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## Interview no. 1526

Richard Najera

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

Interviewee: Richard Najera

Interviewer: Homero Galicia

Project: Hispanic Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

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Date of Interview: n/a

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Transcriber / Summary: Pamela Krch

Richard Najera, president of El Paso Lone Star Homes, Inc., speaks here about his rise to success as an electrician, home builder, banker, and communications entrepreneur. In addition, he shares his memories of his youth and his experiences as a public servant. Born in 1937, Najera attended El Paso High School, graduating in 1955. After studying electrical engineering at Texas Western College (now the University of Texas at El Paso), Najera attended apprenticeship school, finishing the four-year program in just two years. But obstructions arose when he sat for his contractor's license due to the board's corruption and racial discrimination. Upon notification that he had failed the exam, Najera protested the results and eventually received his license; his actions helped to open the doors to many future Mexican-American applicants. As one of El Paso's first Mexican American electricians, he, along with his cousin, began Lone Star Electric with just one truck and no credit history. Paying for everything in cash, the partners soon began building their credit and establishing a solid reputation as one of only a handful of local electrical contractor companies. In 1973, Najera and another partner founded El Paso Lone Star Homes/Electric, entering into the home-building business. Also around that time, he and several other investors began the Mission Savings and Loan. Perhaps his most ambitious venture occurred in 1975 when he and eight others applied for and received a license through the Federal Communications Commission to start up a Spanish-language television station, which ran successfully under Najera's stewardship for over ten years. In 1987, the partners of Channel 26 sold the station for \$40,000,000. As Najera's reputation grew, he was asked to participate in several public roles. For example, he sat on El Paso's Electrical Advisory Board for sixteen years. In addition, he served as president of the local Boy's Club for two terms, and in 1975, Najera was elected to City Council, where he again served two terms.

Length of interview 77 minutes

Length of Transcript 18 pages

Name of Interviewee: Richard A. Najera  
Date of Interview: 12 February 2009  
Name of Interviewer: Homero Galicia

This is Homero Galicia with Richard Najera, president of El Paso Lone Star Home Incorporated. Thank you sir.

HG: Mr. Najera I want to ask you first about where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school.

RN: I'm Richard A. Najera. I was born in April 1, 1937 in a small apartment there where my mother and father lived on Frutas Street and Estrella. Parents grew up, they were very active in Guardian Angel Church and later on we moved to another duplexes that were adjacent to the Guardian Angel Church and we all went to Guardian Angel and in fact that's where I made my first communion and I grew up right there in the neighborhood. My dad's father, my grandfather, Don (Federonio??) Najera, he had a grocery store on Estrella Street and all the Najeras were all pretty close. We all lived close to each other. And then from there, we moved to Alamogordo Street, which is now Yandell Street on Piedras and Alamogordo. And then from Piedras Street, we lived there during the war and everything, the Second World War, and after the war, we moved to a house that my dad bought. We moved to this house on 803 Langtry. In those days, it was called Austin Terrace. And believe it or not, this house was a small little house that belonged to the Frias. And Mr. Frias was the general manager of the Plaza Theatre and the [inaudible] Theatre and he sold the house to my dad, and believe it or not, he sold the house to my dad for \$2,800.00. The payments on the house in those days was twenty-two dollars a month, for everything. Anyway, we grew up there. We went to Lamar Elementary and graduated from Lamar Elementary. From there we went on to the eighth grade at El Paso High. [I] went to El Paso High and participated in sports in El Paso High and played basketball and night shift football. And from there, I didn't play varsity football because I had to earn some money to support myself—for my family. So I went to work for Gunn and Castillo as a delivery boy. I delivered there and I had a license to drive a car. In those days, they issued the driver's license at the age of fourteen. So I was able to drive, and they gave me the route, and I was able to drive the motorcycle for Gunn and Castillo. I used to make deliveries in the evenings for them and then work on the counter tending to the people. But when there was a prescription that had to be delivered, I jumped on the motorcycle and delivered it, all around El Paso High School area and Rio Grande and Arizona and Yandell, Montana, and all that, and enjoyed myself quite a bit. In fact, I worked two or three years at Gunn and Castillo as the delivery boy. And then from there, one of my classmates at El Paso High was a guy by the name of Willie Galarza. And Willie Galarza and I were looking for a job, and Mr. Carreon, Ralph Carreon's father, he was in charge of all the PXs and the commissaries. So he told us, he says, "You boys want to come to work for me, I'll put you to work at PX number 24, which is right adjacent to the William Beaumont Army Hospital, and you guys can go to

work there.” In those days, the salaries were, you know, seventy-five, eighty cents an hour, and he says, “You guys come and work for me and I’ll pay you two dollars an hour,” which was a lot of dollars in those days, and of course, we were tickled to death. We went to work for him and, of course, we were like big shots making all that kind of money. I was able to buy a little car. My brother and me bought a car— a 1941 Ford. It was a business coup. I grew up there. And [I] had a lot of fun. [I] learned a lot of business things from a lady named Lucy Hernandez. She was my manager at the PX No. 24. Lucy taught us how to treat the people right, and how to do this, and always be respectful of people, and treat them right, and when I tell you to do something, you do it and don’t talk back. [She] taught us a lot of good business customs and things like that. We grew up with that, which was very good for us. So we grew up learning those kinds of things. And I went to El Paso High and [I] was very active in the school. I was active in student government. I was in student government my freshman and sophomore years. And then I was going to run for student body president of my senior year, but some of the girls in my class talked me out of it. They wanted another guy to run so they said if I would sort of relinquish not running to give this guy a chance and I said, “Whatever y’all want, that’s fine.” And he ran and he won the election and he became president of my senior class. We had a wonderful class and a wonderful bunch of students that graduated with me. I graduated in 1955. And we had some excellent, excellent teachers. I had Mrs. Aldridge. She was a science teacher. I had Mrs. Foster for English. And I had Mrs. Provencio for Spanish, and Mrs. Stamp, she was a wonderful teacher, Spanish also. Mr. Estes, he was a math teacher and Mr. Lloyd Saunders— he was assistant principal. Let me tell you, it was some of the best years of my life to go to El Paso High. I really enjoyed it. All the students were pleasant. There wasn’t a lot of animosities or fights or anything. Everybody got along with everybody. The rich kids got along with the poor kids. The kids from Smelter Town got along with the kids from Kern Place. And those guys got along with the kids in our neighborhood, around Austin, Yandell, Montana Street areas, we all got along just fine. We had good football teams, good basketball teams, and it was a wonderful, wonderful time of my life growing up with everybody that I did. In fact, some of the guys that I went to high school [with] are still my friends. They were very, very close friends. I have a friend of mine; his name is Dolph Hatfield. He’s a doctor. He’s a research doctor in Washington, D.C., now retired, but he was trying to find a cure for cancer. Now he’s an explorer, and sportsman, and everything. This past summer, [he] just climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa. He sent me some pictures of him skydiving out of an airplane in Africa. It’s just a lot of those guys are just wonderful, wonderful guys that I grew up with. One of my best friends, Edward Abraham, his sister Patsy Abraham, and I, were all close friends. They all went to Saint Patrick’s and El Paso High and we all grew up together—great people. We had a lot of fun, just doing, and being active and everything. In those days, believe it or not, they had prom dances, football, queen dances, and we’d go to Texas Western in the student union building and we’d dance. Bobby Booth was the orchestra. Great, great time of my life and we all had a wonderful, wonderful time. From there I graduated. I wanted to be an

engineer—an electrical engineer. So from there, I graduated from El Paso High and went on to go to Texas Western and studied (hard??) and everything and then I would work in summers and during the year—electrical. I really, really enjoyed it. And after so many hours of going to college, passing my freshman and sophomore year, I decided to make it full—being an electrician. I went to become an electrician, and I liked it very much. I went to work for a guy by the name of Paul Hodges, and he was a very, very nice guy. Within a year, because I had studied blueprint reading, and blueprint architectural drafting in high school, my teacher, by the name of Professor Thompson—he was a very good mechanical drafting teacher and architectural drafting teacher. He taught me a lot of stuff and showed me how to read plans. I was able to pick up the electrical contracting business and electrician's business real quick. So I was a good friend, of a friend of mine that was by the name of Jack Holmes that lived on Yandell Street, a block and a half away from me. Jack's father was an engineer at ASARCO and he ran the electrical shops in ASARCO. He gave Jack and I a letter that we were working for ASARCO so that we could attend the union apprenticeship school. So we went to Tech there on Oregon and Yandell Street. We went to school there and we attended apprenticeship school there. [We] finished four years of apprenticeship school in two years. In those days, they'd let you go as fast as you wanted to go, and if you thought you could pass it, you take the test, and if you passed it, they would promote you. First year and the second year—if you finished it in six months the first year, they'd let you go into the second year, which was good for me. I learned it real quick and I passed and I did real well. And from there I start studying for my contractor's license. I had a good friend of mine by the name of Stu Hammonds that was a chief electrical inspector. Him and I became friends and I said, "Stu, I'd appreciate it if you could—can I study at your house and you and I can go over the codes. You teach me and we'll go study the codes together and everything." He says, "Come on over on Mondays and Wednesdays and we'll study. You can get here at six [o'clock] and by eight, nine o'clock, if we're finished studying, we'll do that for a while and see what it looks like. So I did, and I studied, and we were got along just perfectly fine. His wife was very patient with us and we studied in the breakfast room table. He took the test, and he passed the contractor's license, and he became the chief—the senior inspector for the city. About six months later, I took the test, and I failed it the first time. The second time—I passed it—I felt I passed. Stu was the inspector, so he had a chance to look over my test because it was administered by the City of El Paso. Since he was an employee, and chief electrical inspector, he looked at my test and he thought I had passed the test. And he told me, "Richard, if I was you, I would fight this test. In my opinion, you passed. The board is saying that you didn't pass, but I think the board is made up of a lot of contractors that—they don't want the competition." I hired the Dwyers that had gone to El Paso High, and we knew each other, and they knew me. So I hired them, and they fought the board. And the board said, Richard, if you think you passed the test and we've given you some oral exams, you seem to be answering them okay. If you want to, go on over to the University of Texas Western, in those days, Professor Tomkins is the chief electrical engineer that's the dean of the electrical

engineering. We'll pay him, and he'll grade your test. And if he passes you, it's okay with us. We'll mark you as passed. So he did. I took the test and they sent it to him to grade it. He gave me a passing grade of eighty-five. He brought it back down to the City. And the board says, Hey if he passed you, you're free to take your test. We'll give you the authority to go get your license and pay for it and you're a contractor. So I did, and I started the company called Lone Star Electric. Lone Star Electric was the first company name we had. I started it with my cousin Frnie Najera. Frnie Najera was the foreman for Scott Electric and he was running all of the west side homes for a lot of the builders—HW Crook, it was RPM Construction and Johnny Papas and Westbrook and Chavira and a lot, a lot of the big builders that built a lot of stuff in the Coronado Country Club area. When it first got started, all the Coronado area, the Coronado Shopping Center that was built by HW Crook and a lot of the stuff, he was in charge of that area. So he says, "I'm going to go in business with my cousin," and a lot of the guys said, "Hey, your go into business, FFernie, with your cousin and we'll give you our business because the guy that you're working for, Herman Scott, never comes around and we want to give you the business." I was running the work for Hodges Electric and I told the guy there that I was getting ready to go in business for myself as a contractor—electrical contracting—and there was a guy by the name of Kenneth Graves. Kenneth said, "You know Richard, we're going to be starting a new project called Terrace Hills—six hundred homes. We're going to start with two hundred right away. You've got your license and you're a contractor, bid on this project, and if you're low, we'll give you the job." And sure enough we were low, and he gave us the job, and we started with a truck on the west side and two tucks on the northeast side. We were doing work in the Largo Hills, Terrace Hills, Colonial Terrace—a lot of the work. We were busy and everybody was happy. I remember the first time that we billed out and paid for all of our material cash because we hadn't established credit yet. We paid for all the workers, and paid them cash, and paid for the material and for everything we had grown. Everybody paid us right away because they were kind. They knew that we had just started and they wanted to make sure that we stayed afloat. I remember we made, in those days, \$1,800 profit for one week. I says, "Oh my God. We're going to be zillionaires." (laughter) But anyway, we had a great time. We continued working there, and then pretty soon, we had work from the Hunts—from Hunt Building Mart. They had a remodeling contractor, the two brothers, and a guy named Wally Sheid. Wally Sheid was partners with the Hunts and they were doing remodeling all over the city. They had television programs on the Channel 9 and Channel 4 advertising their remodeling business and they had just about 90 percent of all the remodeling business for homes and businesses and everything in El Paso. And lucky enough we had about half their work. We were very busy doing that too. We had one guy's remodeling, and some doing new houses in northeast and some were in houses in Coronado Country Club area, and some in the Coronado foothills. We stayed real busy and it continued to keep working and we started with one truck and then we had hired a guy by the name of Joe Urquide. He was a longtime electrician. He had his own truck and he says, "I'll come to work for you. You guys give me \$100 a month to rent my truck and

I'll go to work for you and I'll put the name of your company on my truck and I'll just come work for you." In those days, believe it or not, they were making two dollars and fifty cents an hour, a hundred dollars a week for a good electrician, and fifty, sixty dollars a week for a good helper. So things were totally different than they are today. Today, the scale at Fort Bliss and schools and the county and the city work is twenty-five dollars and nineteen cents an hour, compared to what it was back in '55, '56, '57, '58. But anyway, we stayed quite busy. And we moved to—we had a place on Ybarra Street that Mr. Bob Ainsworth was the owner of the building and he says, "Richard, you guys move in here and I'll let you pay me \$100 a month and you can move in. You can have half the warehouse and I'll build you a little office with a restroom and everything." Which he did and he was such a wonderful man, and he was doing general contracting. Bobby Sanders was the young engineer from Texas Western that was running the construction company for Mr. Ainsworth and it was called Ainsworth and Associates. That was the name of the construction company. They had elder guy that was very knowledgeable in construction by the name of Mr. Bob Thomas. He was an elderly fellow, but wonderful, wonderful man. He gave us a lot of business and we were there and he let us park all our trucks. By that time, we had grown to about four or five trucks and we were able to park them inside of the yard and everything was hunky dory. Everything was moving right along and we did a lot of work for Mr. Ainsworth and then we're still doing work for the Hunts and the remodeling and all the houses that we were doing. A friend of ours went to work for a guy by the name of Joe Yarbrough. Joe Yarbrough in those days was building six hundred houses a year. Mr. Yarbrough, this fellow that went to school with Frnie, told Mr. Yarbrough, "These guys are new electricians and they need some help. Will you give them some houses?" He says, "Yeah. Tell them to come bid these houses and if it is, we'll give them fifty houses in the Hacienda area." So we started in the Hacienda area. Then we started doing houses for Yarbrough. We started doing houses on the east side, doing houses down there by Bel Air High School for Mr. Yarbrough. We did houses around all the way to North Loop and from Hunter Street, on both sides, all the way down right by the Price's Dairy. He was a wonderful guy. We loved working for him. If we worked five houses that week for him, you turn in the bill on Thursday, and by Friday, you could go at two o'clock and pick up your check, which for some Mexican guys, young guys that grew up that didn't have a whole heck of a lot of money, that was a blessing because it opened up the credit for us. We had money in the bank. We were able to pay our materials. (Gene's??) Supply was—Mr. Frances was one of the first guys that opened up credit for us. And he says, "Come on down. I'll open you up with \$5,000 a month credit." So he opened us up with \$5,000 a month credit and then pretty soon (Great Wire Electric??), Mr. Henry Chaparro, gave us credit down there. Then we went to Triangle Electric, Mr. Harry Bruce, and Dan Smith, they opened us up credits and we were doing work with all these people. We're paying them off, and everything. We were very, very fortunate that people liked the work we did, liked the way that we handled our business. That if it was something that had developed wrong, or something wasn't working or a light wasn't turning on or a

switch was burned out and we had to replace it so everything was working, we gave them service. We would work—if we shut down the business at 4:30, and we had a couple of trouble calls, Fernie would go get some on the west side, and I handled the calls over here on the eastside and the northeast. We gave people service, and that's what people really wanted. And we were very fortunate. In those days, believe it or not, there was just a handful of electrical contractors. There was Dunn Electric, Callahan Electric, and there was Dunkin Electric, and Tri-State Electric with Lavern Litten. They had, I guess, there was maybe twelve companies—Paul Hodges Electric, Nelson Electric. Today, there's probably ninety contractors in El Paso in the year 2009. In those days, there was enough work for everybody. We were very fortunate that we went in business, when we did, because the opportunities were there and thank goodness that the people gave us opportunities to do their work for them. They treated us very, very nice for two Mexican-American young guys that wanted to start their business. They opened the door for us. The supply houses opened the door for us. Glenn Woodard was our attorney. He opened the door for us at City Hall and the county. There was a lot of things that happened that went our way. And because we were very appreciative and we were guys that, yes sir, no sir, type of fellows, we weren't guys that were rude or mean or anything to people, and that paid off for us. From there, we opened the doors, believe it or not, and a lot of guys have told me this. They said, Richard, if it hadn't been for you fighting the board and taking it to Texas Western to get your license and your everything, that opened the doors for a lot of us Mexican-American guys that take the test and pass them. A lot of people in the past had taken their test and were stopped at the board level [from] not getting their license because they wanted to control the number of contractors in the city and because times were changing and things are getting more modern. In those days, we had Raymond Telles was a city clerk, and he helped us a lot, and a fellow by the name of Carlos Bombach. Carlos Bombach, he was a fair man. He was there to help you. He didn't want to hurt you, but if you weren't qualified to do the work, he wasn't going to pass you just because you were Mexican-American. He was going to pass you if you knew what you were doing. Carlos Bombach was a Mexican-American and very knowledgeable, graduate engineer, and he was in charge of the building inspection department. With his blessings and everything we were able to go on and do a lot of things that some of the young guys today are able to benefit from. We were glad to do the things that we did. People would call us up and say, Richard, we're going to take the test. What do you think? [I would say,] "Well, take it, man. Just keep studying," and this and that, "and keep going on there." By that time, five or six, seven, eight, nine years had passed. Ralph Seitsinger had asked me to maybe look at being on the electrical advisory board for the City of El Paso. Bert Williams, when he came in, he said, "Richard I want you to be on the electrical advisory board." So he appointed me to the electrical advisory board, Bert Williams, and he was very pro-Mexicano. He wanted everything to be fair and square with everybody, not just the people that weren't Mexican-Americans that could take the test and they would pass them. He wanted to make sure that everybody was fair and square. Believe it or not the guys that were at the top of

the administration, and mayors and all those kind of guys, they were very, very fair people. They were not anti-Mexicano or anything like that. They were all, you know, what's fair for this guy is fair for you. That's why we were able to go and do the things that we were able to do. From there, I served sixteen years on the electrical advisory board for a lot of mayors, for a lot of them, until I said, "You know, I'm gonna have to get out—give somebody else a chance." I was there for a long time and I enjoyed it. We did a lot of things; we're fair with everybody. And all the chief electrical inspectors, Stu Hammond and Merrill Hammock, and all the inspectors there afterwards, and Lavern Litten, and all the guys that were chiefs were just fair, fair, individuals in the city. They were not only fair with the Anglos; they were fair with the Mexicanos and everybody. They weren't trying to impose, you know, We're not going to let you pass because you're not an Anglo. That didn't exist after we, sort of, opened the door for everybody.

HG: What year was that that you started your business?

RN: I started it in June 28, 1955; excuse me, June 28, 1958.

HG: Were you one of the first Mexican-American electricians?

RN: One of the first Mexican-American electricians. We had Mr. Victor Delgado that was down in the Second Ward. He was a very smart Mexican-American. Mr. Guevara, he had Friendly Electric down there in the lower valley. He was a Mexican-American. There was probably three, at the most four, when I got in there. And after that, now there's probably, oh sixty or seventy Mexican-American electrical contractors.

HG: So you were about twenty-one, twenty-two, when you started your business?

RN: Yeah, in 1958 I was twenty-two, twenty-three years old.

HG: How did you learn to run a business?

RN: My father-in-law was a CPA and he worked for, I think it was Ladder, Beck, and Borshaw, and he set up my books and he showed me how to bill. He showed me how to type up the invoices. He was the original guy that typed up the bids for me when I went and bid them. We learned how to take off jobs by counting the number of plugs and switches, the lights, the service, the size of the service, the size of the ranges, the size of the ovens, the disposals, dishwashers. And we developed what we called assemblies. We would make up so many feet of pipes, one box or two boxes and pipe and wire and reciprocals and plates and we made assemblies, and then we were able just to count the number of openings with the number of switches and all that and [cell phone rings] we had assemblies for all this stuff. Anyway, all the contractors and everything got along just fine. Back in 1969 or maybe from '66 to '69, we had a fellow by the name of Walter Toothman.

He was a registered professional engineer, [he] graduated from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and he was a very knowledgeable engineer. He had worked for Reynolds Electric Company in five points as an engineer. He was the electrical engineer in charge of the Portsmouth, Ohio Seaman Plant and the Portsmouth, Ohio Generating Plant for Reynolds Electric Company. And it was a quite, quite, quite, big, big, jobs for Reynolds Electric Company. In those days, it was the largest electrical contractor in El Paso, and probably one, two or three in the United States; they were so huge. And they did works at the Las Vegas, Nevada atomic energy test sites and they did the Portsmouth, Ohio energy generating plant and they did the Seaman Plant in Odessa, Texas. And Walter was the head engineer, the electrical engineer, for all those projects and he came and we became partners. I sold him 25 percent of the company. By that time, my cousin Fernie had decided to go on his own, and he had gone into partners with Larry Tovar and Tovar Electric. He was over there with Larry Tovar and Walter, and I became partners. At those times, we were doing engineering work for the Hunts. We were doing engineering work for a lot of people and it was what we called engineer design-build. We did Kaiser Oldsmobile. We did the Nance Buick. We did the AB Poe Motor Company. We did the Ford Motor Company, the first Ken Ford Motor Company on Montana. We did the Lincoln Mercury Dealership. And there across the street from the Motor Company, I forget what the name of the owner was, but we did that facility also. We did the engineering and all that. And [phone rings] it was fellows like Ted Carron that was doing the construction; Hunt Building Mart that was doing the construction. There was a guy by the name of Bill McClure—Danny James and McClure. They were doing a lot of those places. We started doing apartment houses. In fact, we made a survey a couple years ago, and we did over seven thousand apartment units in the city of El Paso. That's how many apartments. We were like the king pins of electricians in the apartment business. We used to do them all over town. [We] did apartments in Las Cruces and everywhere. It's been a very good time in the construction.

HG: Let me ask you, when you started your business, you were already married?

RN: Yes, I was already married. I got married my second year at Texas Western, and she was going to school, too. And she decided to go work for Union Fashion, and her name was Ruthie Moran, and Ruthie's father was the guy that was the CPA that was doing all our books and showing us how to do things and guided us in the right direction. And today, of course, I'm not married to Ruthie. We got divorced back in—I think it was 1967. And I had two children. One of them is Ricky Najera. He graduated from the University of Texas and he became an electrical contractor. I sold him the company, Lone Star Electric, and I kept my homebuilding company, which was El Paso Lone Star Homes/Electric, and I was building homes and also doing electrical work. My second boy is Michael Patrick Najera. He's a periodontist. [He] graduated from Texas Baylor Dental School and then he went and got his specialization as a periodontist and he taught at

Baylor Dental School. And we had two children and now they've got children of their own and now they're grown up.

HG: So what year did you start this business?

RN: This business was June 28, 1958. And then this business, we had it for the whole time and El Paso Lone Star Homes was started in 1973. In 1973, we started building homes. We started buying some lots. Mr. Abrams was developing lots. He had lots over there where Del Valle High School is and there was a subdivision they started. there was a total of one hundred and ten lots there and they sold us twenty lots and we started building homes there. Then they sold us ten lots, that were building lots, also on Edgemere, way out there on the east side of town. I forget the name of the street, but we did ten houses there. And then we just started building houses, built one here, one there, and everywhere. I built Joe Silva's house up in Crazy Cat Mountain, and that was a huge house in those days. The construction was a half a million dollars. That's what Joe paid for us to build his house. We were building in those days, believe it or not, 1,000 square foot, 990, 980 to 1,000 square feet houses, selling them for \$35,000, \$36,000, \$37,000, \$38,000 and they were selling as fast as we could build them. In those days, Joe Yarbrough, when we first started in 1958, believe it or not, in Hacienda and all those houses around Ranchland area and all those areas, some of those houses, the houses that were built by McKee and the Tejas addition right here on Trowbridge Bridge, those houses were selling for \$8,000, \$9,000, \$10,000. And what they are today, it's unbelievable.

HG: You mentioned you served on the city—

RN: Electrical advisory board.

HG: But you also got involved in other things with the city then?

RN: Yeah, as I was growing up I was quite active in the Boys Club. I became president of the Boys Club and I was staying busy in there and getting involved in everything. Jeff Phillips was on the board and the president of the electric company was on the board. The president of the Mutual Savings Association, Bill—I forget his last name. Mr. Bill Castro (Kastrin??) was on the board. We had a lot of prominent people that were on the board. And then I stayed on there. Mr. Don Henderson was on the board. I actually got voted, and elected, as president of the board. I served two terms as president of the board. And I have a plaque over there on the wall that they gave me for being president of the El Paso Boys Club. It was quite interesting and quite proud of being president of the board at the Boys Club and we did a lot of good for the people. In those days, Mr. Baeza was on the board for the Boys Club and we had about 100 boys and girls that lived in the south side that their parents were working late. So if they got out of school at 3:30 and their parents didn't get home until 6:30 or 7:00, what were they going to do for those four hours? So we opened up the Boys Club so

they could play basketball and they could play pool and ping-pong and cards and Monopoly and the girls could learn how to sew and water color and all that kind of stuff. And we fed them. And the people in El Paso were so nice. We would go to Bill McDuffie, president of the Mutual Savings. We would go in there and say, Bill, we need to raise some money so we can go buy some goods, some groceries, and everything for the kids at the Boys Club, and he never hesitated. He'd write a check for five-hundred bucks. We'd go talk to Fred Hervey, say, Fred, we need some money for the Boys Club because we need to buy some groceries for them, and Fred would write us a check for a thousand bucks. I remember when I was president of the Boys Club, Lee Trevino came to me and he says—Lee was on the board—and he says, “Richard,” he said, “for every tournament that I win, I will give you \$1,000 for every tournament that I win, to the Boys Club.” And I says, “Oh, that’s wonderful.” So I went and talked to Fred Hervey. I told Fred that Lee was going to give us \$1,000 for every tournament that he won. He says, “Richard, you must believe in fairy tales,” and I said, “No, he really, he told me that.” He says, “Well, for every \$1,000 he gives you, I’ll give you \$1,000. You just bring me a copy of his check every time and I’ll match his contribution.” And sure enough, Lee won ten tournaments that year and he gave me ten \$1,000 checks. I went to Fred Hervey and I said, “Here you are,” and he didn’t hesitate at all. He gave me ten \$1,000 checks. And Ted Karam gave us a lot on the corner. I forget exactly where the corner is, but it’s past the city of Las Cruces, real close to the Ysleta Mission, and he gave us a corner lot there. He said, “Hey, here you are. I don’t need it. You guys do something. If you want to build a Boys Club in Ysleta, go ahead and do it. I’ll give you this lot.” So they had closed the Boys Club. They had closed the little thing on Zaragoza Street. There was an old brick with a basketball court and a building that the City of El Paso used to use for outdoor parks and recreation, they closed it down, so we went and asked them, Hey let us open it up and you let us use it and let us rent it for free for ten years. And they did. They let us have it, so we didn’t need that lot that Ted Karam gave us. We turned around and sold it for \$35,000. So we had that thing for \$35,000. In fact, we sold it to Fred Hervey. He was going to put a Circle K there because it was on the corner lot, but he never did. I don’t know, I think he gave it to the Veterans of Foreign Wars and I think they use it as a parking lot now. But anyway, during that course, in 1975, the people that I had known in the Boys Club and everything, Don Henderson came and asked me, he was—Fred Hervey was mayor of El Paso, and so was Don Henderson was on the city council. E. H. Baeza was on the city council and Manny—Martinez wasn’t it? He was on the city council, and Ruben Schaeffer. Do you remember that group? Fred only ran one two-year term and he didn’t want to run it and at that time Don says, “Okay, well I’m going to run,” and Ruben Schaeffer said, “I’m gonna run, too.” So he put a team together, Ruben Schaeffer, and E. H. Baeza says, “I’ll run with you, Don,” and so they said, We need to pick out somebody. Well I was a good friend of Margie Henderson, which was Don Henderson’s wife. She says, “Ask Richard. He’s always been involved in a lot of these things. Ask him and see if he’ll run with you.” And sure enough he asked me and I said, “Well, I don’t know, let me think about it.” I

thought about it and I came and talked to my partner, Walt Toothman, and he says, "Well, why not, Richard? If we can help the city, let's do it." So, I went back and he says, "What do you think?" He says, "Yeah, I'm going to run on your ticket." So I ran on my ticket. And Don Henderson was running for mayor. E. H. Baeza was running. In those days, it was Place 1, 2, 3, and 4, and the No. 1 was police and fire, and he decided to ask J. B. Jones, which was a veterinarian and a good friend. He's real active in all those clubs, in the Optimist Club and everything in the northeast. So he decided to ask J. B. Jones to run for office. They used to call it fire and police alderman. And then E. H. Baeza ran. He was in charge of construction. He was a public works alderman. And then Arlene Quenon, she was female and very active in the community. She decided to run in parks and recreation. She was parks and recreation alderman. My position was airport and finance. And I ran. I was in charge of the airport and in charge of the city (comptroller's??) office, the tax office, city personnel office, and all those things. And I got quite involved and enjoyed it very, very much. And Mr. (Higgins??) was in charge of the (controller's??) office and he was, "Anything I can help you with, anything I can show you, and everything, Richard, come on down to the office. I'll be glad to show you." We had this tax office. I went over there with Woody and he showed me everything in the tax office, anything you want. And then I went to (Sam Navarro??) in personnel and he says, "This is how we work it," bang, bang, bang, and he showed me all the stuff and the civil service commission and you're in charge of this and that. Then I went to Walter Jones. He was the airport manager and he showed me the airport and took me and showed me where all the fire trucks were and all the maintenance equipment was. In fact, I rode in the brand new fire truck they had bought that year, brand new fire truck and he showed us around and everything. [He] showed us how the runways are and took us to the control tower and showed us how the control tower does this, that and the other. So we were very fortunate to do that.

HG: How many years did you serve on city council?

RN: I served two two-year terms. The first time I served two years with Don Henderson. The second two-years I served with a mayor who was Ray Salazar, wonderful guy. During the first term with Henderson we increased the alderman from four to six, so the next time we ran, there was six people running. We had J.B. Jones and I were the only two that got re-elected from the Henderson ticket. And then they had Dan Ponder. Then they had Polly Harris. They had Jim Scherr. Let's see, who else? There was a total of six of us. I forget, but I think I mentioned everybody. But anyway, we had good council meetings and everything. Jim Scherr was just a young guy, just passed the law degree and everything and I (they??) took him by the wing and showed him stuff and he was very nice and everybody treated everybody nice.

HG: Did you then expand your business, too? Did you do other things?

RN: Well, actually when I started to run for office, Walter and I were doing about two and a half million dollars worth of business at that time, which was a lot of work in those days. I'd say we had fifty journeymen and fifty helpers working for us, maybe ten laborers. And when I went in there, a lot of the stuff that I was doing because I was paying attention to the city and so on and so forth, actually, our volume fell down to two million dollars a year. It fell from two and a half million to two million dollars a year because my involvement with the city, but we were still staying busy. After running four years, I decided to come back and while I was there the business had dropped down to about \$1.7 million. So I had to come back to try to pick it back up and start growing. And we did. We came back and everything started picking up right away. But I was there for a total of four years and learned an awful lot—had a good experience. We went to a lot of cities. We copied the free trade zone. We went to see the free trade zone in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. We went to see the free trade zone in McAllen, Texas. We went to see the new industrial parks at Irvine Industrial out in California. It was barely starting out there. They had a lot of them started, but it was probably the No. 1 industrial lease-land projects like we have here in El Paso, and starting a lot of manufacturing plants, a lot of office buildings, and everything in Irvine, California. And thanks to Walter Jones and Mr. Eddie Azar and George Finger and a lot of good guys that we had on the board. Believe it or not, Mr. Jonathan Rogers was on our board at that time. We got the concept on how to start the El Paso Airport Industrial Center. We started it, and with the guidelines that Irving Industrial started and what they were able to put together, the airport board and with the help of the city attorney's office and a lot of the lease agreements that other administrations had done because a lot of those buildings that are out there at the Airport Industrial sites, the land where the buildings sit, is owned by the City of El Paso. The airport board, they own none of them. They lease them for ninety-nine years; all that land. All those buildings will someday revert back to the City of El Paso and the city will start making money off the rent of those buildings.

HG: Did you get into other businesses?

RN: Yes, I started the homebuilding business. I started the homebuilding business in 1973. I guess overall we probably built 100 homes. The Federal Housing Administration, FHA, had a program called 229 where if the people could show that they had a good income and good credit, they could come in and buy a home, like a \$35,000 home with \$500 down. And if they had \$500 down and they were first-time buyers and they had good credit and everything, they qualified for homes. El Paso had one of the best 229 FHA programs anywhere in the whole United States. And for some reason the congress stopped it, but it was a lot of people, and today in the lower valley and all over got into their homes because of that program.

HG: Did you get into other businesses outside of construction and electrical work?

RN: Two people came to me in 1972 or '71 and they said, Richard, we'd like to start a savings and loan and we understand that the applications the Department of Commerce and Department of Treasury is allowing these applications to come in and especially they're favoring minorities to form savings and loan. He says, "Do you think we can put it together?" And I says, "Yeah, I think so." He says, "You have any people in mind?" And I said, "Yes, I do. I have some friends of mine." So I called my cousin, Nash [inaudible] from Farmers Dairy. I said, "Nash, what do you think about starting a savings and loan?" And he says, "Sounds good to me. What do we have to do?" I said, "We need to put a group of guys together, about eight guys, and try to form it together and see what we can do." So he says, "Well, okay, let's put the guys—you put some names together and I'll put some names together and we'll meet at your house or my house and we'll put it together." So we got Dr. Luz Candelaria and Nash [inaudible], Louie Binswanger, Andy Guevara, Bernie Roth, myself, and all these people, we formed the Missions Savings and Loan, and we got the charter. Believe it or not, we got the charter. It took us a while to get the charter. It almost waited like two years and then they gave us the charter.

HG: What year was that?

RN: I'm pretty sure it was '73.

HG: And you had to put money into that?

RN: Yes, everybody had to pitch in, but the main criteria, everybody, according to the government, had to bring in new depositors. Everybody had to bring in at least a hundred thousand dollars. Before we opened our doors, we had pledges from people and every director had to have one hundred thousand dollars or a million dollars in savings that we had to open up. So Nash brought some of his rich uncles, and all that, to help us open up. The doctors opened up and we opened up and I went to a lot of different people and I was able to raise the pledges of one hundred thousand dollars, and sure enough, we raised a million dollars. And as soon as we were able to raise one million dollars and have proof of it and deposit it, we were able to open up the savings and loan for business. And we hired a guy by the name of Lloyd Harrison (Harris??) that was vice-president for a savings bank in El Paso, and he came to work for us. And I think Jack Ketchings was the president of that savings and loan. Lloyd was a young vice-president working there as a loan officer and he came to work for us and he ran the savings and loan and did us a good job. Time went on, and everything and we were able to get this savings and loan going. And then the opportunities opened up with the Federal Communications Commission during the time of President Ronald Reagan. And Ronald Reagan wanted to open the doors for minorities, to open up opportunities in the broadcast business, radio stations, television stations. And he opened up the doors for everybody and opened up—allowed, and put pressure, I guess, on the Federal Communications Commission, FCC, to be able to allow minorities to open up and take applications from a lot of cities. So I think they opened up,

initially, with twelve applications for television stations across the United States. I think they opened one up in Colorado Springs, Colorado or Denver, Colorado, El Paso. They wanted them opened up, in I think Bakersfield. Another one in—I think there was another place in California, close to Los Angeles. I think it was Inglewood or one of those cities. And they opened up Houston. They opened up the Rio Grande Valley. They opened up applications in Detroit, Michigan, Washington, D.C., and all these places. It wasn't just limited to minorities. I mean, anybody could apply for the deal. So we made the application and we had competing applicants. There was a competing applicant from Fabens, Texas. I think it was some African-American gentleman that had an application in for the television station. And then there was a group out of Sacramento, California that applied for the license. And then there was another group that applied for the license from Modesto, California. We were all competing applicants for the FCC.

HG: And who was your group?

RN: Our group was called Channel 26. That's what our name was, and it was called KINT. What we were hoping to get, if we got the license, it would be KINT for K International because we were on the international border. And so our filing application was by the fellows that I had mentioned before, which was Dr. Luz Candelaria, Dr. George Salome, Gus Wallace, Mary Ponce and Fernie Ponce, the two Silvas, Joe Silva and Martin Silva, and Angel Beltran from JB Company, and there was a total of eight of us, very, very nice people. Initially, they told us, Okay to get started, once the application is done, we're gonna have to come up with \$54,000. Well, after waiting for the application and fighting them in New York, I mean, in Washington D.C., we had to try and get an affiliation in New York with Univision, which was called SIN, Spanish International Network. A fellow by the name of Emilio Azcarraga from Mexico City and another fellow that was in charge of the New York offices, Rene Anselmo. He had two Anglo guys who were very good broadcasters that were in charge of the Univision station. At that time, they had a total of eighteen stations in little cities, and they were operating. We had just gotten our license and we wanted to get affiliated. So Mr. Rene Anselmo said, "When you guys go on air, and we see how you operate after awhile, then we'll talk about allowing you to come into our network." But where were we going to get programming? And they first had told us it was going to be \$54,000 each, which we each put up \$54,000, and then we couldn't get programming and then programming was so expensive and everything. We went to the State National Bank and we talked to the State National Bank people. We had made all the different applications with them and filled all the paperwork and everything. We were a group of minority people and some guys had some pretty healthy statements, a lot of guys didn't, but a lot of guys did. They looked at everything, and sure enough, after a while, they gave us a loan for four million dollars so we could buy a transmitter, our tower on the mountain, so we could construct our building, so we could get all the broadcast control equipment in the building, all our office equipment, our computers, furniture, and the whole thing, and they were very, very nice. A guy by the name

of Joe Chavez was the guy that Okayed the loan and he administered the loan and he was very, very happy with it.

HG: What year was that?

RN: We went on air on cinco de mayo, 1985, and it took us about, after we got the application and everything, about a year to build the building, build the tower up on Mount Franklin, and the building, and the transmitter, and all the requirements that go with the FCC where all the engineering data and everything. Where the tower's going to be and so on and so forth. Luckily, Channel 4 was thinking of building a new tower. So they say, Hey you guys going to build a tower? I said, "Yeah." Let us build it with you and we'll go 50/50 on the cost of the tower. I says, "Okay and how about the building?" He says, "We'll go 50/50 on the building, too, the construction and everything." That saved us a lot of bucks. So they went 50/50 and we built a building big enough so they could put their transmitter up there and we could put our transmitter, we had the same tower and two antennas. Then pretty soon we started leasing space on that antenna to the FBI and to the Southern Pacific Railroad and on to the army and to the air force. We had a lot of rental income coming in that we split, part of it to Channel 4 and part of it to us, which was a good move. But anyway, we had a very successful deal. What they told us, if we could start, and in six months, we could show that we knew what we were doing and we had the strength, financial strength wherewithal, to stay in business for that long a time, so on and so forth. We were renting old kung fu movies and we would dub it in Spanish and we were doing that and then Tarzan movies with Johnny Weissmuller and all that and we were dubbing it in Spanish. Tarzan was speaking Spanish over the air and people loved it. They loved watching those movies. And we bought a big package of Contiflas movies and started showing those movies in the evenings. Believe it or not, El Paso, at the time, there was a lot of first generation Americans that came from Mexico. They were first generations and they were Mexican-Americans, first generations. They all started watching all these movies and we started having a big success showing these movies. When we showed Univision, the SIN network in those days, saw that we were successful doing all this stuff, they said, Hey, yeah I think we'll give you the signal, but right now the signal is going to Channel 5 in Juárez, Mr. Manassas. Because Mr. Manassas has been sitting on our signal and not really doing anything, he's receiving \$350,000 a year and not doing too much with it, we're going to increase the signal costs to \$500,000 and give you \$250,000, Richard, and we're going to give Mr. Manassas \$250,000. If Mr. Manassas doesn't pick up and start having a news program and everything, by the end of a year, then we're going to give you the full \$500,000, and following the contract for the full \$500,000 the next year. So I said, "Okay." So they were monitoring him. They hired a company to monitor his time and make sure he was—what programs he was doing and everything, unbeknownst to us. We were putting out the good programs. They had the signal, the programs, and everything. They said Manassas has to put on a news program. And we had an excellent news program. We hired a guy named Victor Vasquez from Los

Angeles Channel 2 and Victor was (an experience??). He had been a broadcaster in Los Angeles. He was a young guy and his parents lived in El Paso, so we were able to get him. He came to Channel 9 and they hired him and he was trying to unionize some of the workers and the owner of the Channel 9 says, “Hey man, I don’t want any of this business. You’re out of here Victor.” So we hired Victor. And we told Victor, We’ll hire you, but don’t starting any of this nonsense of trying to unionize our guys until we get a chance to get on the air and start doing some”—he says, “Okay.” In those times, there was a Mexican-American Broadcaster’s Association, and they meet in Phoenix and Albuquerque and Santa Fe and El Paso. They would meet in Santa Fe and Dallas and For Worth. And they would meet all over. Sometimes, they kept going east and go into Philadelphia and all those places, and Los Angeles and back west and going up north to San Francisco area. And there was a young lady that later became part of my family, Veronica Sosa, and she married my son which is a periodontist. She was a news broadcaster, graduated from the University of Arizona. Victor says, “I got this girl who speaks perfect Spanish and she’s a broadcaster over there. She wants to come to El Paso and wants to be the head anchor and I think we ought to hire her. We can get her cheap, and she’s a smart, smart girl.” And sure enough we hired her and everybody loved her. She was a little *guerrita* with blonde hair and spoke perfect Spanish and was born in Mazatlan Sinaloa and grew up in Tucson. She went to the University of Arizona. Then we hired Victor who was a news broadcaster and he was the male anchor. She was a (male??) anchor. He was also being a news director, Victor was, Victor Vasquez. Then, we hired a sports announcer by the name of Luis Zuñiga that is still there today, Channel 26. Then a kid that was working as electrician for my cousin Fernie, this guy says, “Hey, does you cousin—is one of the owners of that Channel 26?” He says, “Yeah.” He says, “Well, you know I used to work for Televisa in Mexico City in the news department and here’s my credentials. I wonder if he’d give a job.” We interviewed him, and sure enough, we hired him, Hector Urrutia. He’s still there. So we had an excellent news team and they’re so good that they’re still there, except Victor wanted to do something else because his parents were in the real estate business. So now, he’s in the real estate business. But everything was very, very, very good to us.

HG: You didn’t stay in that business?

RN: We loved the business and we were there for ten years. We were there from ’75 to ’87. The guys I became to know, (Adan Trevino??) in Houston—he had the license and the television station in Houston. I knew Mr. Sosa in McAllen. We knew the guys that owned the stations in Las Vegas, and the station in Reno, and the station in Oxnard, and the station in Oregon, it was an Anglo guy but he spoke perfect Spanish and [he] used to be a country-western singer. All these guys got together and he says, “You know, let’s form our own network. Adan liked the idea and he says, “Well my brother’s a lawyer. I’ll get him to put it together.” He says, “Okay, Adan.” The guys from McAllen, the guys from Houston, the guys from El Paso, and then we had the guys from all in California.

(Was it, Diaz??)? We got together, and we put the idea that we were going to start our own network. And then, we were going to get the signal from Univision. Now, they've changed the name from SIN to Univision, and we were going to buy the signal from Univision. Doubleday had bought Univision and then they had bought it for fifty-five million [dollars] and they couldn't make a go of it to make really big money—(Hallmark Cards??). So they sold it to a guy named Peter Perenchio, and he bought it for fifty-five million. And right away he hired some real hot shots from CBS and NBC and then they started getting the sales up in Univision because this guys says, "Look, the population of the United States, is Spanish, Mexican-American population, the Hispanic population in the United States is 8 percent. Hey, we got three hundred million people, or 8 percent. You're entitled to 8 percent of the monies that's being spent on advertising because all the Hispanic Americans they drink Budweiser beer and Coors beer and they use Dove soap and Head and Shoulders shampoo and all these things." So they went in there, and by God, they sold to major advertising companies under that premise that they need to start giving Univision 8 percent of the total buys for the network. Well, to make a long story short, he bought it for fifty-five million dollars. Recently, in 2007, Mr. Perenchio sold Univision to CBS for two hundred fifty million dollars. Anyways, he's quite a businessman. He owns Republic Pictures in Hollywood. He made the movie Driving Miss Daisy. The guy's an entrepreneur. He's from Fresno, California, great guy. He had a tremendous brain, that guy. You know how I had met him? We had a meeting in Fort Lauderdale at a country club there. We were having a meeting, a sales meeting, and we were walking down to get the elevator and he was too and he looks at me and says, "Hi Richard, how are you guys doing over there in El Paso?" I didn't even know he knew who I was.(laughing) I said, "Oh, we're doing find, sir." He says, "I know you are. We've been keeping our eye on you. We're very impressed with the way you guys run the station." At that time, the viewing audience in the city of El Paso, the Hispanics—the population of the Hispanics in El Paso was a total of, 70 percent of the population of El Paso in those days was Mexican or Spanish speaking people. And we had, of those Spanish-speaking people, we had 70 percent of the total television sets tuned in at five and six o'clock were watching Channel 26 because they were Mexican-Americans. And the population in those days was probably half a million. So 70 percent of that is three hundred fifty thousand. We had 77 percent of that. The percentage was so high that Perenchio and all those people, in their sales presentations to other stations were telling them, Hey, you guys need to increase your viewership because look at El Paso. They got 77 percent. Whatever they're doing, you need to talk to those people [phone rings] because they're the ones that are really, really getting the sales up and people are really watching them. Whatever they're doing, you need to find out that secret. What we did, a lot of the things for viewing audiences, we would start at two o'clock. We started a BINGO program and then we had guys like Malooly Furniture and we had Skyline Furniture. Okay, after—back in '85, '86, '87, we were making three million dollars, profit a year. That was gross profit, and we had a small operating budget, but we were making lots of money. And these guys took our idea of

putting a bunch of stations together; they were working in L.A. for KMX. They had got the idea from us when we were trying to put it together in Houston and McAllen, Texas and up north. They came to us and they said, Look guys, you guys had this idea of putting it together, and for some reason, you guys dropped the ball. And we'd like to take it up, and we're going to come in, and we've made McAllen an offer, and they've taken the offer. And we're buying McAllen, Texas for twenty-two million dollars, and we'd like to offer you guys twenty million." And George Salome and Gus Wallace and the Silvas, being smart businessmen they said, We don't need to sell this thing. He says, "We want forty million dollars for our station." And I says, "Forty million dollars? You know, Channel 4 sold, you know they sold the CBS affiliate for twenty-five million. You think we can get forty? All right, let's give it a try." So they came in and we told them. They came back and said, "Well, we'll give you twenty-eight million." [We said,] Nope. [They asked,] Well how much you guys want? We said, Well we got an offer from some other broadcasters in Chicago for thirty-eight million. [They asked,] You do? [We answered,] Yeah. The very next day they said, We'll offer you forty million dollars. We'll give each director, so that they don't compete, we'll give them \$150,000 each, and we'll buy your building in Juárez for \$250,000, and we'll give you an extra million dollars for your radio stations. You know, the offer was so good that we couldn't turn it down and we turned around and sold it to those guys. They bought McAllen. They bought El Paso. They bought central California. They bought Oxnard, California. They bought Denver, Colorado. They bought the stations in Philadelphia. They bought the stations in Detroit, Michigan. They put a little group together with a lot of money, and the guy that owned 25 percent of this group was Mr. Peter Perenchio.

HG: So what year was that, that you sold out?

RN: We sold it in '87. They took over June 1, 1987.

HG: Then you went back to contracting, which you are still doing today?

RN: Yes.

HG: Mr. Najera, I appreciate your wonderful story and I think there's a lot of value to it, and I might want to get some more, but I appreciate your time, very valuable, very valuable time. I appreciate it. This concludes the interview with Mr. Richard Najera.

**End of Interview**