

2-16-2009

Interview no. 1530

Alejandra Chávez

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Interview with Alejandra Chávez by Edmundo Valencia, 2009, "Interview no. 1530," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Alejandra Chávez

Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

Project: Hispanic Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: February 16, 2009

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Transcript No.: 1530

Transcriber / Summary: Pamela Krch

As both a young woman and a hispanic restaurateur, Alejandra Chávez has beaten the odds with her successful El Paso restaurant and catering business, Thyme Matters. In this interview, she recounts her childhood, education, and early career, and ends with advice for aspiring entrepreneurs in general and restaurant owners in particular. Born in Houston, Texas, in 1977, Chávez moved with her family to El Paso at the age of three. Both her father, a physician, and her mother, a journalist, emigrated from Mexico and, although neither initially spoke English, they managed to succeed in this country while modeling a strong work ethic and high standards. After attending El Paso's Loretto Academy, Chávez went on to earn a degree in corporate communications with a minor in business at the University of Texas at Austin. Even though she quickly advanced in the business world, first working as a corn trader for Cargill and later as a risk manager for Enron, Chávez remained unsatisfied. Realizing that cooking was truly her passion, she left her job in 2002 and spent the entire year in Italy learning to cook and working at various restaurants. After her return to El Paso, Chávez secured a Small Business Administration loan and started up Thyme Matters in 2004, concentrating primarily on catering and offering only a tiny eat-in space consisting of four tables. Five years later, her business has grown to a larger, full-service restaurant employing twenty-two workers. Although the restaurant business is a high-risk industry, Chávez maintains that hard work, passion, and attention to detail will ensure success. Furthermore, she insists that "food is very powerful," and even though life in the corporate work provided benefits she no longer enjoys, her role in the community now fulfills her life-long desire to be of service.

Length of interview 76 minutes

Length of Transcript 36 pages

Name of Interviewee: Alejandra Chávez
Date of Interview: 16 February 2009
Name of Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

This is an interview with Alejandra Chávez on February 16, 2009 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Edmundo Valencia. This interview is part of the Paso Del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

EV: Good afternoon. First of all, when and where were you born?

AC: I was born in Houston, Texas in November 1977, November 2, to be exact. *El Dia de los Muertos.*

EV: Nice, '77?

AC: Yes.

EV: And where did you grow up?

AC: I grew up mostly in El Paso because at the age of three, my family moved to El Paso. However, since I do not have any other family, except my parents and my brother and sister, that live in the United States, we spent most of our vacations and summers in Mexico, in Chihuahua.

EV: Most of your family lives in Chihuahua?

AC: All of my family, yes.

EV: And what were your parents' names? Are they still alive?

AC: Yes, both of my parents.

EV: What are their names?

AC: My mom's name is Georgina Chávez. Iube (Ayub??) is her maiden name. And my father is Alfonso Chávez-Pacheco. He's from Parral and she's from the city of Chihuahua.

EV: Iube (Ayub??), where is that last name from?

AC: That's from Lebanon. My great-grandparents emigrated from Lebanon to Mexico, all four great-grandparents on my mother's side.

EV: Did they move originally to Mexico, I mean to Chihuahua, or do you know?

AC: Well, first, they moved to Mexico City and then they migrated up north to the city of Chihuahua.

EV: Do you know around what time this happened?

AC: Oh, I'm not sure. I could probably let you know later. My grandmother was born in 1919 and she was born in Chihuahua, already; so early 1900s, probably.

EV: So that was – your grandmother's parents are the ones that moved?

AC: And my grandfather's parents, all four of them.

EV: Oh, so your grandmother is like the second generation, I mean the first generation born in Mexico?

AC: And my grandfather, too.

EV: Oh wow, and what were your parents' occupations?

AC: My father studied medicine in Mexico and my mother studied journalism.

EV: Did they operate, actually no, I'm getting ahead, sorry about that. And what was the primary language spoken at home?

AC: Spanish. Yes, my first language was Spanish.

EV: Did you speak any Lebanese at all or anybody?

AC: My grandparents spoke Lebanese between them and to my mother and her sisters, somewhat Lebanese. And then I took some classes to speak Lebanese when I was younger, but it was very difficult for me to pick up since nobody spoke it in my house. So mostly we spoke Spanish and then every once in a while you would hear a Lebanese word.

EV: Tell me about your education, where you went to elementary school, up to high school.

AC: I studied in private school here in El Paso, almost all my life. I went to Loretto for twelve years of my life, from first until I graduated high school. Then after that, I went to school in Austin, in UT Austin, and I actually studied communications.

EV: At what point did your parents move from Chihuahua to El Paso?

AC: After my father finished medical school in Chihuahua, and so that probably was when he was about twenty-three years old. He probably moved to the United States, twenty-four years old. And then he married my mother. He went back to Chihuahua, married my mother, and then they moved here when they were about twenty-five, or twenty-six years old.

EV: Do you know the reasons why they moved?

AC: They moved because my father was graduated from medical school and then he was given a job in Mexico City in a hospital, but I think politically someone took that position away from him, as a graduated from medical school *recién graduado*. And so since someone took that position away from him he didn't have a job. So he had one friend who lived here in the United States as a doctor in Minneapolis, in Minnesota, and he called that friend. And he said, "They just took my job away so I don't know what to do." And that friend of his told him to come to the United States and so he came and he got a position as a surgeon assistant in a hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And then he didn't speak any English, so he worked just as an assistant, even though he was a doctor in Mexico. He couldn't practice medicine yet here. So he worked as an assistant in surgery and he lived in the basement of the hospital in Minneapolis until slowly he started learning English. And then back then, which was probably in 1970, early 1970s, he was able to go back into school to study medicine here in the United States and then eventually able to practice medicine as a doctor, not as an assistant anymore.

EV: And while all this happened, him living in Minneapolis, were you all with him?

AC: No, that was when he first graduated from medical school. I wasn't born then.

EV: Oh, that was before he got married.

AC: That was before I was born, um-hm. Then he married my mother. He went back to Chihuahua, married my mother, and then they both came here to the United States together and then they started a family right away.

EV: I see. And did your family operate some sort of business besides your dad being a doctor?

AC: No, my family didn't operate any business.

EV: And what was your mom's occupation?

AC: Well she studied journalism in Chihuahua. She worked as a journalist in Chihuahua for the newspaper in Chihuahua. And then when she came to live to the United States, of course, she didn't speak any English, so she didn't work. Fifteen years after they got married was when my dad first opened his office as a physician, and she would help him at the office.

EV: Does she continue to do that?

AC: Yeah, she continues to do that.

EV: And what is the present name of your company?

AC: Thyme Matters. It's incorporated, so technically it's Thyme Matters Incorporation, but we just call it – it's also known as Thyme Matters.

EV: Would you please describe your business, the number of employees, the products, the services?

AC: My business is a full-service restaurant. Within the full-service restaurants, there are different categories, so we would label ourselves as a full-service restaurant and casual dining. It's not fine dining. It's more of a casual setting. I currently have about twenty-two employees and they're all full-time employees that work with me. I started my business five years ago. This coming March is going to be five years ago since I started, but I started as a much smaller operation which only had about eight to ten employees, and then since then I've expanded. About three years ago, or a little over three years ago, I expanded into what is now a bigger operation.

EV: So in the beginning, how did you start? What was it that you were providing?

AC: Well, in the beginning, it was more of a catering operation and that is the reason why the name came about, Thyme Matters, because it was more of a catering and thyme is an herb that we use in some of our dishes. That's why it's spelled T-h-y-m-e, and it's pronounced as time, like time. So for a catering operation it was perfect. Thyme Matters, you know, your time matters so when you need catering we can deliver it for you, we can do anything quick. And I was a very small restaurant with four tables. And I had a small dessert refrigerator in the front where people could come in and have maybe a cappuccino and some dessert and maybe order something quick to eat, but most of my business was catering back then. And when I decided to expand the restaurant because more and more people came to eat at that small dining facility, then I decided I'm going to expand the restaurant, but I kept the name. I still do catering, but now I'm more of a restaurant than I am a caterer. But I kept the name so that people would still know me and they would recognize the business.

EV: Why did you decide to go into business by yourself?

AC: Well, okay, it's a long story, but I'm going to try to –

EV: No, just tell it as it happened.

AC: Okay. Well I studied corporate communications in college and I did my minor in business. And then after that I graduated from UT Austin in the Year 2000. After that, I went to work for a small company. Well, it's actually the largest privately owned company in the United States. It's called Cargill and I was a corn trader. And I worked in Iowa for a while, but I didn't like living in Iowa very much because it was a very small community and I kind of missed my family a lot. So I decided that I wanted to move back to Texas. So I got a job at Enron, which everybody knows who they are, and there, I worked in risk management for

natural gas. So in Cargill, I did corn trading, and in Enron, I did natural gas, so it was almost the same thing. And so I was much more like a financial analyzer, much more working numbers and spreadsheets and worked behind a desk and did all of that. And I worked there for a year and then when I realized the company was doing very badly, a month before they declared bankruptcy I quit my job. And I had always had a big passion for cooking, always. That was my passion. But my parents were very old school, very traditional, they wanted me to pursue a career in a university and they didn't want me to do culinary school or anything like that. And when they realized that I really wasn't happy and Enron was not the best company to be in, they declared bankruptcy and all that, I decided to leave to culinary school and that's when I went to Italy. I was originally going to Italy just for six months to do a small course in the culinary arts, and then I really fell in love with the program and the country and everything. So I stayed and I moved around, and I went to two different schools and I worked in different restaurants in Italy. And I was there for a year. And then after I finished my coursework in Italy, and my training and all of that, is when I moved back to El Paso. And I wasn't sure at that time what I was going to do. I didn't know if I was going to go back into the corporate world or if I was going to start in the food industry. And that's when I started doing catering from home, and mostly it was to people that I already knew. And I just wanted to see if people really liked my creations. And they did. And so slowly I started building a little bit of clientele, but I know I needed to be in a more professional setting, I know I needed my own space. So I was looking mostly for a kitchen that I could just work out of for my catering, but I needed the money to start my business. So I consulted with the Small Business Association, the SBA, and they gave me my first loan in 2004. And I'm very, very excited because this coming April is when I'm going to pay off my first loan. So I'm very excited because since then I've gotten another loan. So the first loan I got through the SBA and Chase Bank gave me the money.

EV: Let me ask you, would you describe more what you did? What was the name of the first company, the corn company?

AC: Cargill.

EV: Cargill. Would you describe what you did there?

AC: Well, for Cargill I was a corn trader. So mostly what I did was I also sat on a desk and I talked to farmers from the state of Iowa, all around the state of Iowa. And we worked in actually a corn milling plant. So we received corn from farmers, and we also received corn through train and all that other stuff. But mostly we received it through the farmers. So the farmers would call and they would say, I want to sell you ten bushels of corn. We would buy them by the bushel. And we would say, Okay, the price per bushel for today is this much. Do you want to sell? And the farmer would say, "Yes I want to sell." So then, we would take down the order and we would put it in the computer and all that, and then the farmer would come and drop off his corn. We would process, it and in that processing plant is where we produced things like high fructose corn syrup, which everybody's familiar with. There's a big debate about whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, but it comes from corn. And they use it in toothpaste and in cookies and all sorts of things. And we produced a lot of other things, too. And then what we did was we turned around and we hedged all of our purchases in the Chicago Board of Trade. So I was a corn trader in the sense that I bought corn from the farmer, but then I also bought and sold it through the Chicago Board of Trade and that's what we did basically all day long.

EV: And for how long did you work for them?

AC: I worked for a total of six months for Cargill.

EV: Prior to these, have you had other jobs? What were your jobs?

AC: Well, I mean, I always did random jobs when I was like in high school and also in the university, but I did more voluntary type of jobs. I volunteered a lot in the hospital. I've always had a big calling for service, for serving others, for helping others, and so I did a lot of volunteer jobs in the hospital or I would help my dad out in his office during the summers, filing paperwork, things like that. I love working with people.

EV: So how early will you trace yourself working or volunteering, around what age?

AC: Oh, I think, volunteering, I mean I've volunteered all of my life. I would say ever since I was in middle school, especially through our school. The school I went to, they would always encourage us. I went to Loretto, so we had a whole, back then – I don't even think it's like that anymore, but back then we had all of the nuns lived in the school, in Loretto, and it was like a nursing home for them. And so they would always, always encourage us to go and talk to them, read to them, sing to them, sit with them, whatever, all of my life I remember doing things like that.

EV: And out of these volunteer jobs or activities, which one would you say that impacted you the most, and why?

AC: I told you I spent a lot of my summers in Mexico. One of my summers, I went to *La Sierra Tarahumara*, which is in the state of Chihuahua, and I went to *Sisoguichi*, which is a small town there. And I think of all my volunteer jobs, that's the one that impacted me the most. I worked in a clinic, which they called a hospital, but it was more of a clinic, and what I did there was just take care of patients. Actually, I wasn't equipped to do the work that they were giving me to do, but I did it anyway. I took blood pressure. I took people's temperatures, the old-fashioned way. I helped sometimes in surgery. I mean they made me do things that I wasn't prepared to do, but I really enjoyed doing that, even distributing medications to the sick. It was a humbling experience for me. And

then I also used to feed an elderly priest that was a little senile, but I learned to care for him so much. And so it was just helping those that were in need.

EV: How old were you at that time, that summer?

AC: I was fifteen.

EV: Fifteen?

AC: I was fifteen.

EV: And how about working with your dad, what would you do, what age did you start doing that?

AC: Anytime we had Christmas break or spring break my mom would be like, “You know you have to go help your dad.” So we would just go to the office and mostly they would make us file things, you know. Oh, we’re going to change these files from here to there. You need to put this in this person’s file or call this person or things like that. We did a little bit of insurance claims, things like that, but just normal things.

EV: And what would you consider that you learned from your dad, or both your parents, from watching them work?

AC: Well, when my parents first came to the United States, neither of them spoke any English, and also, they didn’t have any money. They were very, very, very humble. My mom often tells me the story that when they lived in Houston, which is where I was born, they lived in a black community. Everybody was African American. And so she was pregnant with me and she always says the story that when I was born my brother went and told all the neighbors, “My sister’s born and she’s white,” because he just expected me to be born African American

because everybody around him was that color. So he just thought I was going to be the same way. So she always makes fun of him for saying that. And it just goes to show that it was just a different time. They didn't have any money, but I think they came to this country with very good work ethic, and that's what they tried to show us. It doesn't matter what you're doing. My dad always said it doesn't matter what you're going to do, but you have to do it the very best that you can. And they always, always instilled that in us. And to this day, that's what I always think. If I'm going to work, if I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it right and I'm going to work very hard. And I see a lot of younger people in these days – and even though I'm very young still, I consider myself, I'm thirty-one years old, I'm very young. And still I see that some people, even my age or even those that are a little bit younger, with my employees, sometimes they don't have that same work ethic. So I don't know. That's what I would say.

EV: In going to the starting your business, was there anybody who encouraged you or along those years were – well it can be your parents, as well. Has there been another figure, like a mentor, somebody who encouraged you into business or somebody who you would consider that you learned some [inaudible] from that person to run a business or –

AC: You know what? I'd have to think about that. I don't think anybody – and that's been the hardest thing for me because as you probably know, or most people can recognize, is that a lot of physicians are not very business oriented, and so my mom is, so I would say my mom definitely. And my dad definitely encouraged me to open my business, but that was one of the toughest things for me because my parents, they're very good people, and so running a business, it's difficult sometimes. It's difficult and so it's one of the things that I've struggled with the most, to learn – I don't have someone that I could just turn to and say, "Oh, what am I supposed to do with this?" I had other friends in the industry that I would turn to and I would ask them certain questions. For example, I had a friend who also owned a restaurant and one day I had an employee who was acting up and I

didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to reprimand the employee. I just thought we all come to work and do what we're supposed to do and there's no need for any discussion, but for this particular case, there had to be something said to this employee and I didn't know how to go about that. So I asked this employee, "What do you usually do when something like this happens?" He says, "Oh, in the restaurant industry here in the United States we have what's called a write-up." And he taught me, you know, so it's just like a pink slip when you're in school and you got a little piece of paper. And you call this person's attention you say, "This is what you did wrong. Let's try not to do it again." So things like that, but it took me a really long time to catch up because I didn't really know. Remember, my training was mostly in Italy. I never worked in a restaurant in the United States. So in Italy it was very different. In Italy, it was everybody sat down for a family meal. It was very family oriented. Here I think it's a lot more business oriented. Over there it was more everybody's going to sit down. We're all going to eat together. The chef sits down and eats with the line cooks. I mean everybody eats together. You all eat before we're going to start working. It's just a lot more family oriented. So that was a very difficult thing for me. But in terms of mentoring, obviously, my dad encouraged me greatly to open my own business because he's always believed in me greatly. And my mom has helped me in terms of, you know, financially. "Make sure you pay your taxes. Make sure you do this." My mom is very 'by the book' when it comes to things like that so she's always been on top of me. "Make sure you're doing this, and make sure you're doing that, and make sure you have your accounting straight." So both of them, I think, helped me mutually.

EV: And how about your education at college? What was the primary focus of your major?

AC: My primary focus was corporate communications and then I did my minor in business. So, of course, I took classes, like for my minor in business I took classes, you know, accounting, business law, things like that that were very

important. But corporate communications was a very good degree for me. It fit me very well because I like working with people. Like I said, I have a heart for serving others. And I think that's a big part of this business, the communication with customers and even with employees. It had some things to do with how to handle training employees, hiring, firing, things like that. That's more like the corporate communications. I think what most people do in human resources is mostly what it is, similar to that.

EV: So how would you sort of rate how university prepared you for your business or like conducted business?

AC: Oh, I think it's essential. I don't know. I mean, I know that there are some people like Michael Dell – I mean, I went to school in Austin, so everybody talked about Michael Dell, how he dropped out of school and then became a millionaire. And I just think that there's very few cases of people like that. Maybe you can open up a fruit stand or a taco stand and maybe you'll make it big. I mean, I guess you never really know. And I don't want to pass judgment on anybody who does that because it's still something that's serving other people. So I value those jobs too. But I think it's essential for a lot of things. I mean, and I can tell you for people that I've trained in terms of management positions – I learned very basic skills in college, how to use a Word document, how to write a letter, how to use Excel, those very basic things that people that I've tried to train for management positions here struggle with because they don't have that education. So I think college is essential for anybody to learn, to move forward in other things. I can't tell you that what I learned in Calculus is important right now, but I'm not saying it wouldn't be important for an engineer. So I think it's good for everybody to have your training in all realms so that you can apply it. You never know when you're going to have to apply it. I mean, even to this day – I took a class in college that was called Interpersonal Communications, which was one of my favorite classes, and even to this day, I can still open the book and say, “Oh, this, this, and this. This is the way you should do that.” So I think it's very

important. College, to me, was not easy by any means. I don't want to say it was all fun and games. It wasn't. I think you have to work hard at it, but I think it's super important.

EV: And I need to ask you about Enron. How was your experience there? What did you do, first of all?

AC: Well, at Enron – okay, so with Cargill I was actually trading corn. I would actually buy and sell corn in the Chicago Board of Trade and buy it from the farmers. At Enron, I worked in what was called risk management. So that was completely financial analysis. I did profit and loss reports for five different natural gas traders, which was the busiest floor in that whole building. I worked on the 32nd floor and there was about two hundred people that worked with me on that floor. And I managed the P&L for natural gas traders for the east coast of the country. The country was split into different regions: east, west, northwest, all those regions. And I managed all the gas trades done on the east coast of the country. So I had like the VP and some other different types of traders that I worked for, five different ones in total. And I would sit in a desk and I would be viewing all of their trades all day. So if any of their trades seemed a little off, they bought something that the price was too high or they sold it too low or they were buying too much of something, I was supposed to alert them of how their profit and loss was going for that day. And then at the end of the day, I would do a report that would tell them exactly how they did: they lost this many thousands of dollars or they made this many thousands of dollars. And there was all sorts of different types of trades going on there. So there, I mean, I used a lot of my classes from college in terms of economics and things like that.

EV: And so what was the time between you working for Cargill and Enron?

AC: Well, I started working for Enron in November of 2000 because I graduated in May, I started working for Cargill. Then in November of 2000, I started working

for Enron. And then I worked until November of 2001. So I left to Italy in January of 2002. I was in Italy all of 2002.

EV: And what would you consider are the lessons that you learned working within the corporate world, good or bad?

AC: Well, there's some good things about the corporate world. The first is that you don't really have to worry about anything. You're an employee so you get paid, you get your check, you get your benefits, at Cargill, in particular, they had a lot of perks working for Cargill, as well as for Enron. And Enron, for example, we had a really, really, really state-of-the-art, nice, state-of-the-art gym in the building I worked in and we also had laundry service. We had a lot of perks that a lot of people don't have. We had lunch catered to us. We always had outings, happy hours. I mean there was just a lot of money going around everywhere so things weren't tight. Like right now there's so many tight economic crises everywhere. Money is very tight right now. Back then, I mean it just seemed like money was growing on trees. Everything was about money. How much money did this trader make? How much money did this other trader make? I mean, it just seemed like it was endless. And so there were a lot of perks to working. Also, it's fast paced, and so sometimes, it's like an adrenaline rush. You just want to keep learning. And Enron was categorized as hiring the very best of the best and so there were a lot of really smart people working there. So that was enriching. You're working around people – you're maybe trying to solve a problem and you don't know how to figure it out and the person next to you is just really smart. So there were a lot of people you could go to. And that was encouraging. But on the other hand, the downfall was that it was cutthroat. That was one of the things I didn't like. No feelings went into anything. This is the way it is. It's either black and white. You're obligated to do this and this and this. We don't care if your grandmother's sick, or whatever, just as an example, you still have to come to work. And it was very cutthroat and that was one thing that I just didn't think it was for me because it was just – there was a lot of things

that I couldn't understand, mostly because it was so big. It was just such a big environment. And like my boss called us in one day and she was like, "You know we're all going to have to work this weekend because we have twenty million dollars and we can't find it, and we have to find it this weekend." And it's just like everything was in millions and it just didn't make sense. And obviously, there was a reason why it didn't make sense. But that's one of the things I didn't like about it.

EV: So out of the whole experience, what did you get out?

AC: That you have to be fiscally responsible. I always use a term 'fuzzy math'. I got it from Enron. I always say, "Oh, no fuzzy math here," because Enron was all about the fuzzy math. No one ever knew exactly what was going on. So I always use that term, 'fuzzy math'. I always tell my servers, "I don't want any fuzzy math," or whatever, as a joke. So I got out of it that you can have it all, but you can lose it all, too. So you just have to take care of your business. You have to take care of what you're doing. You have to watch it. In Spanish, we have a saying, *El que tiene tienda, que la atiende*. We say that all the time, do. That's just the way I feel. You have to be fiscally responsible. You have to do things the right way and you have to work hard. And also, what I got out of it was a very different way of treating employees because sometimes I didn't like the way we were treated at Enron. Like my boss was having an affair with someone else's boss, and there was just a lot of confusion. Sometimes you were just like, "Where is our boss? What if I need to ask a question?" And so I learned a lot about what employees want because I was there and I knew what I wanted. I knew how I wanted to be treated. I knew what was right for me. I didn't want to work sixteen hours a day with no compensation. We were working at Enron, and the computers would go down while we were trying to run our end-of-the-day reports. And so then, we were stuck there for another three, four hours trying to get them to fix the computers, and we were just sitting there doing nothing. And that was very frustrating. And I always think of my employees. If I need them to

work extra, if I need them to do something, they need to be compensated. And they want to be treated fairly and I think that's very important. That's a very important lesson I learned. I'm glad I was there because now I know what it feels like on both sides.

EV: And now going back to your business and getting it started, the question is what kind of experience did you have in the area, but maybe before that, you might want to tell me about your experience in Italy and your prior experience or your motivations with food and cuisine and things like that.

AC: Okay, well, when I was twelve years old I asked my mom for a beater, a KitchenAid beater, not any beater. I wanted a really good, professional beater for my birthday. And my mom said, "Are you sure," – which is an expensive gift, but I said that's what I want. And she was able to buy it for me. I still have it to this day. And I remember going to school and I told my friends and my friends were like, "What did you get for your birthday?" You know at that age everybody asks you, and I said, "I got a beater." And I was just so excited about my beater. I remember one of my friends told me, "I would cry if I got a beater for my birthday." But then it was the best thing because I used that beater every year after that, that was when I was twelve. When I went into high school, I ran for office. Every year I was doing something. I was vice-president of my class, president of my class, the student council president. My senior year I was class representative. Every year I had something to do. Well I used that beater every single year to bake cookies when I was running for office. And I would bake cookies and I would put my name, "Alejandra running for student council president," or whatever, and I would give everybody cookies and people loved them. Or when I was class representative, you know, you go into your classroom and everybody's talking and I realized that the only way to make them listen to my news or whatever I had to say was to give them food so that they would eat and be quiet. So I was the best class representative. Everybody loved me so much because I always fed them neat things, and I used that beater. And so I

always had a huge passion for cooking. And back then, it was mostly baking because I was younger, but even then for cooking. And I just realized that food is very powerful. Food is very powerful. It's a way of connecting to people. It's a way of keeping families together, I think. So to me it's a lot more than just sitting down and eating because there's a need to eat. There is a need to eat, physical need to eat, but it's a lot more sentimental to me than that. And so that was one of my big motivations. My motivation was how can I connect to other people through food? How can I serve others through food? And I can go on and on about that. Like I always have things about thinking about the psychology of food and deeper themes to food than just cooking and eating. But what was the second part of that question? I forgot.

EV: Well, let me ask you, was there anybody – I mean did you see in your family, is there also like a big tradition of cooking?

AC: Yes, there's a big tradition of cooking in my house. My grandmother, obviously, was the one that started the tradition. And my grandmother, when I was really young, she would make us prepare the next day's meal the night before. So all my summers that I spent in Chihuahua, it's like what are we going to eat tomorrow. Okay, we're going to eat this. We're going to clean the rice because back then you had to clean the rice, clean the beans or we had to peel the peas, take them out of the pods. Everything was done the night before and right when you woke up the next morning, my grandmother was already cooking. She was already preparing the meal for the family, and so those are very special moments for me, very special times. But similarly, when I was in Italy, that's the way it was. And when I went to the north, when I studied in the second school I went to in the north, I met a family that was very much like that. And they all lived in the same house and they had a restaurant in town and they were very much like that. So we're very similar, I think, in culture, that way.

EV: And tell me more about the type of training you got at the school in Italy.

AC: Well, the first school was kind of just like an introduction, like a basic Italian cooking, where we learned to make fresh pasta and maybe fresh tomato sauce and marinara sauce and maybe minestrone soup, things like that that are very typical. And then some more complex things, but it was more like an introductory course to Italian cooking.

EV: I'm sorry, what was the name of that school?

AC: Apicius. A-P-I-C-I-U-S.

EV: And where is that located?

AC: That's in Florence.

EV: I'm sorry, continue.

AC: And Florence is a small town that doesn't have a subway station or anything like that, so I got around by foot. And I loved it because then I got to know the local bakery, my corner bakery store, my corner coffee shop where I used to buy my espresso or whatever. And it's like a small town with a lot of culture and a lot of great food. And I lived there for six months, and I enjoyed it tremendously. And then after that, I went to a school that required you to have a previous culinary certificate to be enrolled in that school. So since I already had my certificate from Apicius, I was able to enroll in this other school, which was up in the north. And that was a lot more professional. It was more like if you would go to the CIA or whatever. It was in a castle though, so I mean it made it a lot more luxurious, I guess. But it was fun and it was intense. It was all day, all day, all day. And that was in the northern part of Italy. And that's where I met this family that I've been telling you that was very similar to my family. And many times, they would make food, and we would go out in the garden and eat it. It was a very small

kitchen the lady had, and she would make such delicious food just out of that very small kitchen. So it doesn't take a lot to make good food.

EV: And what is the name of that other school?

AC: That's called Italian Culinary Institute for Foreigners, ICIF.

EV: Exactly where is it located?

AC: That's Costigliole d'Asti. I'm going to have to write that down for you because it's kind of complicated. But it's between Turin and Milan, up in the north.

EV: I think we covered that question. Let me just ask you now, when you were starting your business, what were the economic conditions in the region, here?

AC: Well, I think for restaurants it's a little different because I think the success rate for restaurants is very low. I don't know the exact number right now, but it's always been that way. Restaurants have a high rate of failure. And when I was opening my restaurant, when I went for my first loan, it was kind of hard for me to get my first loan. First, because the loan officer didn't like the name of the restaurant; he didn't like Thyme Matters. He said that we lived in a very Hispanic city and no one was going to understand the name. And that was it; I wasn't going to make it. And it took me a lot of convincing to do, to tell him, "But I've done my catering through this name. And I don't want to lose my name because people might not recognize me after that." And then other than that, you have to do a business proposal. It was thirty pages where you had to figure out how much you had to make to survive, basically. But it was difficult because you have to realize how many number of guests you were going to have, and what was the average ticket price per guest, and how many employees you were going to have, and how much labor you had to pay, and what other fixed costs and variable costs you were going to have. And it was just like, "I don't know. I've never worked

in a restaurant. How am I going to know all of the costs I'm going to have?" It was hard. But I finally got that loan and so I think that was the hardest part. Building a name is also difficult. Building your reputation and getting regular clientele, regular customers, is difficult, and then, of course, the whole initial process of hiring, training, just starting the business. I think like in any business, "Okay, we're going to call this business this name. We're going to hire these people." Now how do you start training them to do things? And then sometimes you don't even know exactly what you really want done. You're just like, "I don't know if I really want black napkins or blue napkins," or whatever. You just, you don't have everything already decided when you first start. So it's very stressful. I remember I would just go home and go to sleep. I didn't want to know about anything else. It was difficult.

EV: Getting the loan with SBA, other than requiring a detail business proposal, what other requirements did you have?

AC: I think I had to give them a list of my assets ,or whatever, which weren't that many, but I guess whatever little you have they still want to know that you have something or whatever. So it was a list of my assets, which wasn't much because I had lost all my 401K at Enron anyway and then I had been in Italy for so long. I hadn't been making money, so I didn't have much, but whatever it is. I had a car and so they wanted to know the (lien of my??) car or whatever, and a list of assets, and then the business proposal and, I guess, a backup in case something didn't work out. But I think that mostly you just have to walk in there, be very confident and consistent in what you say. If they try to say, Oh, well, are you sure you can do this? Just always answer the same questions over and over again, "Yes, this is the way it's going to be. Yes, this is it." I mean, I had to take a bunch of backup. For example, in the other restaurant, it was a fast casual restaurant. Remember I told you this was a full-service restaurant? That restaurant was fast casual in the sense that it was a lot smaller. You didn't have the level of service that you have here or anything like that. So they didn't

understand that concept back then. They were like, Well what does that mean? Not that they didn't understand it, maybe they just weren't familiar with it. So I had to do a lot of investigating on the Internet, through magazines and print out articles that supported that type of restaurant; that said, "This is the trend. This is where customers are leaning towards, in their dining experiences, is more fast casual." And so I printed out all of those, I guess, testimonies that I found through the Internet and through magazines and I said, "Look this is the trend. This is why I'm opening this type of restaurant because this is what everybody seems to say is what's happening right now, what's the best thing for consumers," so things like that that I had to give them.

EV: Did you have any other sources of funding?

AC: No, not at that time. The SBA was my only source of funding.

EV: Were there any other major obstacles that you encountered on the startup phase?

AC: I don't remember. I mean there's always going to be the obstacle of not opening on time. I don't know if anybody's opened on time. But I would say most business owners say they're going to open one day and then they don't open that day because you depend on so many other people to open. Even if this is your plan, you're depending on, for example, I had to install a kitchen. So you order equipment, the equipment doesn't come in on time, or the person who's going to install your hood, or whatever, doesn't show up or has to cancel because something else came up. Or your inspector comes, but now the inspector wants you to change this – for example, I had to do a sink in the front because, remember, I had my dessert refrigerator in the front. So they wanted a hand sink for my employees to be able to wash their hands in the front. So we had to run a waterline and get the whole sink. And so things like that always come up. So I would say that's one of the biggest challenges, just to be able to open. And then the second thing is, I think everybody underestimates, not everybody, but I would

say most people, probably underestimate the number of hours you're going to be working when you first start. And I was alone; I didn't have anybody. So it's really exhausting. I think that was one thing that I just didn't realize, how many hours it was going to take. Because it really isn't just about the hours of operation you're open, but it's all the hours after and before, that you're trying to figure out everything. You're trying to figure out your computer system. You're trying to figure out, like I just said, your payroll, payroll taxes, all the other things that go on behind the scenes. I would say other than that, that was my biggest.

EV: And how did this change happen, focusing most on the in-house service and less on the catering?

AC: I think that just happens with time. It's just an adjustment that happens with time. You start to realize what you have to give priority to. And you don't want to get sick. I mean I was so stressed out I got sick with my gallbladder. I had to get my gallbladder out, and it was just, like, a mess because I was thinking, I have to go in for surgery, and how am I going to take care of my business? Who's going to open my business? Who's going to close my business? Who's going to help me run the business? I even had one of my mom's friends, when I was going in to surgery, [I said] "You need to come. You need to sit here and this is what you're going to do." And she said, "Okay." So you really need someone who's going to help you. That doesn't mean they're going to have to be there all the time, but you need to have a little Plan B in case something happens because something's bound to happen. You're going to get the flu one day. And a lot of people, I think, especially small business operators, we need people to help us out. Well, unless you're like an accountant, but most people need help with accounting things and financial things, cash flow things and all that stuff.

EV: So what were the signs or what did you start seeing that made you realize that maybe you should have capability for hiring more people?

AC: And to grow?

EV: Um-hm.

AC: Well, I was busy. I was busy and that was just one thing. The second thing was I realized that I had reached my potential in that place. I wasn't going to be able to make any more money because I already reached the potential of the space. There wasn't any more space to produce any more caterings or any more dishes. There wasn't any more space to seat people. That was it. That was my potential, and I didn't want to stay stuck. I wanted to grow. And so then, I realized, Do I want to do that? But I was afraid to because I was afraid that some people were going to feel like the place got too big. That happens sometimes. It's happened. I think it happened to – I don't remember the name of the restaurant, but it was a restaurant on Mesa Street, and they expanded. It's happened a few times. And sometimes they expand too big and then they end up having to close because they over-expanded. So what I did was I printed out some type of comment card. And I asked all my customers that came in, for like three months, "How did you enjoy your meal?" "Do you like the size of this restaurant?" And then the next question was, "If we relocated, would you still visit us? Would you still dine with us?" And then, I just went through it, and I made a statistic to see if people would really still – it was just down the street, but I didn't want people to feel like it's lost its intimacy because that place was so small, and I was always there. And so they thought it was just a real close, intimate place, which I think this place is now, still. But back then, it was just, Well what are you going to do? Is it going to be extremely big? We're never going to see her again. We're never going to talk to her. Things like that, they were afraid. Just like everybody, sometimes, is afraid of change. But in the end, I do that comment card, still to this day, and one of my questions on that comment card now is, "How did you hear about us?" And you would be surprised how many people I have that have heard of us through my old location. I mean, they're just customers that will always be my customers.

EV: And for this location is the one where you got the loan from the SBA?

AC: Then I got a second SBA loan for this location.

EV: Was it easier to get it for this one?

AC: Yes, but the interest rates were higher. Yes, it was a little easier. It is. It was easier because people knew me and I had references by then. You have customer letters that say, "This is a really good restaurant." And plus you have a history of paying your first SBA loan, which they know you've never defaulted on, that you've always paid on time and so they have that reassurance, "Okay, well she's paying that one, so she should be okay." Everything's a risk. Even so, everything is still a risk, and it's still a restaurant so people are always hesitant to buy restaurants. The interest rate was higher, and I got it through a different bank, but it was still through the SBA.

EV: What factors do you consider that have helped your business grow?

AC: Well, one big factor, I think, was getting – I only had a wine and beer license before. I got a full bar, a full liquor license along with building my patio on the side. I think that helped tremendously. Obviously, if you have a full bar it's always better than just having wine and beer, even though I still sell more wine than I sell anything else, but that's helped me a lot; that, [and] loyal customers. El Paso is still a very – we're like a big city with an old town feel. People still want you to make them feel special. And I think that has been very important for my business, adding value to the customer's experience. And the only way to add value, aside from the food and the good service, is the special attention to the customer that they won't get at a chain restaurant because El Paso loves chain restaurants, and all of our chain restaurants have done very successful here. I was just reading an article this morning, in one of my restaurant magazines, and it says

how many Applebee's have closed, how many Macaroni Grills have closed, all over the country. And they haven't closed here because El Paso loves chain restaurants. And so the only way to add value to the customer is by making them feel special, making them feel like this is their neighborhood restaurant. This is their neighborhood bar. This is where they're going to come and I'm going to make them an appetizer that's not on the menu, but they come so often that they deserve it. So things like that. So I would say that, the addition of a bar, the special attention to the customers, that in turn creates the loyalty of the customers. I would say those two things and obviously paying attention to the details. Making sure you're consistent. Making sure your service is always good. Things like that that are very important. It takes a lot of attention to detail, I think.

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

AC: Well, I mean, they're my number one fans. So they come and try to support the business as much as possible. I had my sister here working with me for some time, but she has a big family so she wasn't able to stay very long. So really, it's been me by myself, which, I guess, is okay because a lot of other people have a big family-owned restaurant, but in my case, my sister worked here for a while. She's no longer here with me because she has her family to tend to. But I recently got married and so my husband's with me now. So I mean that helps. It's helped a lot, actually. But my family has been a great support. What can I say? They're the best word-of-mouth.

EV: And what role does your husband play in the business?

AC: Well, my husband has a masters in finance. So now, I'm paying more attention to the kitchen, to creating dishes, to cooking, and he's managing more of the back of the house, which all the paperwork, paying the bills, all that stuff, taxes, payroll, which is great, which is stuff that I learned in Enron and did by myself for four years at this restaurant, for more than four years. But it's hard to be, I don't know

how you would say it in English, but well, I guess it would be like the know-it-all. In Spanish we say, *el todólogo*, the person that knows everything and does everything. And I just don't think that's the way to do things now. I think the best way to do it is to have people help you; to have someone who's really good at one thing to do that, and if someone is really good at another thing, to do that. If you can pull that off, ultimately, that's the best thing for the business, and I think it's the best thing for growth of a business. And it's the best thing for the customer because a customer doesn't want to walk in and see you going crazy trying to be a busser, and a server, and a cook, and a manager. And they don't want to see that. They want to see a place that's together, that has it together.

EV: What's your husband's name?

AC: Iván Torres.

EV: And did he have any previous experience with restaurants?

AC: Yeah, he's actually from Mexico City and he went to study his masters in Boston University. And he opened a restaurant in Boston and he had it for ten years. And then we met, we actually met at a food conference, him and I, in Mexico City. And then he moved here and we got married about six months ago. So he's just recently here. So he's trying to get adapted to the city, the culture. I mean, the culture's a little bit different and, I think, obviously, here in El Paso than it is in Boston. But we're trying to get more into some upscale Mexican cuisine. I went a summer to Oaxaca and studied there and worked there with a chef in Oaxaca. And we're trying to get more integrated into a little bit more upscale fine dining Mexican food. Like this Valentine's Day, I had a chicken with *huitlacoche* and stuffed with *huitlacoche*, and it had a *poblano* sauce on top, and I thought, Okay, I'm going to go with it, but I don't know if it's going to sell. And it was my number two seller. So maybe people are ready. I don't know.

EV: Maybe I shouldn't record this question, but where did you find *huitlacoche* here?

AC: Well, I actually special-ordered it. It was very expensive. I didn't get it fresh. I got it canned, but it's very good. And I mixed it and seasoned it with *epazote*, which it's an herb that's similar to maybe anise or tarragon, and some corn and onions and other spices, and then I stuffed the chicken with it. And the people really liked it. So I don't know. I'd really like to get back into that cooking. I have some Italian dishes. I have some, just regular, like steaks, and things on the menu, seafood items, but I really love Mexican food, but in a different way. Not the same Mexican food you see in a lot of places.

EV: Not Mexican plate.

AC: Uh-huh, exactly, exactly.

EV: And, let me see, what challenges, if any, have you faced growing a business as a Hispanic?

AC: Oh, I think so many. I don't even know where to start. It's like a double whammy for me because I'm Hispanic and I'm a woman. And not that I feel [like] a victim. because I don't at all, but I mean the truth of the matter is – and I could give you names, but I'm not going to. But if you look at all the restaurateurs in El Paso that are independently owned, the ones from many generations, some of them the ones maybe not from many generations, but most of them, the big ones that I would consider my competitors, they're all male-owned. And, I mean, I've got people coming in here and one day I got a restaurateur, a man who owns another restaurant in town, he came in here with like ten people. They all sat down. They ordered food and they all returned their plates. I mean it was very in your face, "We don't want you to succeed." And I got another customer that came in, and, of course, it's gossip, but I think there must be some truth to it. They say, So-and-so gives you six months to close. I go

to every restaurant in town, my husband and I. We love to go out to eat. Whenever we do have a chance to go out to eat, I'll visit any restaurant in town. I have nothing against any other restaurant in town. I love to eat at any different type of food and I don't know. So it's hard because you're Hispanic. I'm a west side restaurant and my food is not fast food and it's not very usual food. There's an element of difference to it. So most of my customers have traveled and know the type of food, but they're very picky customers. And so I love them to death, and I just think that I'm going to do the best I can for my customers, always, every day. But I do know that it's challenging because they doubt. They're like, you're Hispanic and you're cooking this. It doesn't make any sense. So I don't know. I'm sure there would be some people that would be very happy if I closed and there would be a lot more people that would be very sad. So I'm focusing on my customers and not anybody else in town.

EV: Now on the other hand, does your company enjoy any advantage of being a Hispanic owned business?

AC: Well, I'm going to be honest with you. You know Felipa Solis? She used to be on News Channel 9 and now she writes for the Times. She's one of my really good friends. She's always, "Ale, I want the very best for you." She's Hispanic. I'm Hispanic. We're both female. She's like, "Ale, I want the very best for you." She was here for lunch today. She comes in all the time. We talk, as friends, all the time. So there are some people that, yes, they do want to see Hispanic people, in general, successful. And that's something else I should do, I'm not part of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, but I think I should be. Because, of course, as Hispanics we work very hard. We work very hard, and I'm not saying other people don't, but I know that in general I think we do. And I don't mean this in a very bad way, but some of my best employees are Hispanic. My husband, when he worked in Boston, all the people in the kitchen were Hispanic, and all the people in the front were American, all of them. And here it's backwards. All my front of the house, all my servers and everybody are Hispanic, and all the back,

not all the back of the house, but it's mixed. It's mostly mixed in the back, in the kitchen. They are the best employees. I don't know, and I'm not judgmental, I'm not biased. I'm not saying I wouldn't hire anybody because I've had all sorts of people. I have all sorts of people on my staff, but we work very hard and so, yeah, I think it helps. I think there are people that really, really want success, want Hispanic people to be successful.

EV: What is it that you know about belonging to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and why would you want to join?

AC: Well, I would like to join because I would like to meet more Hispanic entrepreneurs that work in the city. I'd like to network with them. And right now that I got married, I have just a little bit more time on my hands. Before, it was just me and it was very hard for me. Like I was a part of the Junior League of El Paso and they asked me to resign five years ago, and I was more than happy to because it was just really hard for me. We talked about this earlier, when you have your own business and you don't have someone to back you up, someone to help you out, you have very little time to yourself. You're working all the time. You're working in the morning. You're opening your business, and you're making sure everything is ready, and you're placing your orders for food, and you're doing this and you're doing your inventories. And when you're closing at night, you're counting your money. It's the never-ending story. And then you're going home and you're stressed about the next day or whatever the upcoming event is. But now I have more time, so what I really would like to do is I would like to network first with them and second, support them, support their businesses. I don't know. If I need someone to help me in marketing or whatever, maybe there's someone that I could support that we could help each other out.

EV: Looking back on your business, if any, what would you have done differently, so far?

AC: Well, there's a lot of things, but I might have worked at a restaurant in the United States before opening a restaurant in the United States because my experience in Italy was very different. And then, like I said, I went to Mexico and worked in a restaurant there, with a chef along there, but it was very different. And not so much because of the laws and regulations, just because more of, you know, the culture. I mean people in different companies have different eating habits, eating cultures. I mean, it's just different. I think I would have done that. And then maybe, I don't know, but I think that would have been one thing. I think maybe the second thing I would have done is, I would have probably had someone to help me so that I wouldn't have done it all myself because I think most of my mistakes, I did when I was most tired. I think that's it.

EV: And I should have asked you before about your experience in Mexico. I think I missed that somewhere along the interview. Would you mind talking about that? How did it happen? How did you work there? What did you learn from that experience?

AC: Well, like I said, I don't want to be classified as one type of restaurant. I did go to Italy and I did all my training there, but I don't think that that makes me bound to that type of food, that makes me say, "Oh, well, she can only think Italian food." No, because I think cooking is a lot about instinct, and what you use is you gather all your tools, all your knowledge, and then you use your instinct to put them together and to create something. And so I went to a wedding in Oaxaca and I fell in love with the city and I fell in love with the food. And so I asked the wedding coordinator, there was a wedding coordinator at that wedding, and I just asked her, I said, "Who do you think are the best chefs here?" And she said, "This one, this one, and this one." I said, "Who do you know?" And she said, "Well, I know this one." I said, "Can I have a meeting with him?" And she said, "Yes." So I went and met with him.

EV: What was his name?

AC: Alejandro Ruiz. And he works at a restaurant called Casa Oaxaca in the city of Oaxaca, and he's been interviewed by Bon Appétit and he's a very good chef. And he used locally grown things. And so I met with him and I said, "I don't want you to pay me. I don't want to do that. I want to come and I want to learn about your food and how you cook and all that." And he wanted to learn more about Italian food, so we did like an exchange. And it was really neat. And he would take me to the local markets and we would buy everything fresh. And he would create dishes, which is something that's very, very neat about having your own restaurant. You can create and change your menu whenever you want and however you want. So that's very, very good. And he taught me a lot about Oaxacan cuisine. *Moles* are very popular in Oaxaca, *Mole Verde*, *Mole Amarillo*, *Mole Negro*, all those different things, just a lot of different dishes, chili [inaudible], all those unique dishes that are from the south and I spent a summer there, with him, and it was very exciting. And I worked in the kitchen that was very small and it had a blender and I think other than the blender, I don't think it had anything else. I mean, one time I said, "Okay, I'm going to make something with coconut in it. I need coconut." He would say, "Make your list of ingredients." Then the next thing I know, the lady's peeling a coconut, and grating the coconut and I'm just like, "I just wanted bagged coconut." But everything was really fresh there. It was like, okay, if you want coconut, we're going to peel it, we're going to grate it, and it's going to be fresh. And so that was just the idea of that restaurant. Of course, you could have a lot of people helping you there, so that was nice.

EV: And in what year was this?

AC: This was in the summer of 2003.

EV: And after that you came –

AC: After that, yes.

EV: With the idea of opening your own business?

AC: Yes, exactly.

EV: And going back to the reflections, in your opinion, is the business climate better for Hispanics today?

AC: Sure, why not? Yeah, I think it could be better, for anybody. I think Hispanics the number of Hispanics are growing in this country and everybody is familiar with Hispanics in one way or another. Hispanic food is growing tremendously. Look at the rise of things like *Chipotle*. We don't have a *Chipotle* here, but it's in many other cities. There's a lot of Hispanic food and Hispanic culture in every city, I think, now. And so I think yes. I think because of our ethic of hard work and as long as we're willing to do things in the proper way, I think we can always get ahead, for sure. Yeah. I mean, I don't think this is a time to sit back and wait for things to happen. And that's not our culture; we don't sit back and wait for things to happen. We get up and do something about it.

EV: What advice would you offer a Hispanic starting a business today?

AC: I would say know what you want. Have it very well defined, whatever it is that you want to do, whether it's a business in marketing, or a business in promotional products, or a business in whatever. Have it well defined so that when you do have to get a loan, or when you do have to approach somebody to help you out, that they feel confidence in you and they say, Okay, this person knows what he or she is doing. And I would say never give up. I had a consultant one time tell me, "Once you start your business, it's kind of like skydiving." He said, "Once you jump from the plane, that's it. You have to pull your parachute. You can't go back in. And once you start your business," he says, "guess what, you jumped."

So there's no going back. You've jumped, pull your parachute, and make the best of your landing. So that's what I would tell them. Just stay confident and know what you want and go after it and don't give up. There will be good times. There will be bad times. I mean, we're going through a recession right now. And you just have to be confident and keep doing what you do and I'm 100 percent positive that if what you're doing is right, it will pay off. It has to.

EV: This will conclude the interview unless you want to add anything. What hopes do you have for the future?

AC: Well, my hope would be that we wouldn't have to ask so many questions about if you're Hispanic, or if you're female, or if you're this, all those things. That we would just live in a world that has equality, but that's probably never going to happen because there'll always be some people that don't want equality for others. But hopefully, we can progress to that. My hope for the future is that more people are able to start their businesses and be successful and that the SBA keeps giving loans to people to make their dreams come true. Obviously, my hope for the future is that the economy gets better for everybody because everybody suffers. I believe that probably right now it would be really hard to get a loan to open a business because of the way the economy is, even though interest rates are really low, but that doesn't do you any good if you can't get the money. So my hope for the future is that the economy will get better and we will all become stronger and be better and bigger because of it. And I do think that in times of a recession there are people that have really good ideas and that can make it through and can make it big. And so my hope is just that a lot of people benefit from all of this and that everything tomorrow will be better than today.

EV: Is there anything else you would like to add?

AC: One more thing that I think is important in having your own business is having some sort of social skills. Like I said, that's why I think communications helped

me a lot. Because I don't think you can have your own business without knowing how to communicate and without knowing how to be social with people because that's going to be a big part of any business, is going to be on the personal level. So if there is a course that they can take at UTEP or if there is some way that they can improve those skills. Everybody has room for improvement. That would be, I think, very beneficial to anybody who's interested in opening their own business. It helps you network. It helps you create customers, customer loyalty. I mean, it's just a big part of, I think, any business, if you're selling insurance, if you're selling cars, or whatever. Whatever it is that you're doing, or even in my business, in the restaurant industry, it really makes a difference in any business. So any type of communication course, even if that's not their area of study, but any type of communication, social skills, all of that, I think is very important. I would even love to take more courses on that.

EV: Why do you think you need to take more courses?

AC: I don't know. I think you can never stop learning. I mean, I would love to go back and get a masters in something. I'm not sure exactly what area it would be, but I just think you should never stop learning. I mean, once you stop and once you put that – I don't know the word in English. Again, *la barrera*. Like once you just say no, this is as far as I go, then you're shutting yourself off for more opportunity for room for growth, for yourself to excel. You're not letting yourself move beyond a certain point. I mean you just never know. You never know who's going to help you in the end. You never know how things are going to get back to you. I always tell people don't burn your bridges. Even my employees, I said, "If you want to move on, you want to do something else, you're more than welcome to, but don't burn any bridges because you never know what you're going to be doing in the future."

EV: Thank you very much. That was all very good.

AC: Thank you.

End of Interview

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