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Interview no. 1487

Gustavo Rodriguez

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Name of Interviewee: Rodriguez, Guztavo J.
Date of Interview: July 13th, 2010
Name of Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

Interviewer: This is an interview with Gustavo Rodriguez on July 13th, 2010 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Arlina Palacios. This interview is part of the Paso Del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

Thank you for meeting with us, Mr. Rodriguez.

Interviewee: You're welcome.

Interviewer: I'd like to start with some background questions.

Interviewee: Okay.

Interviewer: When and where were you born?

Interviewee: I was born here in El Paso, February 24th, 1935, and lived here all my life. Attended grade school, bell school and then I went on to Austin High School. What was then Texas Western College, which is now University of Texas at El Paso.

Interviewer: And did you get your degree from here?

Interviewee: Yes, I did. I got my degree in business, I don't even remember what I minored in, but I got my minor somewhere.

Interviewer: And what are your parents' names?

Interviewee: My mother's name was Marina Gonzales Rodriguez, and my father was Juan Wevanos Rodriguez. And I don't have any brothers or sisters.

Interviewer: Were your parents from El Paso?

Interviewee: My mother was from El Paso, she was born here, my father was born here. My father's parents came from Gomez Palacios, Chihuahua. And my mother came from Durango; my mother's parents came from Durango.

Interviewer: So tell me about your education in high school. You said that you went to -

Interviewee: I went to Austin. I lived on what was then known as south of the tracks. All Mexicans lived south of the tracks. My mother, she didn't want to be pushed around because she is a Smith descendant, her mother was Smith.

She says, "You're not gonna go to boye." I said, "Well, mom, what's wrong with boye?" She says, "No, I want you to have a different life."

So they bought a house north of the tracks. And that's how I wound up going to the wrong school, like my wife says, I went to Austin. But that's what she wanted, my mom says, no. My father didn't care; he said I could go anywhere. My mom said, "No, he's going to Austin."

Interviewer: And what language was primarily spoken in that house?

Interviewee: I spoke both languages. When I went to grade school, I spoke both languages. I went to Hispanic or Mexican grade school where all Mexicans were pushed. I was there first day of school and the teacher would be talking to us in English and she would say, "Little boy." And the little boy is just looking at her. He didn't know what she was talking about.

I would turn around and say, tell him in Spanish and then he'd tell me in English, and I would say that he said his name is so-and-so and whatever. And this went on for about half an hour, and finally she says, "Young man do you speak Spanish?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am." "Well, how can that be?" I said, "I don't know." "Well, what language did you learn at home?" "Both." "How can that be?" I said, "I don't know, ma'am, I just speak English and I speak Spanish. I don't know."

My mom spoke to me in English and my dad spoke to me in Spanish and vice versa." "Oh, well you don't belong in this grade." So she pulled me out of kindergarten and put me in first grade. I got my first promotion.

Interviewer: And what was your father's occupation?

Interviewee: My father was started out as a truck driver and then during the war he was Four F, he wanted to go into the Army, he couldn't, he was Four F. So he got a job and became a painter. And then he saw – my dad also was very assertive. He was always looking to see how he could get ahead.

He saw this man putting in some glass and he told him, he says, "How much do you make?" Well, he was making the same amount as my dad. And the glass man got a little piece of glass and he put it in there. My dad would have to scrape the wood and prime it and paint it. There's a lot of work.

So he says, so he switched over to be in the glass department. That's how my dad wound up in the glass business and that's how I wound up in the glass business. Because he told me, he says, "It's a good business, good profession, but you have to work at it."

Interviewer: And your mother?

Interviewee: My mother, she went to what they call vocational school. The whites would be geared to go to college and the Mexicans would be geared to be just common people. So she wound up going to vocational because her last name was Gonzales, but she was Smith-Gonzales, but she was Gonzales and so she went to vocational.

She learned how to be a beautician and how to do bookkeeping and things like that. So when my dad opened his business, my mom was the one that pushed him. This end of the Mexican population, they're very assertive.

My mom says, "You need to go into business for yourself. Honey, you need to go into business." "I can do the work, but I don't know the paper work." She says, "I know the paper work. I know how to price, I know how to do the bookkeeping. I know how to do this."

She pulled him out of where he was working and kind of pushed him into the glass business. That's how we started the glass business.

Interviewer: And how was it that – what was the name of your dad's company?

Interviewee: My dad's company was Rodriguez Glass. I didn't want to name my business as a Hispanic name because he had a hard time because it was Rodriguez Glass.

Interviewer: And you worked with your father?

Interviewee: I worked with my father, yes. We started moonlighting and then that's when my mom says, "I think it's time to go into business for ourselves." So we started the business and here again the white

companies they didn't want to sell him any glass because he was Mexican.

So what we would do we would go to Juarez and buy the glass over there and bring it across. And then finally a red neck business person came by one day and he says, "How would you like to buy some glass from me, Johnny?" And my dad said, "Well, sir."

I said, "Don't call him sir; you're just as good as he is." "Well, sir." So they made a deal and the guy would come from Amarillo all the way down here to bring him the glass. So he got my dad started.

I was really surprised because here's a guy coming from Amarillo, red neck, and you could tell he was really red neck. And he would sell him the glass and the people here wouldn't sell him nothing.

My dad went through a lot to get his business going.

Interviewer: So you saw the differences in the business experience that your father went through?

Interviewee: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Were there any parallels between what you went through when you started your business and what your father went through, or was there -

Interviewee: It was parallel pretty much the same. I felt like he stopped and I continued with the same thing. And when I started my business, they didn't want to sell me any glass because I was a Mexican.

And they finally sold me glass. And I look at the prices now and I was paying the same price back in 1969 as I am now. So you know that they didn't want me to make any money.

But I made my money on the labor and not so much on the material because I was able to do the work faster. So I was making money on the labor and not on material because it was way too high. But I didn't care; I said that's okay, as long as I can get in.

That's what my dad did, he also – my dad would send my cousin to buy putty because in those days there was glass in putty. My cousin would go buy the putty like it was for himself and it was actually for my dad because they didn't want to sell my dad any putty because he was Mexican. So my cousin would go out there

and buy it. And of course he paid three times more than what it was supposed to be.

Interviewer: Was that because there was competition with other glass workers in El Paso?

Interviewee: There was only one large company, it was Pittsburgh Plate Glass. And I think there was another one, I think maybe about two or three glass companies. And there was a lot of work because it was right after the war; and then the Korean War came in. And there was a lot of work.

And contractors were looking for people to do the work. That's when my mom told him you need to go in on your own. And so it wasn't that there was a lot of competition. They just didn't want the Mexican to get started. And we know that's for a fact because we overheard in a conversation in a grocery store.

"That Mexican wants to be in the glass business, but we gonna push him out." And he says, "Who?" So we just decided they're not gonna push us out.

Interviewer: And your mother did the paper work for your father's company?

Interviewee: My mom did all the paper work. But she was the one that ran the company in those days. In 1950 it was unheard of for a woman to actually be the person. And just like my wife, she didn't want to be pushed. And she – a lot of people didn't want to deal with her.

But she says, talk to me, are you gonna talk to anybody?

Interviewer: And so you met your wife while you were in high school?

Interviewee: We were high school sweethearts.

Interviewer: Then you decided to get married, had a family, and you mentioned that you had just gotten married, had two children?

Interviewee: We had been married ten years or less, between eight and ten years. And we had two children. And she got pregnant with a third child. And I was in the reserves because I choose to be in the reserves rather than to go to active duty because they gave you an option then.

You get drafted, you do reserve time or you went in regular Army. And I didn't want to do that so I was in the Navy CB reserve, CB

means construction battalion, CB. So I was in there and one day they called me from the reserve center. And my wife says, "They called from the reserve center and that you've been activated."

That's not true, they don't want CB's, they want the Army and the Marines so they can send them to Vietnam. So I called up, you need to come over right now and get your green card because active duty personnel had a green card, reservists had a red card. I got a green card just like a lot of these people coming over here to get their green card.

So they gave me 30 days to get my civilian affairs in order. I left and she says what am I gonna do? I said, "I don't know. They didn't give me enough time to figure out what you're gonna do so be a strong woman. **[Speaking Spanish]** Let's get going."

A lot of guys were called; they were getting a divorce because their wife couldn't take this shock. I went from civilian pay to military pay because in those days, military pay was nothing. In fact, to go to Vietnam they gave me \$50 extra, my combat pay \$50. And now they get like \$2,000 a month or something.

So I didn't have any money when I was over there, so I just tightened my belt and just drink a glass of water instead of drinking a soda and just drink a water.

My old boss, he called me up, he says, "I hear your back, when are they gonna start working?" I said, "Well, I'll give it a try." He was real nice, he says, "You going into the glass business?" I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, if I have any work for you, I'll shoot it down your way." My dad and my mom and I had worked for this man when I was still in high school. He helped us out. This gentleman - his name was Remus Thomas - funny name, Remus.

He helped us out. He helped my dad also and he helped me and said whatever you need. We started in the garage and eventually the neighbors started complaining. One day the inspector came over and said, "I hear you're doing business out of your garage." I said, "You heard right." I mean, I wasn't going to lie.

He says, "Well, you got 30 days to move." I said, "Okay, fine." So we rented a warehouse and we moved over there. And the amount of hours that I worked and including my wife, it was no

8:00 to 5:00. I worked 12, 14, 16 hours, 20 hours a day, sleep three, four hours get up and go to work again.

This guy told me one day, he says, "You're lucky." I said, "I'm lucky?" He says, "Yeah." "In what way, what do you mean?" He says, "You got a business." "Oh, I said, well, I work ten, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20 hours a day. And I'm lucky, I am."

I told myself, don't ever say you're unlucky; you make your own luck. If you're successful in business it's because you worked for it. Some people get lucky in a sense that they inherited, but even then they a lot of them lose that money because they don't how to manage it. So your life is what you make of it.

Interviewer: And what's the present name of your company?

Interviewee: It's Basil Glass, and I decided to name it Basil Glass because I didn't want to name it Rodriguez Glass, like my dad because it was too much prejudiced. I'd say Rodriguez Glass, what, what is that name?

Spell it because I can't understand you. Okay, so then I'd answer Rodriguez Glass and the Hispanic or Mexican person would say "que"? I still continue being Mexicanized.

So I was looking out the window and I said, "Honey, what name do you think we ought to name the company?" She says, "I don't know, but I know we don't want to name it Rodriguez or something with a Mexican name."

"How about Basil?" "Where'd you get that name?" "The street sign, Basil." "That sounds good." I said, "Not only that, if Hispanic can't pronounce basil, he can say ba-zil, ba-zil." so I said, "How's that?" "Yeah, it sounds good, it's catchy."

Interviewer: So you were working out of your house?

Interviewee: We were, yeah, we had to register the business with a name and the whole nine yards, but we were working out of the garage.

Interviewer: And the neighbors were complaining about?

Interviewee: Well, they tolerated us for about four to six months, but trucks would come and cars would come. And they'd start having traffic. The trucks that would come – came to deliver the glass. We'd

have to take it into the garage and the neighbors started seeing too much traffic.

Really, you're not supposed to have business in the residence. You can have a business like your own just do the bookkeeping and things like that, but you start having traffic. So we were asked to move out. And that's when we moved out.

Interviewer: And tell me a bit about how you started up the business?

Interviewee: How I started, it's interesting. I got \$500 that the Navy owed me, they call it muster out pay. You come out of the Navy and they gave me \$500. I got home, I said, I don't feel like working for somebody else anymore. And we had a car, a truck, a house and three kids, and I wife that I had to support because my wife wasn't working.

I said, well, I went to Vietnam; they could have killed me there. To me, Vietnam was a blessing. People say they shouldn't have sent me. It's a blessing because it helped to not be afraid. Don't be afraid, so I was over there and I was afraid. I said, well, don't be afraid. I come over here and I said, why be afraid? All I can do is fall and I go back to work for somebody else.

So I started and the first month I grossed \$100, grossed, not profit. Grossed \$100, I said oh, my God. Second month, I think I grossed about \$250. I said, oh. And I kept the faith, God will help me. You just got to keep on going, got to keep on going.

So the third month, I got a \$2,000 job. I was like whoa, \$2,000 in those days is like \$15,000; it's a lot of money. I got this job, I said, whoa, so that carried me another three, four months.

And then I got a contract doing service work for this window company. And that was a blessing because I had steady work. I was a one man show. I learned how to balance materials so I could put it in without having to pick it up with force. I would balance it and I'd just throw it on the truck and put it up.

And guys bigger than me, would say, "How can you do that?" I said, "You just learn how to balance it." I kept on working like that for about two years, just by myself with no helpers. Finally, I said I need help. So I went to – they had different programs.

Now they have the job corps, but in those days a program for slow learners. I call them slow learners because some of them were

really slow in just picking up. I'd tell them this is a screwdriver. And then I'd turn around, can I have the screwdriver? He'd forget.

I did that program and then I also would go to high schools and get Hispanics that weren't meant to go to college. Do you have anybody who'd like to work? I'd hire her after work to help my wife.

As time went, we started getting more, better workers and job corps was a blessing. Because I used to hire people with illegal's, which you're not supposed to do, but everybody was doing it, so why not. But I had a hard time with my own people because they didn't want to work. They just wanted to come and make some money and take it back to Mexico. I don't know what they did.

Two weeks later, they'd come back and wanted their job back. So I said, okay, this went on and on, finally, I said, no more. I started hiring – the government has a lot of good things. People complain about the government, they got good things. They help the kids, they help you with this, they help you with that.

So anyway, I got these workers. But all my kids were older and they started, they were always in the company, but now they started working more hours. My son did about a year and a half in college. Your mom only made one year, but you made a year and a half.

My daughter was on the Dean's List. She even went to Saint Mary's. She came back and I said, "What are you doing?" "College is not for me." So she didn't go to college she didn't finish either.

And our youngest, well, she's got a Master's Degree. The fact that the two oldest don't have a degree, they're still very knowledgeable because they look at this and they look at that; they study this, and they study that. This is the training that we gave them.

Like we used to go on vacation and I'd never been to say Houston. "Where we going dad?" "Just a minute, I'd get the street map." Let's go this way, then we'd get there. "What are you doing, dad?" "You got to study so you remember what you're gonna do the next day." So that's how we went on vacation.

So they got this practice of don't sit and wait for somebody to show you how, do it itself.

Interviewer: And how were you able to get funding for your business, besides the money that you got when you mustered out? Did you attempt to get any loans?

Interviewee: Oh, yes, the government, the Navy, said we could get a veteran's loan. You want to start a business, this is El Paso. Went to the bank to get a veteran's loan - "Fill this paper work out, Gustavo Juan Rodriguez." I could tell just by reading my name.

When I was in Austin, I changed my name from Gustavo to Gus because they said I had a real Mexican name and they couldn't pronounce it. Well, Gustavo is just like *Gustavo*. You can pronounce *Gustavo*, you can pronounce Gustavo. When I went to apply for a loan, they said Gustavo Juan Rodriguez. I saw it in their eyes.

When I drove out of the bank - "Well, Mr. Rodriguez, we'd like to lend you the money, but it's too small an amount. We don't make loans that small." "Okay, thank you."

The next bank, instead of asking for \$3,000, I asked for \$10,000. "Well, Mr. Rodriguez, it's a little more than what we normally lend out to start up businesses. I'm awfully sorry we can't lend you the money."

So I knew it wasn't that they couldn't lend it to me, it's that they didn't want to lend it to me. So my wife and I just started tightening the belt, doing this and doing that and weeding and dieseling so we would have a little extra money. We would do this and then we finally decided we had money to buy the warehouse, we couldn't get a loan because I never owned a warehouse.

My business was relatively new. John Scotsman, he was a contractor, I said, "I guess I'm not going to be able to build it there." He said, "Why?" "I can't get a loan." He says, "I'll get it for you."

Interviewer: So he was the one who went into the bank?

Interviewee: He went in there and did the talking. And next thing I know, he says, "You're all set, just go sign the papers." I went over there and signed the papers. So I need to thank him, but he's the one that got me the loan and we built our first warehouse.

Interviewer: So before anything, did I have a business plan or you just said I'm back from the war, I'm gonna start a business, I'm know gonna work for myself and just drove in head first or?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah because see my dad had been in the glass business, I grew up in the glass business, I don't know anything else. It was why throw all this experience away? I said I know the business so that was my plan. I know the business and we'll see where I go. I had gone, I got a degree in Business Administration, so that helped me a lot.

In life, sometimes you think you're gonna go straight this way and you hit a brick wall so you just go this way, then you go straight again you hit another brick wall. Sometimes you have to make a u-turn and go around this way, but yeah, you can do a business plan.

But the business plan is the goal you want to get to because the business – the path and the goal is not gonna be a straight, but you have to establish a goal, what do I want to be in ten years, in twenty years, what do I want to be?

And so our goal was to make money and enjoy it and enjoy life and do the best we could for our kids.

Interviewer: And when you got the SBA loan, do they require that you have a business plan?

Interviewee: Like I said, we always had a business plan, but a business plan doesn't always go the way you're going, you think you're going. So they make you fill out all these papers and where were you born, what did you do, who are your parents, oh, you were in Vietnam? Yes, I was in Vietnam.

Oh, were you a baby killer? No, I wasn't a baby killer; I went to fight for my country. Oh, okay, they check everything about you. How many hours do you work, everything. And I don't blame them, they need to know. They're gonna lend you some money; they need to know who they're dealing with.

Anybody can go apply for a loan, it doesn't work that way. You have to show what you're worth or what you are.

Interviewer: So besides the challenges being a Hispanic-owned business, you also found challenges being a U.S. vet?

Interviewee: I guess I found challenges, yeah because Vietnam was an unpopular war. And I didn't even want to say I was a vet, but when it came out veteran, yes or no? Yes, branch, service. All Vietnam vets kind of kept their mouth shut because it was very unpopular.

One time this guy, he says, "Oh, you're one of those baby killers?" No, but that was one of the challenges that we had besides the business is that I was a vet.

Interviewer: And so what services did you start off in your business providing to the community?

Interviewee: I decided to concentrate on the small jobs because working with another glass company and working with my dad, I realized that a lot of people wanted to have their glass fixed like maybe today or maybe tomorrow, but they didn't want to wait two, three weeks because the large companies, yeah, that's a small job, push it off to the side.

I'll take that one, so I started getting all the small jobs. And people liked the service that I gave them. Grocery store didn't want to wait three, four days to get their glass fixed. I jumped on it - yeah, I can fix it for you today. That's why I was working ten, twelve hours.

We'd get calls at 2:00 in the morning, "Can you fix glass?" "Sure, I can fix it." It'd be freezing, go out there and freeze. My wife says, "I'll go with you." "It's okay, honey, I can do it." "It's okay, even if it's just to keep you company."

I'd be fixing the glass 2:00 in the morning, it might be raining, it might be freezing, it might be extremely hot, and then she would get the broom and sweep up all the broken glass and clean while I put everything up. And then we'd get home and we'd get another call. We'd go out again, that's why we were working 20 hours a day because it never stopped.

Interviewer: So your wife -

Interviewee: Sure, she went with me. Even if it was just to give me the screwdriver or move something because when you're trying to put the glass in, you have to set it on what we call setting blocks and sometimes when you're gonna put the glass, you get that little setting block, it's just a little block, white block. And then it falls, and here you are with the glass.

She would get it, and put it in. She's a hard working woman. As the kids were growing up, I'd get my daughters to go. I'd get my son to go.

And my daughters could cut glass. They can cut glass, they cut these long fingernails with extensions or whatever you call them, and they get that glass cutter and their fingernails are sticking out and they cut.

And people would come over to buy glass. "Oh, yeah sir, just a minute, I'll cut it for you." "You're gonna cut it?" "Yes." "Do you mind if I watch?" "No, go ahead." She'd get the glass, put it on the table. They'd go, "Wow, I can't do that. I tried one time and I broke the glass."

"Well, how did you learn?" "My dad always told us to learn, and so we can do it."

Interviewer: How many years has your company been in existence?

Interviewee: 41 years, 41 years.

Interviewer: And within those 41 years you've gone from small jobs?

Interviewee: Yeah, like I said we started on \$100 for the month, now we do large jobs, four, six, eight hundred thousand. They'll bid on a million, two million; we'll take the large jobs. We even got a job in Boston, Boston, Massachusetts.

Interviewer: So you don't just-

Interviewee: No. And people were saying, "How can you go out there and do the job?" I said, "It's easy." "But you don't even have a company out there." I said, "It's easy, you just learn to move around, think about it before you go."

So what I did is I called some local suppliers in Boston and I told them I was going to be doing a job for a government agency out there and I went to buy the glass. Sure, can you deliver it to the job site, sure.

Interviewer: Do you think the business climate is better or worse today than when you first started?

Interviewee: It definitely has gotten better, but there's still some problems. People are still fighting the war of Texas Independence for

Mexico, like they're fighting the Civil War. It's gonna get a lot better now that there all these soldiers coming in. They're bringing in different views.

Because see El Paso is isolated and we don't get to see things that other cities see because we're not exposed to it. Because Albuquerque is what, 350 miles away, Tucson is 250, San Antonio is 450, 500. So we don't see a lot of those things.

What we do is we go to trade shows and see what's available; otherwise we don't get to see it. Because there's a lot of things that are done in north cities that we don't see, but I go to the trade shows and I bring these ideas back. Not only in the glass business, but a lot of companies do that. They go to trade shows.

Interviewer: So when you go to the trade shows, you go and see what the latest trends are?

Interviewee: What the manufacturer, say the glass manufacturer, what he's got to offer in different colors of glass or different patterns. And then you'd go see tools or you see trucks. You see other thing that's come into the glass business. Mirror clips, they have different mirror clips or they have mirror clips is what you hang the mirror with.

So you see all these things right there in this great big show, like 300 companies. And sometimes right adjoining to the glass trade show there's other trade shows. You go to from one door to another and you're like, wow, I didn't know they made things like that. The north cities have different trade shows, especially Las Vegas. You go from one section of this great big center into another one or even a smaller one, but you see a lot of things.

Interviewer: Earlier you mentioned the 8A program, has that program been beneficial?

Interviewee: Oh, yes, yes, yes, we learn about the 8A program when we were in the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. I kept hearing about it. I'm always looking for something that's going to help my business. I asked this guy, "What is this 8A? Why is it called 8A?"

"Well, it's a program and you go to section 8A and it talks about providing minorities a chance to bid on the government jobs." So we applied and we had about oh, 200 pages of stuff to fill out. Our

kids being in the business, they filled out all the paper work. And everybody was shocked that they did such a good job.

Interviewer: I've heard the 8A program referred to as the government kiss?

Interviewee: The government kiss, a lot of people are kind of like no, I don't want the government to give me anything. I'll take anything the government wants to give me. You want to give me financial aid; I'll take it, whatever. Why let it go?

And so it's a government kiss, I don't care what it is.

Interviewer: I've heard it in a positive way.

Interviewee: I'll take it. Give it to me. There are also programs for minorities, there are programs for women, there are programs for disabled, and there are programs for veterans.

The United States is a wonderful country. I love the United States. I have nothing to say other than sometimes I get frustrated, but that's part of the course. But, yeah, heard about and then I said, well, why not? The kiss of the government or whatever, if anybody wants to give it to me, I'll take it.

Interviewer: But there's a lot of paper work?

Interviewee: Right.

Interviewer: And a lot of things that goes into -

Interviewee: Yeah, and the government will do that to kind of discourage a lot of people that aren't going to go through with it because anybody can apply for this or apply for that. You apply for a grant, it's a lot of paper work; you apply for school aid or whatever, it's a lot of paper work. If you're willing to do it, then people say, well, they filled out all these papers, then they're serious about it.

So we filled them out and that was a lot of help for us because now we could compete with other people, larger companies, we could compete with. And we started getting more work and more work, and that's how we got that job in Boston. How was I gonna get a job in Boston?

They don't know me, but it was an 8A assigned. Only 8A people could bid on it. Well, I bid on it. Did it help me? Yes, I made money. And also when they say what type of work, how far have

you gone to do a job when I'm applying for something, I've been to Boston. Boston, yes, so 8A program is a very good program.

Interviewer: And you mentioned the chamber, are you member of the different chambers here in El Paso?

Interviewee: We were members of the El Paso Hispanic Chamber and then we decided to go the Greater Chamber. The only reason is that we wanted to try. If there's another chamber, well, we might want to try it out. In other words, look at every avenue.

The Hispanic Chamber helped us a lot, and now the Greater Chamber. And our son, right now he's a chair for the Greater Chamber.

Interviewer: And what's your son's name?

Interviewee: His name is Gustavo Juan Rodriguez, JR.

Interviewer: He uses Gus?

Interviewee: Yeah, he goes by Gus.

Interviewer: For the record, that was Mrs. Rodriguez, Elma Rodriguez.

The government expansion at Ft. Bliss, has that been beneficial?

Interviewee: Oh, yes, very beneficial, that's where we started going from what we thought was a lot of money, \$10,000 contracts, like I said six, eight hundred thousand bidding on a million, two. Yes, the expansion, it's been a blessing.

Interviewer: What role has your family played with the expansion of your business?

Interviewee: Okay, when our son was – he was – we were with the Hispanic Chamber and he had to go Washington for something and he found out that they were gonna close down Ft. Bliss.

And he came back, and he says, "Dad, did you know they were closing down Ft. Bliss because they consider it a faraway post and not of any value?" They'd already taken the first cab out of here. And we lost a lot of business, the city did.

And he says, "We ought to do something about it." I said, "Well, son, why don't you do something about it?" So then he started

talking to people and talking to congressmen and other people joined him. He was just saying, did you know, did you know, wow, no.

And so he got a group of people besides himself and they were very instrumental in getting the BRAC Realignment.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what the BRAC Realignment is?

Interviewee: Well, I told you they were gonna close Ft. Bliss because they thought it wasn't that important of a post, so what they did is during the second war and the Korean War and the Vietnam War, they had a lot of small military posts, well, we can't have just 500 troops here and 10,000 troops there, we need to close this one. So that's what they called the BRAC Realignment.

And they closed small military posts and threw them in with another post. And so this group of people were able to convince congress that El Paso was not only a strategic post, but we had all the land they wanted to fire their missiles and do their training and this and that. And they didn't realize that our training area is larger than the State of Rhode Island. They were like, what?

But then they said, "Well you don't have any water." So we came in with a plant to convert salt water to drinking water. Now, we've got lots of water. That's why they're bringing all of these troops into El Paso. Rhode Island, you can't do that. There are a lot of states that they don't have room.

That's when El Paso was like, not only that, but this group of people told the community you have to embrace these people. This is our bread and butter, without them we're nothing because we realize it when they pulled all those troops and sent them Colorado. They found out, they are our bread and butter.

So now anything that happens, military, oh, yeah, we love them. I love them. They've been successful because of the military. And we're very involved with the military. We have adopted units that are sent out to Iraq. And we make sure that they have going away parties for the family and we foot the bill.

When they come back, we welcome them and we have a party for them with hotdogs and hamburgers and soda, but a lot of these units coming back don't have funding. The government says you don't have money for that.

They come back, just like when I came back from Vietnam, I came back like where's the people, where's the band? Nothing, and now these troops come back and people are there waiting and band playing.

It makes a lot of difference when a soldier comes back from war and there's somebody there to welcome you, as compared to the way I came back. Oh, you're back, that was it?

Interviewer: How many boys do you currently have here?

Interviewee: We have four working on base and four what we call outside. And then we have, how many do we have in the office? Four, we have a total of about 12. And then we also, if we shorthanded for a few days we'd go to job corps. And then when they're done, we're back to our standard four and four.

Interviewer: And do you foresee expanding outside of the glass company?

Interviewee: We encourage the kids, our children, to start their own businesses. My son found a staffing contract for with the government that was trying to find an 8A company, so he told my daughter. He says, "Why don't we open up that staffing company?" And she says, "I don't know anything about staffing."

He says, "Well, dad says, we'll learn." She's the president, she's the owner - our son works for her. So she opened a staffing company and then she opened a technology company, and then she opened a construction company. And then she's the one that told us, "Why don't we open a hotel?" I said, "Oh, sure."

She says, "Yeah." I said, "Would you like to be in it?" I said, "Yeah, sure, go ahead." I said, "Hotel, God, that's far-fetched." She says, "Okay, dad. Dad, we got this franchise, it's called IHG and it's with Holiday Inn. And they're interested in talking to us."

"Oh, okay, fine." "Dad, the gentlemen from IHG is coming in tomorrow and we all need to be there." "Yeah, okay." All this time I'm thinking, not gonna happen. So she got us into the hotel business.

Interviewer: And this is your daughter with the staffing company, contracting -

Interviewee: Yes, and technology.

Interviewer: And technology.

Interviewee: And we have the glass business. So a 95-room hotel, four stories, and we should open in March of 2011. The other day, my son said, "There's another location." "I said, I'm gonna move my warehouse."

One time they wanted me to move my warehouse to the west side because there was a nice location there, but they sold it before we could negotiate. I said, God, thank God. Warehouses are not like moving a house; it's a lot of work.

So I said, "Well, if you're thinking I'm gonna move the warehouse, I'm not." "Not for that, so we can build another hotel." I said, "We haven't finished this one, and you're thinking about." And then my daughter jumps in, "Yeah, dad, don't think small. That's what you said, don't think small, think big, think ahead."

And my youngest says, "Yeah, dad, that's what you've always said." "Okay, okay, we'll start looking." So we're looking for hotel number two, so. And it's a lot of work. I'm used to working 20 hours.

I read in the newspaper where they're gonna up the retirement age on Social Security to age 70, I told my wife, I said, "Honey, we're five years past that." And people tell us, "When are you gonna retire?"

I said, "For what?" "You can play golf, you can sit around." I said, "And do nothing." I said, "No, I'll play golf once a week if I don't have something to do, but stay home, oh, God, I'd go crazy."

Interviewer: And since your children are taking after you and your wife, now do you feel that you've influenced others to look forward, to think big? Or did you have anybody who influenced you to look forward and to think big?

Interviewee: Well, like I said, my mom was the one with the brains and she pushed my dad and I learned it from them. My wife was that parents were struggling and she struggled to get ahead. And every time people want to hear my story, I'm willing to tell it.

I've had people tell me, "Do you think I can go into business?" I said, "You can go into anything you want. Anything you want, all you got to do is be determined to do it."

Interviewer: And so what advice would you give a person who is thinking of starting a business?

Interviewee: Well, if you don't try it, you'll never know. You're always gonna say I should've, would've and could've. I should've gone into business then, but I was afraid. I could've gone into business, but I didn't think I could do it. I would've gone into business, but nobody told me.

I said, if you don't ever try, you'll never know.

Interviewer: And do you think your business has an advantage being a minority, being owned by a minority?

Interviewee: Yes because the government helps minorities and gives advantages and blah blah blah. There is an advantage, but here again, the government is only gonna open the door for you, and you don't pass that door, you're not gonna get anywhere.

Like the 8A program, they show you how to do it, but you're the one that has to market it, you're the one that has to move it. And if you don't do it, then you're getting your nine years of 8A, then you're gonna graduate and you're out.

Interviewer: So there's a timing?

Interviewee: There's a timing, nine years. Nine years, if you don't make it, hey, we helped you.

Interviewer: And it's nine years, and if you don't learn how to fish in those nine years?

Interviewee: That's right, you said it right there, if you don't learn how to fish. They can teach you to fish, but here again, teach me to fish. That's what the government programs are.

Interviewer: And what does this teaching how to fish consist of, do you have to go to meetings, are there workshops?

Interviewee: Yes, there are workshops, there are workshops and there are mentors. You have a company that's gonna mentor you and tell you do it this way, do it that way; they kind of guide you so they're your mentors. So you have mentors and you have workshops and they send you a lot of literature - how to do this, how to do that, who to talk to.

Interviewer: So are you a mentor yet?

Interviewee: Well, I consider myself a mentor unofficially, yes because people come to us and they want to know how we did, what we do, where you afraid, things like that. They just are asking questions. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions, Mr. Rodriguez? Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" "Sure, go ahead." And they'll ask you.

How did I start, how do you do it, what advice would you give. Thank you very much. Some do go into business and some don't. I don't ask them why they don't, why they didn't pursue it. Maybe it was financial.

Interviewer: So your nine years with the 8A, they're over?

Interviewee: Right, what we did is when my nine years, our nine years were gonna end, that's when we got our daughter in. Now, she's on her nine years and when her nine years are gonna be over.

See actually, we mentored her. So we have mentored. Her nine years, when they're gonna be over, our son is gonna start into the 8A program and she's gonna mentor him. When his nine years are over, our youngest daughter is gonna come in and he's gonna mentor her.

So it's like we're never out of it, but it's not illegal because you're mentoring. But like my wife and I we've always told our kids, there's nothing closer than being family, brothers and sisters. I don't know about cousins and all that, but as long as your brother and sister, you need to help each other.

You can't fight, you can't argue. Talk about your differences, but don't start swinging. Talk about your differences. So we work all day and then we still go out and have supper. And it's like if we hadn't seen each other; and what about this, and that. They're laughing. And they'll kid us, with respect.

Oh, mom, this and that, dad. Then they'll know when to stop because we've taught them. It's okay, you can joke with us, but you know the line. But they won't drink in front of us. I know they have their drinks, but they will not drink in front of us.

Some friend was kidding my son one time, "Oh, come on Gus, I know you drink." He says, "But not in front of my dad." Oh, excuse me. So that's the respect that we teach them to be together. How else are you gonna get ahead?

We put a team of horses, and one horse is pulling the other one. They're gonna get it, that's the example I give them. All three of them are pulling together.

And then we were blessed with a son-in-law, he's the same way we are. He's a go-getter and a half. His father and his mother divorced, so he had a hard time. He just fit right in with us.

Interviewer: It's very nice to hear that your family plays such an integral role in the business.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Looking back now over everything that you went through from starting off with your father, going off to war, getting your business, going through the different programs, would there be any changes that you would have like to make? Are there things that you think of now, that you wonder, well, maybe I should have done this or that differently?

Interviewee: I just probably would have gone for more education, for maybe a Master's like my daughter did. You never stop learning. I would have liked to have gone. I was busy working that many hours, I couldn't go back to school, it was impossible.

But I would, maybe, I would change that.

Interviewer: What hopes or dreams do you have the future, you don't show any signs of slowing down. Do you have plans?

Interviewee: Well, I plan to live to about 95, 100 years old. There's no stopping. My dad asked me one time, he saw me working real hard, he says, "Son, when are you gonna retire?" I said, "Retire, dad, I'm only 40-something."

He said, "No, no, are you gonna retire at 62 or 65?" I said, "One of these days, you're gonna pick me up at the job site and they're gonna say, 'What happened Earl? 'Well, he overworked himself and he died.' And that's a nice way to go, dad because you haven't stopped either."

My father-in-law, he had a heart attack and he was no longer, they didn't want to hire him for that reason so, he kept on going small jobs and he kept on. So why stop, and why think about saying I've worked too hard.

Those motivational talks, and they said don't ever say you're tired because when you're tired, you've lost the battle. I said, oh, that makes sense. Where you are is what you are, that's right. You're successful, that's what you are.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you feel I should have asked you and I didn't? Is there something that you feel needs to be said as far as the economic conditions here? I should have asked you that - the economic conditions when you first started, are they better now than they were when you started?

Interviewee: Economic conditions are better, yes, there weren't that many jobs then, now we have a lot of work, and there will continue to be more work.

One thing you didn't ask me is what made me become close to church.

Interviewer: What made you become close to the church?

Interviewee: Close to God, I became a Catholic Deacon a few years after I came back from Vietnam because I realized that God is there to help you. When I was in Vietnam, I was like scared, I was really scared. I said, "Lord, just get me back and I'll follow you."

So when I came back, I said, I'll think about it, but then I said I made a promise. So I've been a Catholic Deacon for 28 years.

Interviewer: 28 years?

Interviewee: 28 years, and despite of all the work that we do, sometimes up to 20 hours. I may work 20 hours and my day finished at 4:00 in the morning, I get a few hours sleep and I still go do my church duties.

But I feel everybody needs a supreme to get you through the rough times, and to me it's God.

Interviewer: Do you think your family and God helped you -

Interviewee: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Make it through the obstacles?

Interviewee: Yes, yes, yes, without God, I couldn't have made it, I couldn't have made it. I wouldn't have had a good wife.

One time I said, "Lord, I don't what I'm gonna wind up with, but just show me the way." And I saved her from El Paso High, so.

Interviewer: And you've been married for how many years now?

Interviewee: We've been married for 52 years. We dated for five years, boyfriends and then, so we've been together 57 years. And we've always been together, not like I'm gonna do my thing and you do yours; we've always been together.

Interviewer: How did you meet?

Interviewee: We met at a high school party. It was a high school party for El Paso High School. I happened to go and I saw her and I said, I like this girl, so I made sure I got introduced and the rest is history.

Interviewer: Well, thank you for your time today.

Interviewee: Oh, you're welcome.

Interviewer: Mr. Rodriguez, it's been a pleasure.

Interviewee: Well, thank you for -

[End of Audio]

Duration: 72 minutes