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Interview no. 1494

Raul Ramos

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University of Texas at El Paso

Institute of Oral History

Interviewee: Raul Ramos

Interviewer: Kristine Navarro

Project: Paso del Norte Entrepreneurship Oral History Project

Location: _____

Date of Interview: August 11th

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Transcriber: GMR Transcription Services

Biographical Synopsis of Interviewee: Raul Ramos lives in El Paso, Texas and is married with children. He operates and distributes Han-D-Pak spices in El Paso, Texas.

Summary of Interview: Raul Ramos purchased Han-D-Pak from Mr. Young. Raul admits not knowing much about owning a small business however he did see a need for the products within the local market. Raul worked out of a small grocery owned by his mother-in-law and had the help of his two brothers and mother. They would all work to package and deliver the products to the local grocery stores. Raul hand made the racks to hold his product until he was able to hire a carpenter to assist him in the creation of the racks. Raul bought into El Paso products from companies such as Lawry's, La Costena, Dona Maria, Reyes, Gamesa and Tapatío. Raul enjoys meeting people and selling his products. Although Raul has had success with Han-D-Pak, current economic conditions as well as bigger companies taking away business have affected Han-D-Pak. Raul hopes to stay in the business, offering quality spices at an affordable price. The advice Raul would offer entrepreneurs is to keep the faith and watch the spending.

Length of interview: 112 minutes

Length of Transcript: 36 pages

Name of Interviewee: Raul Ramos
Date of Interview: August 11th
Name of Interviewer: Kristine Navarro

KN: Today is August 11th. I am with Mr. Raul Ramos. My name is Kristine Navarro. I am at the Handy Pak headquarters. Good afternoon.

Raul Ramos: Good afternoon.

KN: I'd like to continue where we left off, talking about your acquiring the business from Mr. Young, if you can go ahead and share that story with us?

Raul Ramos: Okay. I told you how I acquired it, right?

KN: Yes.

Raul Ramos: Okay. That's when I told you that we drank a jigger of Jack – what was it? Algren [inaudible] or Jack Daniels. I can't recall. Algren [inaudible].

KN: Okay.

Raul Ramos: And the deal was done.

KN: Just like that?

Raul Ramos: Just like that.

KN: Okay. So what were some of the challenges when you first acquired the business?

Raul Ramos: Challenges were – I didn't see any because I was blind. I was blind to owning a business, and I just took it a day at a time to see what had to be done, what to develop because I was learning at the same time. I did not know anything about spices, about running a business, about having a business. I did not know anything.

KN: What made you choose this business to purchase?

Raul Ramos: Made me choose this business because I had scouted it, going through the different stores in town, and I noticed that the product sold and that it needed work to be done in there. It needed attention, for one thing, and somebody to start working. That's

what I remember, and I could never stop working since then. I caught a bear by the tail.

KN: So you acquired the business, and then did you work out of his home or where did you work out of?

Raul Ramos: At the start, I worked out of his garage, and that's where his business was. The business was really not extensive. He was just limited to what he would use that time. He would have chilies and he would have, I think, bay leaf, saffron, a little bit of it, and I think a manzanilla that he had, but took a time that he used to deliver.

When I took it over, I noticed that I needed more inventory on different items that I thought would sell, so I started adding items to that particular inventory. But before I could do anything, I had to find a place of my own, so I went out there and I rented a little store, where my mother-in-law used to have a grocery store and a little sort of restaurant in there on 514 South Kansas. I moved in there, and I started visualizing, I guess, what could be done, and I got some help to come in with me.

I got my brother Roberto, and Bobby was studying to be a fireman, so his extra days he would come and help me, and he learned the packaging end of it and he would do the packaging on the two machines that Mr. Young sold me. My mother came in to help me, and she would do a lot of the hand labor, hand packaging, so this is where I ended up. I stayed at 514 South Kansas until 1976.

In 1976, I had bought a property on Piedras Street, and I believe I bought the property – I can't recall if it was 1972 that I purchased that property, so in '76, I decided to move to Piedras Street because I was outgrowing myself. I used to have little warehouses on Kansas street that I would store merchandise because my place on 514 Kansas was too small. It was 45x25, something like that, and I needed more inventory.

I started getting in more inventory, so I went up and rented little rooms to put my product, and then around that time, I think it was '72, I purchased an old grocery store on Piedras Street. It used to be the old Beacon Grocery. We moved to Piedras in '76, October – no, let's see, it was – I can't recall the exact date that we moved into Piedras Street, anyway, but I know it was '76. So from there, we worked in there until 1988.

KN: Now who worked from '76 to '88? Was it still your mom and your two brothers just helping you?

Raul Ramos: When we went to the Piedras store, my mom, we told her to retire more or less because she'd been getting on in age, and by then, I had hired more people to help me doing the packaging. I hired people on Kansas Street. There was a lady by the name of Maria that I brought in. There was another lady by the name of Ramona. There was a lady there by the name of – what was her name? Can't recall her name.

KN: And what was her job?

Raul Ramos: They were doing hand packaging.

KN: Of all the spices?

Raul Ramos: Of all the spices.

KN: And what spices had you added by that time?

Raul Ramos: By that time, I had added – one thing, I had brought in some chili pods from California because I did not know where to get chili pods in El Paso. All I started out was learning. I had added a bigger size of chilies. I had added a bigger size of cinnamon, which cinnamon at that time being one of my better sellers because the item I have now, I did not have then – cinnamon, oregano, cumino, molido, cumino. The basic ones were the ones that would keep me going.

Then I ventured into a bigger size on each one of them, so I found out I needed more space, so I went into Israel Street, and Israel and Piedras Street, and when I went in there, I start venturing. By that time, my brother, Richie, had quit painting. He came and started working for me, while still operating out of Kansas Street. Well, my brother is a super salesman. My brother can sell ice to an Eskimo. That's the type of salesman he is.

So he came in and he started asking me, "Why don't we bring in these other?" He wanted grocery items, so I said, "Okay." So when we came to Piedras Street, I started venturing into grocery items, not only because my brother asked me to bring in more items, but because I saw customers were asking me to handle certain products. "Why don't you bring in this and I'll buy from you?" And so it evolved into me bringing in more Mexican products, basically.

KN: What products were they?

Raul Ramos: I brought in [Speaking Spanish], chili products, Dona Maria, farlion. I brought in Costena, arbolita. I brought in Lawry's.

KN: So none of these were available at this time?

Raul Ramos: None of them were available. I was the innovator of a bunch of them here in El Paso. In fact, all of the Mexican product I was actually the innovator of bringing it into El Paso.

KN: And what made you determine what products to bring in?

Raul Ramos: What the customers asked me for. Then I started calling big companies in Mexico, and they came and were receptive of me handling their product and selling it for them. La Costena, and being a manufacturer that had no idea how to sell product here in the U.S., and one of the owners, still to this day, he calls me and talks to me. [Speaking Spanish], he became a real good friend of mine. I was bringing in Dona Maria now through our company.

I was going direct with Dona Maria, and Reyes, and we were selling products. Another line that I brought in was Clemente Jacques. I brought in Tapatio. I brought it in from Los Angeles. At that time, Valentina was not in the market. There was a line, Buffalo, from Mexico I brought in. There were several items that I think I've forgotten. Gamesa. I brought in Gamesa. Brought another thing. I guess if I go down the list, I'll remember other items that I brought in, but also the ones that I can think of right now that I remember starting with them.

KN: Were the vendors surprised that you were approaching them to bring in their product?

Raul Ramos: They were surprised because nobody else had approached them on selling this product. So finally after they noticed that the product would be sold here, they started putting their agencies in the U.S. to the tune that La Costena, right now, has their main office in San Antonio, and they have distribution points all over the U.S., and they have warehouses in the U.S. now.

Reyes has kind of dwindled down in their selling because Costena has taken over completely. [Speaking Spanish] at one time was the one that sold in the U.S. because Dona Maria had been put on the blacklist by the USDA, and they could not bring product across

for, I imagine, maybe five or six years that – I think they boycotted them starting in '80, and I think they started bringing in product around 1990.

Sometime around there, they got authorized again. I can't recall. I think it was 1990 when they started being authorized to bring product into the U.S. again. But that strays away from my Handy Pak. And Handy Pak, I kept on plugging and plugging. While I was operating out of Kansas Street, the other stores started asking me for displays, so I had to learn how to be a carpenter, and I would make my own displays.

KN: Really?

Raul Ramos: Yeah. I was not a carpenter. I had never been a carpenter, so I had to learn the hard way.

KN: How did you learn?

Raul Ramos: I just looked. I knew what a saw was. I knew what a hammer was, and I knew what nails were. And I knew a board you could cut it if you decided, so I started designing my own racks. To this date, I still design my own racks.

KN: Do you enjoy that?

Raul Ramos: Oh, I loved it.

KN: Is it the woodworking or is it the designing?

Raul Ramos: The woodwork and keeping busy. When we came to this place here on Carnegie, I used to do the carpentry work on all my racks, and I would work here on Saturday, Sunday, every day.

KN: How long would it take you to build a display rack?

Raul Ramos: I did not have tools, really. I did it by hand. I did it by hand by cutting. I did my leather by hand. I did not have tools at all. I did not have a saw. So those 4x8s, I cut by hand. Then I started venturing into buying equipment because I cannot do it all by hand. I can't be fast enough.

KN: Were more stores asking you for more displays?

Raul Ramos: Yeah.

KN: They liked your displays?

Raul Ramos: Yeah. Every store wanted a display.

KN: Did you make each one unique?

Raul Ramos: No, I tried to stay just a set size. I would tell them, "I can build you a 4-foot rack," and then I started venturing into a design of a three-face rack, and I started selling three-face racks.

KN: Describe to me what a three-face rack is.

Raul Ramos: A rack that has a base, has three sides, and has a canopy on top that gives you the information as to what is in that display, like Handy Pak spices and chilies. It took me some time to design that three-face rack because I ran into problems that I did not know existed in carpentry.

KN: Like?

Raul Ramos: Well, you cannot make a three-face rack and leave the pegboards all the same size because you have to improvise a little bit. So I started, okay, you want a face over here in the front, then I have to bring the face on the side in a little bit, so that my product does not stick out of the rack.

KN: That's a good point.

Raul Ramos: Anyway, I kind of mastered it a little bit, and I would cut a rack in a night sometimes.

KN: Wow.

Raul Ramos: I would finish loading, and I would stay here working until I got through with cutting my rack. I'd cut my rack in one night, I'd come the next day and assemble it, then I'd be painting it. I would give it either paint or I would give it shellac, or I would give it varnish.

KN: And then how would you place the product? Did you have to drill holes in each one?

Raul Ramos: I bought pegboard. But I did not adorn my racks because I did not have the time to make it nice, you know. It was just a simple rack that I put in there. I had a friend that I've known for many years. He was a butcher when I first knew him, and he started helping me

make the racks in my Kansas Street address. So there, from my Kansas Street address that I moved to Piedras, I did not use him there.

When I moved here to Carnegie, one time he came to visit me. This fellow had been a butcher working for Smith's, for Foodway. I had gotten him a job there. Then he came over and he tells me, "Do you have work?" He is a carpenter. "Do you have work?" I said, "Yes, I do." So Alejandro Cosio, he came over and started helping me build the racks. That was in 1991.

But in the meantime, I had shown several people – one person in particular, I had shown him how to help me make racks, and he would help me. His name is Channo. Channo Rios. And Channo Rios, he's passed away now. He passed away at a very young age. I showed him how to do carpentry work and how to make my racks, so I wasn't making my racks all by myself.

I'd work in loading and doing administrative work, and buy product, and then in the day, he would be doing my racks and he'd call me, "What do I here?" so I go out there and tell him, "Do this, do this, do this, do that," and he started helping me with some of that work.

Well, when Channo left because he got sick, then Alejandro is the one that came in and started helping me build the racks. He is a carpenter. He is a real carpenter, so he knew his stuff, and he brought in his equipment and stuff like that, so he modernized the way of doing racks. He wasn't doing it by hand anymore. He was doing it with a saw and all that. So little by little, I got some help doing my racks.

KN: Did you enjoy building the racks, though?

Raul Ramos: I loved building racks.

KN: Why did you enjoy it?

Raul Ramos: It kept me busy. It kept my mind from wandering. I'd be here every day, all day, and it was therapy for me. I used it as therapy. I would turn on the TV. Somebody bought me a TV, and I would turn it on and I'd see the games there, and I'd be watching the games and I'd be doing my carpentry work. But I lived in here. I lived in here.

KN: And why was that?

Raul Ramos: Because I didn't enjoy going any place without my wife. By that time, my wife, she had other things to do, she had the children to take care of, so her time was with the children, so I had very little time with her aside of me working all day. Saturdays she would be with the children, so I'd come over here. I started going to mass on Saturdays. From here, I'd go to mass, and then if I had time, I'd go to a movie or I'd come back to work, but this was my home. In fact, she started telling me [Speaking Spanish]. This was my other wife. So that's how it evolved.

KN: Let's go back to when you started on Kansas Street. What was your plan?

Raul Ramos: My plan was to grow the business, and the only way I could grow my business was to grow within the store, grow with new items because you can sell X-number of spices, but you have to fill up that invoice with something else, so I started venturing into new items to complement my stock. Then I started hiring people to deliver for me.

I was doing all of the delivering myself, and all the ordering and some of the packaging. But then, one time my truck broke down. I was working the Las Crusas [inaudible] and my truck broke down, so I called my brother, which was working that day, and I said, "Come and help me. Come and pull me in. I broke down." So he went up there, took a chain, and brought me in. So we parked my little Jeep Willys then in front of the store.

I got on the phone, and I called a guy, Jose Mesa, Joe Mesa, he's dead now, and I said, "Joe, I need a truck." "Okay, Raul." He sent me a truck. "I'm going to send it over there to see if you like it." He sent it an hour later. I said, "Yeah, I'll buy it." So I had a truck. And then what I did was I said, "Okay, from now on, I'm going to start selling. I'm going to call my brother, have him pull the orders, and I'm going to go into presales."

KN: And what does that mean?

Raul Ramos: Going to the stores pre-selling. Instead of carrying my inventory on the truck, I'm going to be pre-selling. Call my orders in, and I'll deliver it the next day. Nobody had that system here. Coca-Cola started that system after me here in El Paso.

KN: Really?

Raul Ramos: I started that system 1972.

KN: And what made you decide to start going this route? Was it because the truck broke down?

Raul Ramos: Because I got tired of fixing the truck. I started noticing that I could sell more. Instead of me doing all the work, I'd sell more product, and I'd have somebody go out there and deliver it for me because I used to do the selling. I used to do the delivering.

KN: And it took more of your time?

Raul Ramos: It took all day long. I enjoyed it. I never backed away from it. I enjoyed it, but I knew – well, I want to be selling, and somebody else will be delivering, and if I need to, I'll check on that guy. So I started opening more routes, more routes, and more routes. That's when I decided, yeah, I'm going to need help.

That's when I brought in my brother Richie, and like I tell you, Richie, he's a born salesman. He's a born salesman. Then I started sending Richie to sell, I started staying inside, and there's a saying, [Speaking Spanish], and the other saying is, [Speaking Spanish]. I don't know if you understand those.

KN: I do.

Raul Ramos: Okay. And they are true. It's true.

KN: Is it?

Raul Ramos: Because I was trying to do all of that by myself, but I could only go so far. That's when I brought in my brother. I said, "Go out there and do this, and I'll do this other stuff." So I was doing some selling and administrative work. My brother had a little truck, and I said, "Okay, I'll buy it from you and then use it for selling," so I started.

The only thing that I had was a truck that I bought for delivery, so that truck was supposed to be what I was supposed to be driving, so I bought me [inaudible]. I told my sister, I said, "That car that you have, it's too old for you. Sell it to me and buy yourself another car," so I bought her car from her, a little Hornet, so now I had an automobile to be selling product.

I had that truck that I want, so I said, "Well, I'm going to buy another truck." Again, I called Joe Mesa. I said, "Joe, I need

another truck.” “Okay, Raul. I want to sell it. If you like it, you keep it,” so he sell me another truck. My mother, to this day, says, “I have never seen anybody buy a truck by telephone. You’re the first one that I’ve seen.” Without looking at it, I said, “Yeah, send it over.”

KN: He knew what you wanted or are you just –

Raul Ramos: I just had faith in what I was doing. I had faith in Joe. He was going to sell me a new truck, and he said, “Well, it’s a new truck. Doesn’t matter if it has rivets or stuff like that. It’s just a new truck.” So I bought it. “Send me a truck, Joe,” and he sent me a 1972 Dodge. [Inaudible]

KN: Joe must love those phone calls.

Raul Ramos: My mother says, “To this day, you are the only person that I’ve seen that picks up the phone and says, ‘Send me a truck.’”

KN: I don’t know many people who would do it that way. Was it hard to go into the administrative, being in the office most of the day? Was that a difficult transition for you?

Raul Ramos: Very difficult for me.

KN: Tell me why.

Raul Ramos: Being outside, I was in heaven. I was in heaven out there, selling product, meeting people, working. I was in heaven all the time, and moving to the inside was hard because I felt I was not doing anything, not accomplishing anything. To this day, I still don’t feel that I have completed work until I start doing some actual work. I cannot sit in this chair here doing nothing. That’s why I try to be on the loading end of it to stay busy because I feel that a little sweat makes me earn my living.

KN: So being in the office must’ve been very difficult for you.

Raul Ramos: Oh, it was difficult. It was so hard because I just couldn’t take it. I do know that I can get on the phone, and I know that I can sell product over the phone, but it’s not the joy. The joy is selling product, yes, but it’s the actual contact that you have that really makes it enjoyable.

KN: Was that the best part of your day? Meeting the people?

Raul Ramos: Meeting people and selling product. And of course, my product was sold already, but it's just taking care of my product. My brother, when he started with me, he didn't know anything about the rack, so I had brought in another guy to work with me because we were planning. My brother came in and he started planning an opening in Albuquerque. And like I say, my brother can sell. My brother went out there and opened Albuquerque. He called a guy by the name of Harrison, and Harrison gave me all the Firsts.

KN: What year was this?

Raul Ramos: This was 1975.

KN: Okay, so you were still in Kansas Street?

Raul Ramos: I was still in Kansas Street. That's when my brother came in. My brother knew a guy by the name of Hobbs, with a Smith's, which was a Foodways then, and he opened the doors for me with a Foodways and the Firsts.

KN: All over New Mexico or Albuquerque?

Raul Ramos: Albuquerque.

KN: So how did you handle the logistics of getting the product to Albuquerque?

Raul Ramos: I had to hire somebody. I had to go to Albuquerque and find a place where I can put my product. I had to have this guy that was willing to go to Albuquerque.

KN: He had to move there?

Raul Ramos: Yeah.

KN: Okay.

Raul Ramos: And getting the product over there. I went up there and bought some trucks.

KN: Did you call up Joe?

Raul Ramos: No. What I did was I went to – I can't recall if I went to Albuquerque. I sold two trucks in there, and I bought – no, that was later. First, I bought a truck from Joe again, only it was a larger truck, and I sent that truck to Albuquerque. The salesman

that went out to Albuquerque to live, that was his truck. That was his delivery truck, that was his get-around truck, and then he started coming over and taking the inventory himself.

He would come on a Friday or a Saturday, he would load it up, and go back on a Sunday or whenever he felt like going back. He went to his little warehouse that he had, and he would work from there. At that time, I still had not gotten the okay on the Foodways and the Firsts, but I had some independents that I would sell to there. Finally, when this fellow moved to Albuquerque, he got the okay, the authorization, to go into the Firsts, so I had to make him some racks. The people from Firsts started asking for eight food racks, six-foot tall, so that's another thing that I had to learn how.

KN: That's huge.

Raul Ramos: Yeah. At that time, I did not have Alejandro, so I was in that little space on Kansas Street, plus the little warehouse I had rented over there on Kansas Street. That's where I would make my racks, and I had to make those racks fast.

KN: How many did you have to make?

Raul Ramos: As far as I can recall, I think it was eight racks for Firsts, and it was going to be, I think, eight racks for Foodway.

KN: That's a lot of racks.

Raul Ramos: It was quite a bit of racks, yeah, especially with those eight-footers.

KN: And you still had to work on the administrative part during the day?

Raul Ramos: The selling and administrative, yeah. Well, no selling because my brother was doing the selling, and I would have to work on doing the work. On Kansas Street, my mother-in-law's building was a tenement building, so there was boarders in there that were renting there, so in the aisles or the passage, that's where I was making my racks. Then I rented another room from my mother-in-law that I had some inventory in there, so I would do some carpentry work in their place, and I would do the cutting, and oh, boy. I learned to cut four racks at a time.

KN: And how did you do this?

Raul Ramos: I designed it. I took a piece of plywood. I designed what I needed because from there, I said I'm going to get eight sides, two feet each and so many inches on top. So I made a design. And then all the ends have to be solid because plywood it has one good side and one bad side, so I had to pair everything.

KN: You making the three-faced as well at that time?

Raul Ramos: No, no. This is a simple two-foot or four-foot rack, just one-face rack. At that time, I had no inkling of three-faced racks. I didn't even know what they were then. I'll tell you when I had to make a three-faced rack. It's when I got the Albertson's stores, which was [inaudible], and this fellow came and make me something good, and I said, "Well, I made him one. I had somebody make me one, but then I started saying, 'Hey, I can make a three-foot rack,'" but that's going into something else.

Anyway, then I said, "Well, I'm going to be cutting the same piece of wood all the same, so why not?" So I put four sheets of half-inch in there, so that's two inches, right? I clamped them down, I put nails in there so they wouldn't move, and the same design worked well.

KN: You still didn't have a saw?

Raul Ramos: I didn't have a saw. I had a handsaw. That's all I had. Everything I did by hand. I would nail by hand. Everything. I had no inkling of carpentry. I did not know what carpentry was.

KN: You were just trying to get it finished.

Raul Ramos: I was just trying to get my business going.

KN: Were you excited? Were you just energized?

Raul Ramos: Oh, yeah. Always. I wanted to go all the time. Always on the go. All this building – I designed all of this. I designed this building.

KN: Really? On Carnegie Street?

Raul Ramos: Here. This one. These desks are handmade.

KN: Oh, wow.

Raul Ramos: I designed all of this. All of that. I didn't do the carpentry work, but I designed them. Alejandro did it.

KN: Well, but he needed the design, though.

Raul Ramos: He needed a design.

KN: It's beautiful. That's why it's so –

Raul Ramos: All of my office furniture is handmade.

KN: Really? By him?

Raul Ramos: By another guy that I brought in to supervise the warehouse building because I couldn't go out there and be taking care of business and supervising the building. So I brought him in. I paid him his money. I said, "You look at Jesus [inaudible], and you take care of it. Everything is put in its proper place, and just be my eyes." The first addition I built first, then I built the second addition. When I built the second edition, I left the offices until the end.

KN: How come?

Raul Ramos: Pardon me?

KN: Why?

Raul Ramos: Because I wanted to know how much it was going to cost. So when I built the framework of everything, the offices here were bare, so I said, "Okay, now I'm going to splurge on my office." I could have bought furniture, but no, no, no. This is going to be something that I want, something that I can be proud of.

So I called in this guy and said, "You're going to do all this work in here." He said, "Really? Okay." He knew carpentry also. Alejandro knew carpentry. I said, "I want you to do this. I want you to that." I had gotten in quotes from contractors over here, and I said, "No." One contractor wanted \$480,000.00 to build this section here only because this is two sections. I had already done the L-shape section, the first one, the one I did in '88.

And then when I did this section, I noticed that I needed to do something better than what I have, and that's when I decided to do this section here. Anyway, I got bids from four, five, six contractors. My lowest bid was for \$425,000.00. The highest was \$480,000.00 or \$485,000.00, something like that.

KN: Wow.

Raul Ramos: They would see the forms because I got an architect to make them, and one guy told me, he said, "You're asking for a round – what's the name of this place here? Your receptionist room?" I say, "Yeah." "There is no round wood! Do you know how much it costs to make that?" "No, I don't know how much, but it can be done," I said. "How can you make a straight piece round?" "By doing your cuts."

And he looked at me and said, "Well, this is going to cost you, all right." Okay. So when I saw everything, I said, "All right." I had already done this piece and it had cost me, I think, \$260,000.00. Okay. I said I think I can splurge on \$60,000.00 for my furniture. That's how much it cost, about \$60,000.00.

KN: It's very unique.

Raul Ramos: Pardon me?

KN: It's unique.

Raul Ramos: And it's good wood. I made a table for my meeting room. That thing is what, 18 feet long? I think it's 8 feet wide, and I made it here, so that table cannot be taken out of here.

KN: It stays with the place.

Raul Ramos: Yeah.

KN: What made you decide to move from Kansas to Piedras?

Raul Ramos: I ran out of space. I ran out of space. For example, I remember one item very well. This candle company wanted me to handle their miracle candle. He came over and says, "Raul, you can sell our candle?" I say, "Yeah." But I could not buy enough because my space was too small, so I would buy one pallet of [Speaking Spanish], one pallet maybe of Guadalupe and stuff like that, and the other stuff I didn't buy.

Of course, one pallet of [Speaking Spanish], my brother sold it like crazy. He wouldn't sell one box. He would sell five to a box and stuff like that, so that's when I decided I needed a bigger space. By that time, I had bought this place here, this land.

KN: On Carnegie Street?

Raul Ramos: Right. I had bought this piece of land. I can't recall when I bought this piece of land. I think I bought it in 1975.

KN: What made you purchase the land?

Raul Ramos: The salesman came over and said, "There's a piece of land over there." I said, "How much?" Without seeing it. After the thought, I said, "I should have bought more land," but to me, this was a big piece of land. I don't need that much.

KN: Right. There wasn't anything out there, I'm assuming?

Raul Ramos: There was nothing. Nothing. Of course, when we came into a 16,000-square foot building from about a 7,200 building, I said, "Hell, this building's going to be nothing."

KN: And is that why you went two-story?

Raul Ramos: No, no, I didn't have this piece right here. I only had the L-shape building. Some place in here I have a picture of the first building.

KN: Okay, and then you added on?

Raul Ramos: I added this part right here. The part that was parking, I added the building, all right? And I put my trucks inside. That was the whole thing. I put my trucks inside is how come I got a permit because I put my trucks inside, and there was enough space for the employees. So where was I?

KN: You moved to Piedras. You had just expanded to Piedras. You needed the space.

Raul Ramos: Okay, I needed space, and my brother started selling product and selling product, so I said I needed more space. That's when I bought this piece of land. Well, when I was in Piedras, I could buy merchandise and I started renting places all over the place because Piedras wasn't big enough, and I was buying more product and more product.

My brother was in an out of that. I'd bring him more product and he would get it out, so I rented two warehouses over there on Copia Street, and I filled them up with whatever product I couldn't put in this space here. We would unload the trucks over there, and work from there to Piedras Street. My business started growing. Everybody wanted product. Big 8, at that time was number one

here in El Paso, and they wanted me to send them all the product that I could get to them.

Anyway, going back to one items that I was going to say, the miracle candle. I would buy limited stock when I was on Piedras. When I came over here, I said, "Boy, now I do not buy one pallet of [Speaking Spanish]. I can buy four pallets," so I started bringing in by truckload, and I started moving miracle candles.

KN: They weren't ever sold in stores, were they, before you?

Raul Ramos: No, they were not sold.

KN: What made you decide this might be a good product to sell?

Raul Ramos: Because I know Mexican people, Hispanic people. They want that candle, and they wanted a variety of saints. Right now, you go into the stores, there's no variety. They have them over there in the corner. Everybody saw what I was doing, and everybody wanted to do it, so it killed it.

KN: Because they started bringing in –

Raul Ramos: The market on candles is not what it used to be. They don't sell as many candles now. I know it.

KN: Are you still selling candles?

Raul Ramos: I'm kind of done because I don't have the base anymore. So that's the story on miracle candles. There was white candle. I'd buy six pallets at a time. St. Jude, I'd buy three, four. [Speaking Spanish], I'd buy two. Guadalupe, I'd buy three or four because it sells the same as the saint. Everything sold, but everything has gone down to nothing.

KN: What would you say your best years were?

Raul Ramos: My best year was, I would say, about '94, I think.

KN: And why were they your best years?

Raul Ramos: Because at that time, I was still – '94-'95, I was still in Albuquerque. I was doing good and we were doing good here. Just when [inaudible] and Costena, I was buying something like maybe 18-20 truckloads a year.

KN: Can you explain to me? You buy the spice –

Raul Ramos: The grocery. This was grocery.

KN: Oh, the grocery item, and then do you – so you don't need to package the grocery items. You just transport them through?

Raul Ramos: I just distribute them.

KN: Okay. And what about the spices?

Raul Ramos: The spices I kept on buying. I keep buying spices all the time. I keep on bringing spices all the time.

KN: And do you package them here?

Raul Ramos: Yes.

KN: Is that labor intensive?

Raul Ramos: Yes. I have tried to eliminate a bunch of the hand packaging. I've gone to machine packaging.

KN: When did you do this?

Raul Ramos: I guess I did it all the time, but I did it with my old equipment, but it could only do so much. Now, my machines, they're modern and I modernized them. I went from one machine, and I have three machines now that package the product.

KN: Oh, wow.

Raul Ramos: One of them is a scaling machine. The other one is an order machine. The other one is a dump machine, right? And that dump machine is an old Miro-pack machine. I have redone it. I redesigned the packets. I redesigned the buckets. I didn't do it myself, but I got somebody to do it, to electronically make them work. I went away from a cam, and what do they call it? I forget. Anyway, I went to electronics, and I put an electric eye in there, so everything is done automatically.

KN: Has that helped your business?

Raul Ramos: Oh, tremendously.

KN: Tell me why.

Raul Ramos: When I was packaging cinnamon, even when I came here, cinnamon is a hard item to package. We'd package it by hand. I noticed that by carefully packing it by hand, I could only sell only as much as you package. So consequently, stores were asking for five dozen cinnamon, and I could only send them one dozen cinnamon of X-size. It doesn't matter. The small or the large. I could only send to them because I could only package so much, and I had two or three women packaging cinnamon all the time, you know.

Well, I bought this machine that I have here. The machine that I had bought before was only for ground merchandise. I had nothing for packaging for stuff like bay leaves, for chili pods, or cinnamon. I had to do it by hand, so I bought this machine that used to be used for potato chips.

KN: What made you think of this machine that used to be used for potato chips?

Raul Ramos: Well, I saw that machine and I said, "I think that machine could package my product."

KN: Where did you see it?

Raul Ramos: I went to San Antonio. The guy that sells me the cellophane for our machine, he said, "Raul, why don't you look at this machine?" I said, "Okay. All right, Joe." Joe Carenas is his name.

KN: Okay, the same Joe as the truck?

Raul Ramos: No, not Joe Mesa. Joe Carenas. I said, "Joe, can you make that machine in your plant package spices?" And he said, "Well, we don't know. Why don't you buy it?" I bought it. "I'm going to send it to your place, and you get your man to start working on it."

KN: And who did he work for?

Raul Ramos: This is Longhorn Packaging Company.

KN: Okay.

Raul Ramos: He only does cellophane. All the things that are packaged by cellophane, he'll do. And he started growing like me. He had a little plant, and he started growing, and he became a good friend of mine. I said, "Okay." "Okay, Raul, you go out there and you send

me bay leaves, send me cinnamon, send me chili pods in bulk, and then I can start working on this and see if we can come up with a former.” It has a former, but he said, “What size of bags do you want to package?” I said, “Well, the package that I have here, and I only have a four-inch bag.” “Well, we’ll work on that one,” he said, “But I don’t think you’ll be able to package a four-inch bag with bay leaf.” I said, “All right.”

So anyway, I started working with that. At first, the bay leaf, the small package was only still done by hand because there was no machine, right? So I experimented with him over there. I went over there one time, and we experimented, and this and this and that, and I said, “What we need is a former to a certain size of bag,” so I had to increase the size of my bag. It’s a piece of a web-width that’s X-number of inches.

So I said, “Okay, why don’t you try a six and a half web-width, so it’ll form it into a six-inch bag? Now you can expand. That machine that I have there, can I expand this way?” So we did it with plain cellophane at first, and it started working, and it started working. He said, “You’re going to have problems with the dump. You’re going to have troubles with the dump.” I didn’t know that. I was experimenting, so it needed adjustment.

At that time, it wasn’t electronic. It was only cams with micro switches. Micro switches would let you go and do this, so okay, that’s what I started with, with that machine. Anyway, to make a long story short –

KN: We like long stories. That’s okay.

Raul Ramos: They had a dump where you could put your product, and then they had a – what do you call it? I forgot. Stuff where the merchandise would roll. I forgot it.

KN: That’s okay.

Raul Ramos: Anyway, so we started with that, and it started working, but still, I wasn’t happy. I brought the machine over.

KN: So you brought it from San Antonio?

Raul Ramos: Yeah. I bought it from the person who was selling it, took it to his place here, and he said, “Okay, Raul, I think we have it where you can work with it,” so I said, “Okay,” so I brought it over. We worked on it and we worked on it until finally Brallio, my son-in-

law, I put him in charge of that machine there. To this point, that guy has become an expert in fixing machines and redoing machines. Anyway, we brought it out here, and he would work on it, whether we would package merchandise in there, but I wasn't happy because I was packaging only on plain cellophane.

KN: Oh, okay.

Raul Ramos: Plain cellophane. And that was putting stickers in there, so have a label in there. So we worked in it, and finally Joe came over and said, "Okay, this is what we need to do to make you start working with your cellophane. With this machine that you have here, we already know what we can do.

Now, we have to work with this Miro-Pack that you have here, so we started working with Miro-Pack, and we started designing what we needed to do. We'd take a look at it, and it would breakdown here, breakdown there. The packages were coming this way, this way. Packages were empty. Oh, boy, it was a struggle to the point that we made it work.

KN: How long did that take?

Raul Ramos: I can't recall how it took, but it was frustrating. Maybe two or three months.

KN: So why was it so important? What did you see?

Raul Ramos: Okay. When I said this machine can start working, then I do not have to limit myself to selling one-dozen cinnamon. I can sell ten-dozen cinnamon. I can package 10,000 cinnamon and I can sell it. Even with the problems I was having, I could still package cinnamon faster than you could put it by hand because with cinnamon, you have to weigh it.

You get a knack of it that you could put four sticks in there, and it gives you the weight, you know? Okay, but a machine doesn't know how many sticks. Only by drop. So every time that can goes around, okay, it's a drop. You put two cans to work with and it would be two drops, and stuff like that, or it will delay it a little bit, so you can add more stuff in there. Oh, boy, you have to work at that like crazy. We got her working.

Joe comes around and says, "Okay, Raul," and he knows a lot about packaging and packaging machines, and he gave Brallio and me a lot of pointers. "Why don't you do this," and "Why don't

you do this,” and “Why don’t you put this over here.” Experimenting with everything. Anyway, it came to the point where we would make the machine work the way that we need it.

KN: And you didn’t have to put the stickers anymore?

Raul Ramos: No, no, no.

KN: You still had to put the stickers?

Raul Ramos: I’m still working with cellophane on that, okay? He came over that time, and he said, “We can do this. We can do this. Okay. Now let’s get a definite on this. How much weight do you want it?” so we can go to print that material because it’s very expensive. Plain cellophane against printed material is a whole different ballgame.

KN: It’s more expensive?

Raul Ramos: Very expensive.

KN: Why is it so much more expensive?

Raul Ramos: Because of the artwork, the printing, the dyes that you put in there. At that time, you could buy cellophane for maybe \$0.95 a pound against printed stuff at \$2.05. Right now, my cellophane is \$8.50 a pound. \$8.50 a pound. I don’t know – my daughter paid the invoice, but I just bought – Rosalia, did she pay the cellophane? Yeah. I think it’s \$8.50 what I have to pay right now.

KN: How does a small business continue with the prices going from \$0.95 to \$8.50 a pound?

Raul Ramos: It’s hard. Very hard. When you came in, I was looking at my computer and trying to figure out the prices and the cost of cellophane, and I said, “Well, I have to increase prices. I have to get back some of that money that I’m paying more for the cellophane, for the cardboard, for labor.”

KN: And paying more for the spices themselves, as well.

Raul Ramos: Spices, insurance, it’s all snowballed on me.

KN: How do you remain competitive?

Raul Ramos: By limiting my profit. Right now, I'm limiting my profit to where I'm barely making it. I give my payroll out, and that's what I'm worried about. I'm very loyal to my people. My people have been very loyal to me, but it's hard right now. I'm paying some people \$10.00 an hour; some people \$9.00. I think my cheapest people is \$8.60, and it's hard. Very hard.

Right now, when you came in, since last night, I've been figuring what am I supposed to do now. What should I do? What I came up with is the source should get less percent because I cannot go up on the price on retail. I need to get a little bit more on my packages in the store to make a little bit less.

KN: Will they agree to this?

Raul Ramos: I'm pretty sure they will. The only one that's going to be reluctant is Walmart, but the other ones I'm pretty sure I can sway. Either you want to sell it at a retail that I suggest, or maybe not. They'll go up on me. I cannot control the prices that they sell at the store level, right? So that's what I was thinking of last night and then today.

KN: Does it worry you?

Raul Ramos: It does. It worries me. It worries me. It's not a bowl of cherries anymore. It used to be a bowl of cherries, but not anymore.

KN: Why isn't it anymore?

Raul Ramos: I've been choked. Little companies are being choked.

KN: By?

Raul Ramos: By circumstances. Like I mentioned, price increases on material, on product, insurance, X-number. The water bill has increased. My electrical bill has increased. Everything is coming this way. There's nothing going down. Everything's going up, and it's choking me, big time. I'm talking for myself, and I imagine everybody is going through the same dilemma. Everybody.

My spices – it's very hard to increase the price because I have to look at the consumer. The consumer, they don't have any more money. They're very limited in the money that they have, and I figure that my spices being at that price, they can still afford to buy at least a package instead of buying a can of cinnamon that would

probably sell for \$5-6.00, and have maybe the same weight as the spices I have?

Okay. It is what worries me. How long it's going to take before I have to fold, to tell you the truth. I've been strong for these years, strong in my thinking, but right now, its got me worried because this year has not been good for us at all.

KN: Have you seen sales drop?

Raul Ramos: Very much. Very much. To the point that today, I only put out two routes.

KN: How many do you normally do?

Raul Ramos: Four or five. I have to condense my other routes to one or two days to make work for these people.

KN: So you've condensed your routes. What happens next?

Raul Ramos: The next day I don't have routes, so I have to lay them off until – that's one thing I have not done – layoff people, but I will bring them in at a later hour, so that they don't put in as many hours because if they pull overtime, some people I have to pay \$15-16.00 an hour, and if I don't have sales, I can't produce revenue. That's the bad part about it.

KN: Is laying off people, will that be difficult?

Raul Ramos: Yes. Yes. In my years in business, I've only fired, I think, three people.

KN: Wow.

Raul Ramos: And I've fired them for stealing. When I lost the Walmarts on selling them the grocery items, I cut a few hours, but I didn't fire anybody. When I lost the Big 8s, I didn't fire anybody. I just have let it down by attrition. Either they can find another job, all right, and that's the only way I've been doing it. Just dwindling my workforce.

KN: You said you lost the grocery items selling to Walmart. Did they go to them directly, or how did you – ?

Raul Ramos: Yeah, they supposedly got them from the warehouse, and they would not authorize any items. Only what they authorize is Handy Pak.

KN: So none of the grocery items?

Raul Ramos: Well, in my category, I don't consider a grocery item. I consider it a spice, but a grocery item is considered a canned item and stuff like that – a can of juice, a can of this and that, and I don't sell them anything anymore. I don't sell the Lowe's anything anymore because they get it from their warehouse. I sell token items to Albertsons because I'm a secondary distributor.

A bunch of the independents don't buy from me anymore because they buy from Affiliated, Affiliated being the warehouse that delivers to everybody around here. Since Affiliated gives them a rebate, they are always after that rebate, so it leaves me with zero. And then if I want to sell them, I have to meet some prices that they demand, and I can only work on a drop ship basis with them. They just [inaudible] on the grocery items. If they like the grocery price, and they'll take it or not, they go to somebody else.

KN: How do you manage day by day? These worries will not go away.

Raul Ramos: Pardon me?

KN: These worries and problems.

Raul Ramos: No. I pray a lot. That's what I do. I pray a lot. This year has been a struggle. Never, never in my life have I seen it this bad. My 43 years in business, I've never seen it this bad. I might survive, but it means that I have to cut my people down to the bare minimum, and the only thing I can see, if they don't like it, they can go get something else at some other place, they're welcome to go, but I don't think nobody is offering any jobs right now. I don't think anybody is.

KN: You have a lot of family members that work for you. Do you bear that responsibility as well?

Raul Ramos: Yeah. I bear the responsibility of every employee. I consider that I have, let's say, 100 people that depend on me. That's what I figure. I figure that 100 people depend on me. A bunch of stuff I take out of my pocket, and I put it in there because profit-wise, we're not showing any profit. We're being able to pay payroll and expenses, but profit-wise, nothing. Nothing.

KN: You mentioned that in 2008 you saw that there were problems. What did you do as a businessman when you saw that the problems were starting to appear in the economy?

Raul Ramos: I started lowering my inventory. Like I said, I started paying everything I owed. I lowered my inventory, and I'm only buying what I need to sell. Only buy what I need to sell. I cannot go out there and meet prices against competition because I'll be giving a lot of merchandise away. There's no end to this.

If the economy is like it is, there's no end to it. There's no jobs. There's no money. I'm going to tell you a little joke. When Reagan was in the presidency, we had Bob Hope and we had Johnny Cash. Now with Obama, we don't have hope or cash.

KN: Do you think the economy will turn around?

Raul Ramos: No. No. It's going to turn very little. I don't see the economy turning around. Maybe some time in May or June of '11.

KN: What does a small businessman do?

Raul Ramos: Just tighten his belt more and more and more.

KN: How will this affect them, though? How will this affect you?

Raul Ramos: It'll affect me in the sense that I'd look at myself as a failure because I wasn't able to pull through for these people, for my people. It'll affect me a lot. It always has affected me.

KN: Do you take it home with you?

Raul Ramos: Pardon me?

KN: Do you take the worry home with you?

Raul Ramos: No. I try not to. I try not to show it. I never tell anybody my problems. I never tell anybody. I keep them. I fear what's going on, and I just try to make the best of it. My daughters, they know, and they realize it, but they're strong also. They realize it. Even the employees now, they're coming to grips with the idea that we're having a rough time. They used to demand more money and more hours, and stuff like that. You cut off hours, oh, boy, they make a big fuss of it. Now, they understand that I don't have work for them.

KN: Are they scared?

Raul Ramos: They haven't told me, but there's really no discussion with the employees and me about that. They know that the situation is not good. They know it.

KN: As a businessman, what advice would you give to someone interested in starting their own business?

Raul Ramos: Right now, I don't think I know what type of advice to give them. Right now, I do not know because I do not find the door myself. I cannot find the door myself. The situation is so hard right now that I don't think anybody knows. Nobody knows what to do about it. The economists, they figure you do this, do this, do that, but do they know?

I don't think they know what's coming in the economy. They don't want to double-dip into the recession, but how can they stop it? How can they give advice as to how stop it? I don't think they can. The remarks that the government gives you, they're not solid. They're just hogwash. Cover your eyes. Just so people don't panic. That's what I fear.

KN: Have you been involved any of the Chambers, either the Hispanic or the El Paso Chamber?

Raul Ramos: No, I have not. I have not.

KN: Do you have any final thoughts?

Raul Ramos: No. The only thing I can say is that just keep on working at it.

KN: Is that what you do?

Raul Ramos: Yeah. I keep on working at it, have faith, and that's about all you can do. Just watch every penny that you have because you can't give it away anymore. Used to be that you would say, "Oh, I can spend on this." Now, you have to watch out. Before I spend it, do I need it? Do I need it that much? That's why houses aren't selling. There's no houses selling.

People don't have money. They'll only buy if the government gives them money. You see that, right? You saw it because it happened. Supposedly cars, okay, the government gives you money, they went and bought cars. Now, can you afford to buy a

car? No job is secure right now. Nobody has a secure job. It's hard.

KN: What do you think small business owners need to do to be proactive and to prepare for times like this? What would you advise them to do?

Raul Ramos: Right now, I'm at a standstill. I don't know what type of advice I can give. I really don't.

KN: Well, in 2008, you started lowering your inventory. How did you know to do that?

Raul Ramos: I just saw that things were not right. I just saw that houses were – everybody was buying houses. How can everybody buy a house so easily, as they're doing right now? No down payment. Percentages were good and no down payment, and then there was this ARM deal. What is that ARM deal?

KN: Adjusted Rate Mortgage?

Raul Ramos: On housing, where the percentage is low here, but then they have to pay back there? I said, shoo, it'll kill them. That's what I saw. As soon as this is coming down, everything is going to come down.

KN: How do you make decisions? Do you do research? Is it gut?

Raul Ramos: I just read some stuff, and I make up my mind as what I read. I like to read the business section. I like to read it and some remarks that some people make, I said, well, but the thing about houses, I could see it. Everybody is buying a house and the percentages, how can they do it? If I struggle to buy my house way back then, how is it so easy for them to buy a house now?

That's what got me thinking. I think around that time there was the resolution something that the government went out there and helped them out. It's a big company that went broke that sold houses.

KN: Countrywide Mortgage?

Raul Ramos: No, no, it was before that resolution or something. It started with an "R." Reliable. That's when I saw and said big companies can go under. They want the government to help them with that? What is this coming to?

KN: Is the government helping small businesses?

Raul Ramos: I think they are, but you have to pay through the nose to go out there and get help from the government. The small business, I think you have to pay through the nose to get help from them. That's how come I never went to them because I knew that time, way back when, there was a guy in there that suggested – Hector Bencomo – he suggested, “Why don't you go to the small business to help you, Raul?”

So I did contact them. I can't recall the year, and I talked to them and they wanted four times the amount that I borrow in collateral. I said, “What do I need these people for? What? Four times?” So what I wanted to borrow, and I think I wanted to borrow \$10,000.00 then.

KN: Like no thanks.

Raul Ramos: Yeah. I think that's what they wanted for collateral, so it just scares me of ever going to a small business.

KN: I forgot to ask you why you closed your Albuquerque store.

Raul Ramos: I closed it because the person that was running the place there let it go down, and I could not keep my eye on this business and an eye over there. I knew that if I would go over there, then I could do something, but I cannot be at two places at the same time. So I decided I was spending more money in there, to keep it going, than whatever money I was making, and it was true. I was just dumping money in there.

KN: Was that a hard decision to make, to see it close down?

Raul Ramos: Being in the back of my mind all the time, and then the opportunity arose, and I said, “Okay. Shut it down,” and I did. That time, when I shut it down, that's when I start thinking it hurt me because I said, “I failed.” I kind of failed. Something could have been done, and I did not go out there and make it work.

KN: But weren't you running all the stores here and running your distribution here?

Raul Ramos: Um hum, but in my mind, I took it as a failure in not making it progress.

KN: What did you learn from the Albuquerque distribution?

Raul Ramos: I learned that it's only certain people that you can delegate responsibility. Not everybody is responsible. There's only certain people you can delegate responsibility that are true to you. The other ones don't care. They don't care. As long as they get a paycheck, it's all they care, and that's what happened to me over there.

I was guaranteeing this guy his money, and he just lost interest in what he was doing and he started selling less, and less, and less, and less. At that point, it got to a time where a fellow could have been selling a million dollars in a year. It got to a point where he wasn't selling two hundred thousand a year. That's how bad it got, so I couldn't take it anymore.

I had the building. I had the equipment. I had everything. It's only the person. Had nothing to do with not having the building. It had nothing to do with merchandise. It's just the individual that was running it away. He just lost interest. He was getting a guarantee. He's not going to work for his money, and that dwindles on to the people that he has with him, and that's what happened. People lost interest.

KN: Any closing thoughts that you might have? I know I asked you this already. Sorry.

Raul Ramos: No. I'll keep on trying, like I said.

KN: Keep on working?

Raul Ramos: I will not give up until I can't do it anymore. I will not give up. I am persistent; I've always been. I know there's more ways than one to skin a cat, so I'll keep on looking for the other way. Right now, I have in my mind a program to help my cash flow. I have made an application to join Affiliated Grocers.

Those are the people that killed me, and my thinking is if I become a member, then I want to go to every little store in El Paso that is not a member of Affiliated, and sell them product that right now they cannot get from me, like a case of peas, a case of apple juice, or stuff that I don't handle right now. Stuff that they can buy, that I can buy from Affiliated and they can buy it through me, and they can get it to their store.

KN: Joining Affiliated, was that difficult for you?

Raul Ramos: It is. Well, I will not know until I'm approved by the Board of Directors.

KN: Was that hard to put in the application for you?

Raul Ramos: It wasn't hard, but they have a lot of requirements, being that me being a warehouse, I'm not able to get the same discounts that a regular member has, but I am able to buy groceries in truckloads that I can bring in for different stores.

KN: So is that your strategy, then?

Raul Ramos: That's my strategy right now, to get some money in here, so that I can pay my people, so I can keep my people. That is my strategy. I'm not going to make very much of it, but I'm going to get some cash flow to pay my people, and live off of Handy Pak. If Handy Pak realizes profit, then we can all make some money from Handy Pak.

KN: When will you know about your application?

Raul Ramos: September the 30th is when they have the Board of Directors meeting.

KN: Do you foresee any problems?

Raul Ramos: There's a doubt in my mind of one or two members of the Board of Directors.

KN: Are they against you for financial reasons?

Raul Ramos: No. They might be against me because right now, this person, especially the one here in El Paso, has a store that is next to another store. The other store has been eating their lunch, and that fellow might figure that I might sell to that particular store. This is what I fear.

KN: Can one person stop the application?

Raul Ramos: I do not know. I do not know their policies or anything, but I do not know.

KN: Didn't you used to work for Affiliated?

Raul Ramos: No.

KN: No, you worked for Tri-State?

Raul Ramos: Tri-State. And that is the only thing in my mind that says maybe that guy will vote against me.

KN: I guess you won't –

Raul Ramos: I will not know until September.

KN: So what do you do in the meantime?

Raul Ramos: Just wait it out. Wait it out and wait it out. I have, in the meantime, gone out there and purchase a truckload of Costena and a truckload of Humex to bring in to have something to sell, to complement my spices. At least having something else to sell, so I don't only have spices to sell. The merchandise should be coming in maybe tomorrow.

KN: Do certain times of the year help your sales?

Raul Ramos: On what?

KN: Selling product? Lent?

Raul Ramos: On spices, from the first cold day in autumn, that's when my spices go up in sales. Otherwise, it's just steady. Then the first cold day in October or September, that's when my spices start selling the most, to a peak in December, and then in January, I have a peak of my Lent items and then it drops again. Summer months being the slowest. Right after Lent, you can notice it slows down completely.

KN: Can you also just tell us real quick – we talked about it before I turned the recorder on – the process of how you get your product to the market and what that entails?

Raul Ramos: First I send a salesman to pre-sell to the store. The salesman calls in the order to the office. The order is processed. It's sent down to the shipping office. The order is pulled by an order selector. Later on in the day, that store is routed with different stores into a route, and then the store is loaded into a truck. A checker checks into a truck for next day delivery.

KN: So you're able to do next day deliver from an order?

Raul Ramos: Nearly everything, unless the person goes out of town to pick up orders, and then we have a certain date to deliver to that out of town store, being either Wednesday, or Monday, or a Tuesday, whichever the store requires because we do have delivery dates and we do have time limits out of town, so we have to make time limits and we have to make delivery dates.

KN: I noticed you don't do a lot of advertising. Do you think you'll start going down that path, or do you think it's worth the money?

Raul Ramos: My advertising has been by word of mouth. Handy Pak is the only thing that I would like to advertise. I get no money out of advertising. Somebody else sells the brand, so the only one that I would advertise would be Handy Pak.

KN: What message would you want people to know about Handy Pak?

Raul Ramos: That we have premium product, we guarantee our product, that we have a good selling price, it's not expensive compared to competition – competition being big companies – McCormick and whatever. The prices at McCormick against my prices, it's a lot cheaper buying a packaged item then buying a canned item.

KN: So there's a big push in El Paso to buy local. Do you think that people know that you're local?

Raul Ramos: People know that I'm local. I think to them the bottom line is, if somebody offers you money, you're going to go to the other person. Like right now, there's another brand that's coming in. I think it's coming in from Los Angeles. I think it's Los Angeles, but it's just a local distributor here.

That's my competition, but competition, if you put my package against that package, people don't realize that they're getting a better bargain with Handy Pak because we have more product in the package at a lesser cost. The only one that dictates the pricing is that store-level price. I cannot dictate the price that they sell it at a store level. That's the difference. I can suggest, but I cannot dictate.

KN: So those prices are dictated by the stores themselves?

Raul Ramos: Ah, yes. I'm saying this because my competition will go out there and tell the customer, "My product is cheaper than Handy Pak," but they figure on mark-up not on selling price, and that's two different things, right?

KN: How many years has this business been open?

Raul Ramos: 43 years.

KN: So if you get through this rough patch, will your daughters take over?

Raul Ramos: I hope they do.

KN: Will you retire?

Raul Ramos: Not unless I have to, being sickness or that I cannot come to the office, but I come to the office every day with pride, and I want to be here.

KN: Why?

Raul Ramos: I enjoy it. I enjoy what I do.

KN: Even after 43 years?

Raul Ramos: I enjoy what I do every day. The day that I do not enjoy what I do, that's when I will retire.

KN: Do you think that day will ever happen?

Raul Ramos: Only God knows. I'm just happy to come here. I'm anxious to come here.

KN: Are you?

Raul Ramos: Yeah. Every day. Even when things are not right, I still want to get here and see if I can cover that hole.

KN: Is that what you see your role is? To cover the hole?

Raul Ramos: No, I think my role is to manage to see that no holes open up. To see that no holes open up. Keep them covered all the time.

KN: One at a time?

Raul Ramos: If need be. [Inaudible] I have 10 fingers to put in there.

KN: Okay, Mr. Ramos. Thank you.

Raul Ramos: Thank you.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 112 minutes

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