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Interview no. 1483

Edith Morales

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Name of Interviewee: Edith Morales
Date of Interview: June 23rd, 2010
Name of Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

This is an interview with Edith Morales on June 23rd, 2010. The interviewer is Arlina Palacios. This interview is a part of the Paso del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project. Thank you for meeting with us today, Mrs. Morales.

EM: Thank you.

AP: I'd like to start off with a little bit of background information. Where were you born?

EM: I was born here in El Paso.

AP: Would you like to tell me when you were born?

EM: Yes, August 19, 1970. I was born actually, here, but it was, like many others here, that you live in Juárez and your mom just comes across the border and have a baby (laughs).

AP: Oh, so you were born here, but you were raised in Juárez?

EM: Yes.

AP: Tell me about that. What were your parents' names?

EM: Elvia and Roberto Portillo.

AP: And were they business owners, or what was their occupations?

EM: Well, my mom was a housewife, but she was always working, selling clothes, whatever, you name it, whether it be Avon or all those things—Jafra and all of

that. And my dad, he was in construction. So I guess, he was working by himself, so—.

AP: And where did you go to school? Did you go to school, here, in El Paso?

EM: I went all the way to—I just did two years of high school, here, in Socorro High School.

AP: Socorro High School, so the majority of your education was in Juárez?

EM: Before those two years, it was in Juárez.

AP: And you went to Socorro High School in the valley.

EM: And I went to Socorro High School.

AP: All right. What language was primarily spoken at home?

EM: Spanish.

AP: Spanish? Okay.

EM: Still, Spanish.

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

EM: Printek Supplies, Inc.

AP: And what services do you offer?

EM: We try to be the single source supplier for everything that you may need for your office, from office supplies, printing supplies, and any accessories and all that for computers and all that.

AP: What else? I looked at your web site, and I saw that—I think, the way that I understood it, you had computers for sale? Do you sell—

EM: No, we don't sell computers at all. We sell everything that you need for the office, everything from a desk, from a pen, from a toner, from a printer, from a projector or, I don't know, anything that you might need but computers. You might need a drive. You might need backup, a monitor, things like that, but not the actual computers or no programs or anything like that.

AP: And how long have you been in business?

EM: We have been in business since 2002.

AP: Two-thousand two.

EM: And I have been in this industry since 1992.

AP: Well, tell me about that.

EM: Well, I moved from here to Dallas to go to UTD, and I started working at a call center in Dallas, in Plano, Texas. And then, I started working the call-in center, and it was basically the same thing, and I lasted there twelve years working for the company until—it was a public company, and I used to run their, at the end, I used to run their Latin America division out of Miami, and then the company went [into] bankruptcy, and we started our own business.

AP: So you ran the Latin division for the company?

EM: Um-hm.

AP: What was the company's name?

EM: Daisy Tech.

AP: Daisy Tech?

EM: Um-hm. It was a public, international company, pretty big.

AP: It sounds pretty big.

EM: Yeah.

AP: So you worked there for twelve years?

EM: Twelve years.

AP: And is that where you got the idea to develop this business or—

EM: Well, it was basically the only thing I knew to do after the company went down, so yes. For probably a couple of months, I didn't know what to do, whether to start working for another company in that same industry or not. But then I already had a baby, so it was kinda hard because they own your life.

AP: So you moved to Florida.

EM: Um-hm.

AP: You were working there. You had a baby.

EM: Not exactly.

AP: Not exactly.

EM: I was working in Dallas, and then from Dallas, they transferred me to Miami to work as manager of sales for the Latin America division. And then we moved to Mexico City to open a call center over there.

AP: So you opened a—go ahead.

EM: A call center in Mexico City, and then I stayed there for two years. And then I moved back to Miami. I needed to move back because we wanted to start a family and all that thing, and Mexico City, I don't think, from my point of view, was not the right place for me to be. So we went back to Miami, and I still was running the call-in center in Mexico City. I was going back and forth, back and forth, so then we moved back to Miami.

AP: And what was the call center in Mexico City?

EM: It was the same company, Daisy Tech. It was just Daisy Tech de Mexico.

AP: Okay.

EM: Uh-hm. And they was Daisy Tech Latin America, the one in Miami.

AP: So you moved back to Miami and you just decided to start a business?

EM: No, basically, what happens is that the company started having some problems, and we have different divisions. There were five different divisions, and they started buying—as a public company, we started buying other companies, and I

think what happened is that the company tried to grow so fast that something went wrong. So we needed to shut down and everything. So that was in 2000.

AP: And what happened after that?

EM: After that—well, we were the leaders on that industry, so I had a couple of job offers and all that. And my boss, Christian Gross, for the record (laughter), he's a really nice and wise man, and he told me, "Just wait. Don't do anything. Don't get any jobs or anything. Just think about what you want to do because it's gonna be another twelve years of your life, and just think what you want to do. Just relax for a couple of months," and that's what I did. And it was kinda crazy for me.

AP: So you relaxed for a few months and then—

EM: Not really. I was thinking too much (laughter). I already had a baby, and it was decision time with my husband. So it was kinda hard, and I didn't know what to do because the only thing I knew to do at the time was work, probably, for someone. And it was kinda hard deciding what to do because I knew that if I go and work for someone else, another big company like [inaudible] Microtek Data. Those are leaders also in my industry. It will be same. It will be like being away from home and all that, so—

AP: So what encouraged you to go into business besides what happened with the company?

EM: That I wanted to have control of my time basically, and I wanted to grow something for ourselves. And build something that it was our own.

AP: And you mentioned your boss. Was the one who encouraged you, or inspired you, in any way?

EM: Yes, he has been always an inspiration for me.

AP: How did he do that?

EM: I worked with him for, out of the twelve years, ten years, and he was always really like a mentor to me. He was always letting me make my own mistakes. He always told me, “Run this as if it is your own business.” So he really encouraged me to do so. Until the end, he told me, “Do whatever you want, but just make sure that you do the right thing for you.” So he said, “Your family comes first, and you have to find something that is gonna make you happy.”

AP: What kind of experience did you have when you opened your business here in the area?

EM: Here in El Paso?

AP: Um-hm.

EM: Basically, we opened our business in Miami. We stayed over there, and during one Christmas—I can’t remember. It was 2005? Yeah. No, 2005, 2004, something like that. We always come here for Christmas, so we came, and then we were like, hmm. We’re kinda alone over there, and we don’t keep—our business, we don’t keep inventory here. It’s minimum, the inventory that we keep, so basically we can be anywhere. We were selling to customers in Latin America when we opened our Printek Supplies. We were selling to customers in Mexico, in Latin America and all those places, and basically you don’t see them. It’s more Internet, e-mail and phone calls and all that. So we were able to be anywhere. Like with vacations and all of that, we used to travel and just log in and work. So basically, we decided that we wanted to move back to El Paso.

AP: When you came for Christmas?

EM: We came for Christmas, and we were like, Um, we have a little girl, and we can be anywhere running this business. So that's what we did. We put our house on sale, in Miami, and it was the boom in the market at the time, and we sold the house in two weeks. So it was kinda, "Oh, my God, what do we do now?" And then the icing on the cake, it was that I was pregnant, and I did not know.

AP: So you were bringing back a new daughter—

EM: A new daughter—

AP: —to El Paso, to start all over here. So you found a house here. You established—

EM: Yes. I came because we needed to leave our house over there, so it was like I came, and I started looking at houses and all that. But I was pregnant, so I was kinda cranky, so my husband did all that work, and he looked for houses and all that when we moved here.

AP: So what were the economic conditions here in the region?

EM: It's different coming from a big city to El Paso, and I guess I never really worked here. Well, I did work at Cal TV a long time ago. But it was a new challenge for me. It was big, a big challenge because basically what happens is that I was coming from selling to resellers like millions of dollars to Latin America and all that, to coming to start a business that we already have that division of the resellers. But we were trying to start selling our products here, and it's a totally different story. I can tell you that.

AP: Well, tell me more about that.

EM: Why? Well, I guess, here it's more personal. Still, I think it's a small town that we like to do business differently, and it was a big challenge too, because you are coming to compete here with the big players like Office Depot, Office Max. And we needed to start letting people know who we are and what we do, and that was kinda hard. I started contacting other people that was doing the same thing here, like Theresa Gandara from Pencil Cup. She's a really nice lady, and she helped me when I moved here. And I started getting into the chambers and Homegrown El Paso and all those events for people to know what we're really doing because they were thinking that, Oh, it's just one more person selling pencils and notebooks and all those things. But we have our history already.

AP: And so you mentioned the chamber. Which chambers are—

EM: Both of them. We are members of both of the chambers.

AP: And that's—

EM: Hispanic—and actually, the Hispanic Chamber has been really useful. We got some certifications of the Texas HUB and all those things, so—.

AP: So you're 8(a) certified?

EM: Not yet.

AP: Not yet?

EM: No, I haven't finished filling out all that paperwork that they ask, but I'm a Texas HUB already.

AP: And that's the Historically Underutilized—

EM: Yes. Underutilized Business, I think.

AP: Okay, that's right. And as far as starting off, getting loans to start off a business, and since you said you were just moving your business to Miami, did you have to take out any loans to start up here?

EM: Actually, we got the loan from the house. That's basically how we started. As today, we just have credits with the big companies and all that, but we haven't really, really get a loan from a bank or something like that. We basically have been working with GE Capital and all those, but they work through our vendors. Basically, a loan, loan, loan? No, we haven't get a loan.

AP: So no SBA loans?

EM: No, nothing like that, yet.

AP: Not yet. Are you minority certified?

EM: Yes.

AP: And you talked about the Homegrown organization. Will you tell me a little bit about that?

EM: It's a new group, or I don't know how you can call it, and basically, it's a lot of companies here from El Paso that we're trying to get together for people to understand that we are trying to grow El Paso, and that it's very important for them to keep their business here. And that's a major thing because they don't think that business here in El Paso can deliver what they need, and it's very typical for a lot of companies not to trust companies here because they think, Oh, you're so small or this and that, so we have that Homegrown. It's a new thing,

and we just a members for a couple of months, probably five or six months, and it's pretty good. It's just for people to have awareness that we are here, and we're not a little company that is just trying to fix something. It's just we are here, and we are a serious company, that we can deliver what you need.

AP: So what was your start-up plan during your start-up phase here in El Paso?

EM: Here in El Paso—I forgot to mention there is one group that I joined that it was really important for me when I moved here to El Paso, E-Woman Network. I started working with E-Woman Network and it really helped me meet other women here in El Paso that were doing the same thing like us. Actually, the invitation to join that group came to my husband, and he gave it to me. And I said, “You know what? I don't like any of those women things.” I said, “Oh, I'm not into that.” They're like, Oh, women power, yoo-hoo. I didn't like that. I did not, but now I do. And I joined that, and I went to a couple of lunches that they had and all that, and I realized there is a lot of people like me, having a business woman and we face the same challenges and all that. And it was pretty nice. It was helping me. Basically, my main goal when I came here it was just to let people know that they can buy locally. I don't think they have that culture to do business here. They think they need to buy it the Internet; they need to buy it somewhere else, and it was the biggest challenge, I guess. But that was my main business plan, I guess.

AP: And have you seen any progress in that area here in El Paso?

EM: Yes, I think so. I think so. Still there is a lot of work to do, still a lot.

AP: What kind of challenges do you think you face being a minority-owned—

EM: The Office Depots and the Office Max, that they have millions of dollars to advertise and all that. So, I guess, the only way we can do it is like all our

business owners try to get together and show people here that we can manage El Paso. Basically, that's what it is.

AP: Well, I was gonna ask you if you've expanded beyond the local area, but it seems as though you've come in—

EM: I came into the local area, the other way around. We still sell to a lot of people in Latin America and Mexico.

AP: And your other business—would you like to talk about the other business that you're expanding here in El Paso?

EM: Well, the burrito—

AP: Sure.

EM: Well, basically, my husband went to a conference in San Francisco, no Phoenix, and we had a friend that we knew in the same industry as us, and he went. He came back after, I think, some drinks, he mentioned to me that, "We are gonna open a burrito place." And I said, "Cool. Nice." I liked what I was doing at the moment, and I was going to a conference, it was last year I was going to a conference to Dallas for E-Woman Network, and we had plans to have a booth and the whole thing, but I needed to finish my web site, so I didn't get into the burrito—anything. I didn't see anything. I said, "When I come back, I'm gonna start looking into that." So basically, I was just doing my project and the whole thing. When I came back, I started like, "What is this, and what is that?" All of a sudden, I was so involved in the burrito that it was too late for me to back up, so I got stuck there.

AP: Now, how is that going?

EM: It's going pretty good. We had our challenges too, but we have a really nice location, and, I guess, our food is really good then. You'll have to try it. But it's real good, and it's a totally different story for me. It's a different industry. It's a different everything, and you have to get the—basically, here at Printek, I do all the sales and marketing, and I divide my responsibilities with the husband. So over there, I was kinda by myself. And it was hard to learn that, so much paperwork and things in the food industry is a totally different challenge.

AP: So how many employees do you have here?

EM: Here we have four.

AP: And that's—

EM: Four employees, actually including me, it's five.

AP: Okay.

EM: So it's Federico, and we have two sales people and one sales assistants and the delivery man, so one more.

AP: Looking back at your business, what do you think you would have done differently?

EM: Probably move back here before, like a couple of years before and all that. We started the company in Miami. I guess, it was, at the time, it was better to start it here. There is so much potential for us to be here. There was a big boom with all the maquiladoras, and that is kind of down right now, but hopefully that will come back. But we're still selling to all those—I had like three customers, really big customers in Juárez that they sell to all the maquiladora industry. So still, even though we were in Miami, we were still living out of this area. So, I guess, if I

could change something, maybe move back before the time that we moved here because there is so much potential here. And at the time, it was like a big boom with all the maquiladoras and all that, so I think we missed some business there to establish—really establish here. Right now there is, with the thing that's going on in Juárez and all that, it's really hard to do business there, so we have to rely on the people that are there, already doing it. So we just sell to resellers. But we were in the position to open our own thing over there or open more here, so—

AP: So you've thought about expanding—

EM: Yeah—

AP: —to Juárez?

EM: —Yeah, we thought about it. We wanted to live there. Thank God we did not. Yeah.

AP: But it's still a possibility?

EM: If things change, yes. We want to expand, here, too. We probably want to open a retail store and all that, and right now since it is some difficult times, we still want to keep it like that for a while.

AP: And when you moved back, it was December, Christmas time. Was it that you wanted to be closer to your family?

EM: And I wanted a place for my daughter to grow, a really nice place where you have family values and all those things. My family's close. And it's totally different here than living in a big city, that's for sure.

AP: What's the difference, for you?

EM: For me. We were in a place that they did not even know the *mañanitas*. They were singing Happy Birthday and all those things, but they didn't know the *mañanitas*. The food was different. Everything was different. The music—and they were—it's for the record, huh? They are too open minded (laughing). It's different than here. I guess, I consider here we're still our small town that you know what is happening and all that. Over there, they are pretty big cities, and I don't think it was a place for me to have my daughter, to grow there. I'd rather have her growing here. And it was really nice for us when we moved here that you have Juárez and you have El Paso, and you can go back and forth. Not anymore though, but it was really nice. I always try to teach them—like at home, we don't speak any English at all. And all the years that we were living out of here—like my older daughter, we're always talking to her in Spanish. Everything was in Spanish—toys, everything like that. So it was very important for me, for her to keep her background, her things. So that was one of the reasons, mainly, that we moved here besides our business, that we knew that we could do a lot here.

AP: And so culture is very important and family is very important for you?

EM: Um-hm.

AP: And as far as being a Hispanic woman-owned business, have you experienced anything in particular in terms of how you're treated because you're a minority-owned business?

EM: Yes, it's totally different. It's different. It's hard sometimes for people to understand that you're a woman and you own a business, and that they can see that you're doing really good job there. And, I guess, it's a big challenge. You have to convince them first that you can do it, so after that, it's easier. But after they understand, and they see what you do, I guess, it's easier.

AP: You have anything in particular that stands out?

EM: Well, for example, we sell to a lot of resellers in Central America or Latin America and other places, and we deal with men. That's basically a man's world, and it's nice. It's a big challenge, and it's really nice.

AP: So you're not one to back away from a challenge?

EM: I like challenges, so I guess that's why, I guess. But it's pretty nice, and it's a man's world, but we don't have anything that can prevent us to do. So we can do whatever we want. So we just have to believe it.

AP: And you mentioned a networking with local business owners here and getting advice from them. Was there anybody besides your boss and Theresa Gandara, here in El Paso, that inspired you to branch out a little bit more or—

EM: Melissa Rodriguez from Hear on Earth. She's a doctor, ear doctor, and she's a real good friend of mine. And when I started E-Woman Network, she helped me a lot and we really got into that organization and we met a lot of other women like us, and we really have a good group. They become your friends. I also joined the [inaudible], Lorena Paragalo, Mila Garcias, Arcy Serna, those are like, in all the events that you have, I guess, networking events, all of them are there, and they are really nice people. They help you a lot.

AP: What are your plans for the future?

EM: Our plans for the future—we want to expand with Printek Supplies. We wanna do a—hopefully, we can open a retail place, and we want to expand on the web site that we already invested a lot of time and money into that. We just need to

start exploring that, and basically grow. Keep growing. Even though there is some hard times when you work hard, it's coming.

AP: So you're gonna go into the ring, and you're already competing with these big box—

EM: Yes.

AP: But you're thinking of starting a retail store?

EM: We just want to open something small here for people. Since our main business is resellers, we just have offices here. We just have a small warehouse that we keep some things, and we try to deliver almost everything next day to our customers. But the thing is that sometimes people need our products right now. When you run out of ink or toner, you don't need it tomorrow. So we really need to take advantage of that market right there, the ones that keep it until the last (drop??). So we need to keep advantage of that and open something—a retail store probably.

AP: And what advice would you give to a Hispanic who's thinking of becoming an entrepreneur in this—

EM: Never give up. You can do whatever you want. Just as long as you believe it, you can do it, but never give up. And also surround yourself—that's one thing that I learned at the E-Woman Network. Surround yourself with people that you can learn something from, and once they told me, If you're with the most successful person in your group and the one that you think is the more intelligent, you need to move on. You need to find another set of friends. But it's so true. You need to learn from people. You need to listen to other people, what they went through, and they give you advice. When you are around all these people like Aliana Apodaca—I don't know if you know her. I'm pretty sure that you

know her. They see you somewhere, at an event, and you just tell them what you are doing, and they give advice from—free advice. Really nice from all these women that they are really successful, so you just have to surround yourself with people that they are growing. They are positive people. That's really important, and people that you can learn something from.

AP: I think that pretty much ends the interview unless you have something that you'd like to add that we may not have asked you that you want to let people know about your business.

EM: What else can I tell you? (laughter). Well, basically, what we do here is we sell office supplies, but we also help people understand that doing business locally can save them money. And they also, besides saving money, they are growing the economy here. That's basically one big challenge. I know most of us, we go to school somewhere else, and we just get out of El Paso because there is nothing here to do. But, I guess, a lot of people come back, and there's a lot of potential here in El Paso because of the same reason that a lot of people leave and they go—there is a lot of potential, here, for us to grow, and we can all grow together and if we really get together and do business together and all that. But it's a pretty cool town. I really like it.

AP: So you see the potential—

EM: There's a lot of potential, a lot of potential, but I guess we just have to see it and realize that we can do something here.

AP: Well, this ends the interview with Edith Morales. Thank you for your time, Ms. Morales.

EM: Thank you.

AP: This continues the interview with Edith Morales. Ms. Morales, I noticed throughout the interview that you make mention of Latin America and your business transactions with companies in Latin America. And I'm wondering if you would expand on what kind of business you do and what motivates you to continue to do business with Latin America and the United States and the challenges that you face.

EM: Basically, because of my background, that's what we started doing business with Latin America. Basically, I started the other way around. I started doing business outside the U.S. Now that we move back here to El Paso, we try to do business locally and also in the U.S. It's a different story. It's a lot of challenges as a small business to do business here. On a national level, you have all those Office Depots, Office Max and all their marketing that I mentioned before and all those big marketing campaigns that they can do. And for a small, woman business owned, it's hard. I have been to several shows like trade shows and all that, and people still have that mentality to go and buy from these big players. So it has been a challenge. That's why we launched our web site, but it's pretty nice, and we have put a lot of work into it. And it doesn't need anything from anyone. It can compete with the big players. It's pretty nice. It's like more than forty-thousand different products there for office supplies. So it's pretty complete, and we just need to go out there and show that we can do it. That's the challenge that we have right now. And one of the things that they don't have, these big, big companies, like I said, all those retailers and all that, is service. It's not all the time about the price. They can call right now, and since we're a small company, they can talk to the owner. I don't know how many times you have been to Office Depot or Office Max, and I'm sorry if I'm saying that too much, but you go there, and you need a toner for a printer and you have a weird printer, an old printer. They don't have it, and they don't have it. Period. They are not gonna go that extra mile to go and find it for you. And, "Oh, well. We don't have it here. We can get it for you. Maybe three days, four days, or maybe next week I can have it." We will do anything that they need for them to have it, and

we can get it the same day even. We have done it before. We go, and we buy it probably somewhere else here, locally. We overpay just to have a customer happy, and that's what they need. And I guess, those big companies, they will never, never, never, I guess, they will compete on the service level that we can offer. That's a big thing. And price-wise, we can also compete with them. Like I said, they have big expenses and all that. We are a smaller company. But we can compete in price even though. So if you add the price and the service, it's a big story.

AP: And the challenges, as far as Latin America and U.S. sales, you were saying that—it's my understanding, that it isn't that easy to work in Latin American and the United States.

EM: It's not, I guess overall, the industry that I used to work is more like a—you have in Latin America all this businessmen, really big shots and all that, and you're a woman and you go there, and you try to talk to them into buying from you, and why and all that. So it's like I guess it's double the work than if another guy just goes, shows up and says, "This is what I can do for you." So you have to prove yourself I guess, before you start doing business. And it's a nice challenge. Like I said before, I really like it because when you prove them wrong, you're happy (laughter).

AP: So you have these challenges as a minority.

EM: Yeah, and as a woman, and as Hispanic, too. I guess, that's a big challenge, too, for us to expand in the U.S., and it's a big challenge. It's a small company, and you're Hispanic, and it's woman-owned and all that. I guess, it's double the work to get your name out there and this is what you are doing, and you can compete with anyone over there. But, I guess, the satisfaction is doubled.

AP: Have you experienced that here in El Paso, or in other places that you've been?

EM: Here in El Paso, too, but I guess more in the U.S. level when you go to all these trade shows and all that. Still there is not that many Hispanics there. I guess, we just need more Hispanics to be ready for the growth that is coming. So, that's basically what we need. We need to be prepared. We need to be educated and all that, and we need to know that we can do it. That's basically what we need to do.

AP: Would you like to add anything before we end the interview?

EM: No. Basically, I think we talk about a lot of things. It's just that you just really have to put what you want to do, and if you believe that you can do it, then never give up.

AP: Just to make sure that we covered this since we've had a very colorful interview today (laughter), I just wanted to know if you saw any advantages or disadvantages to having to compete with the big companies here in El Paso.

EM: Like I said, everything is about service. So when it comes to service, I don't think they can compete with us. Like I said, we can go the extra mile. We can run up and down, and I don't think they are set-up, there. They have too much infrastructure with them, different levels and all that. And being a small business, I guess, you cut most of that red tape doing things so you can make things happen without too much paperwork and things and all that. So we can keep our customers happier by providing the service that they are not used to have. That's it.

AP: Well, this concludes the interview with Edith Morales. Thank you very much, Ms. Morales.

EM: Thank you.

[End of Interview]