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Interview no. 1495

Yolanda Diaz

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Name of Interviewee: Yolanda Diaz
Date of Interview: September 1st, 2010
Name of Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

AP: Today is September 1st, 2010. This is an interview with Yolanda Diaz of Mirador Enterprises. The interviewer's name is Arlina Palacios. This project is a part of the Paso Del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

Good morning, Ms. Diaz, how are you?

YD: Good morning, how are you?

AP: I'm fine, thank you. I'd like to get started with a little bit of background information. Let's start with when and where were you born?

YD: I was born – I have to tell you my age, huh?

AP: Yeah.

YD: I was born in 1960, born and raised here in El Paso, Texas.

AP: What part of El Paso?

YD: Oh, my goodness, where I grew up was a very poor neighborhood. I grew up in the projects by the Paisano area and then later on moved to the Paisano and I forgot the other area where we lived, but it's close to Jefferson High School. But it was definitely one of the projects, very, very poor upbringing. I was raised by my mom. She raised just her and five brothers and sisters, so it's a total of six of us.

AP: Six of you?

YD: Yeah, six of us.

AP: What did your mother do?

YD: My mom worked at a factory. She worked for Billy the Kid all her life [Speaking Spanish]. She had a really, really hard job, but believe it or not she was very happy. She loved working. My dad left her with the six children when we were all very, very little so she had to go out there and work and raise the kids.

AP: And in terms of the six children, where are you in line of those kids?

YD: I'm the third. I have my sister Lori who's is the oldest and then Joe, who is also a business owner, he owns MIRATECH Corporations; and myself, and then I have my sister Rosy, my brother Pete and my sister Veronica.

AP: Okay, so did you go to Jefferson High School?

YD: I went to Jefferson High School; I graduated from there in 1979.

AP: And how was that, do you have any memorable experiences?

YD: Oh, my goodness, I have nothing but beautiful memories of my childhood and my youth and high school, it was just all beautiful. Although we grew up in a poor neighborhood and all, we didn't know it. We thought we were rich because we were so happy at home.

Although we didn't have everything, I truly didn't miss out on anything to be honest with you. When you're happy, you don't know what you don't have. Or when you've never had it, you really don't know what you're missing; I guess that's the way to put it. But yeah, high school was wonderful. Really my whole childhood experience. We were really blessed.

AP: And what did your mom do at Billy the Kid?

YD: My mom was God, she had several positions, but she was an operator of the irons, you know doing all the ironing of the jeans, they used to manufacture jeans for very large companies like Bill Blass and gosh I forgot some of the other designers. But she would iron and cut and I mean just a factory worker, very, very hard.

I remember she used to come home and her arms were burned. And we used to ask her how she got that. And she would say don't worry about it she got burned at work. I mean never complained about anything. This lady was truly amazing. I think that's where I know for myself, I know that's where I got a lot of the work ethic and not minding working very late hours, studying hard, helping really make ends meet.

I had to start working very young because my mom needed help. Although we lived in the projects and I think they discount your

rent a little bit and stuff, you still have to get food on the table, clothing, books, for school. There's still a lot that a mom needs help with to raise six kids.

AP: Mm hmm, so tell me about working and going to high school.

YD: As a matter of fact, I started working very, very young. I was always looking for volunteer work, whether it was babysitting with the neighbors or going to the stores around my neighborhood asking them if I could sweep or grill burgers, whatever opportunity I could find to make extra money.

I always liked clothes, so I was all looking for ways to earn some money because my mom couldn't really afford to buy me the clothes. When I was in high school, I started when I was a junior; I joined VOE, which is Vocational Office Education.

It's a really nice program that prepares young kids to learn about business. They teach you, in the ancient days we didn't really have computers, but the typewriters, I learned how to type at a very young age. I learned the basics of bookkeeping, a little bit of accounting. I had a teacher that was really incredible and she really prepared me well.

One of the other things that this program does is they find jobs for the young kids at school. So as a junior, I started working for the administration. They used to be on Brook Hollow. I worked there my junior and senior year while I was going to school, so I was very fortunate that I was getting that opportunity. And I learned a lot at a young age. As a young kid, you're so hungry to learn.

There are always people who are really into getting the opportunity. They have a full plate of work and they'll take advantage of a young kid who is energetic and who is always volunteering for extra work. So that was me, so again I had some real good mentors and a lot of people that trusted in my ability and my skills to let me learn on the job.

Two years working at the VA really prepared me for the next five, six years of my life.

AP: And what did you do at the VA?

YD: At the VA, I used to work in the pharmacy. I used to sit in front of a window and assist our veterans, our ex-veterans. They used to come in there and see the doctors and fill their prescriptions. So I

used to take their prescription and type the labels and pass them on to the pharmacist. And do administrative work, also, help the pharmacist. It was a big staff there.

We had the chief pharmacist and several other pharmacists that worked under him that needed administrative support, just typing, answering the phones. But mainly I was there typing labels all day long and talking to the patients, who were all ex-Vietnam veterans, really neat. I really enjoyed that job.

AP: And do you have any memorable experiences of working there or mentors that you had there at the VA?

YD: You know what, there was a mentor of mine, there were two, actually, Oscar and Liana. This girl kind of took me under her wing; she was older than me, a government employee. Took me under her wing and trained me. She would really challenge me on certain little projects at such a young age.

For whatever reason, I don't know if she thought I was her daughter or something or maybe I reminded her of her when she was young. They really just treated me very well. Even after work, one of the hardest things for me was I lived close to Jefferson High School, which is not very near to where I had to go to work. I had to catch a bus.

During the winter time when it starts getting dark, I had to go out there, leave work and then catch a bus to go back home again. They would give me a ride. I thought man, that is so cool. I guess they felt sorry for me or whatever, but regardless, after being with them for about a year, I never had to take the bus again. Somebody always put me on a schedule and said this week I'll take her, next week you take her.

I was like their child; it was really, really neat, until I was able to afford my car.

AP: You were able to get there?

YD: Yeah, finally in my senior year, thanks to my brother, okay, thanks to my brother and I was working as well. He loaned me some money. He loaned me \$500 to buy my first car. I was never able to save the \$500, but then I paid him. Believe me, he's really, really shroud with money and stuff, but he wanted to make sure we had transportation.

By then, he had left the house and he had moved. He got a scholarship to go to UT Austin, so he left El Paso and wanted to make sure that we were going to be able to take care of my mom. We would have transportation to get around. Because although we didn't really miss it, we were used to the bus, but it was awesome when I got my first car, oh, my goodness.

AP: Is this the brother who owns?

YD: This is the brother, Joe Diaz, who owns MIRATECH Corporation, who is my mentor and has really been my mentor since we were children. He's been like a father; we're only a year, two years apart. He was always like the father of the family. He had to grow up very fast. When you grew up without a father and you grow up in the hood, in a dangerous area like that, the boys really take on a different role, like a father role to protect the mom, the sisters, they're all young. He's a real good guy, real good man.

AP: He's your mentor?

YD: He's my mentor today in business. He was my mentor when I was small, always guiding us, trying to get us to be as focused as he was. That guy was always focused all his life. We used to kid that he took all the brains in the family; he didn't leave much for the others. That he was really, really smart and did well.

Again, I always played that father role. And what ended up happening when we got older many, many years later is that he went and opened his own company. I kept my eyes on him, like man, I like what he's doing. I can't believe that Joe is capable of this because he was also an introvert.

He was one of the shiest people in the world, I mean the last thing I ever expected is that he would go out there and open a company and grow multimillion dollar company and do so well. So he really inspired me. I thought if Joe being as shy as he is can do that, then I being as outgoing as I am, should be able to do that as well.

Although I'm not saying I'm dumb because I'm no dummy, but I'm definitely not as book smart as he was. I mean the guy was just a straight A student, always very likely to succeed. Got a full scholarship to go to UT Austin and took advantage of all that.

Where the girls, we ended up doing something a little different than the boys in the family, as you do unfortunately. One thing

that my mom would say is, "You guys don't need to go to college, you really don't. Just get a job; you need to get out there. You need to go get married. That's what women do. Boys need to go get educated and prepare themselves so they can take care of a family."

Well, for whatever reason, all my sisters just couldn't buy into that. It's like, wait a minute, you a single mom who is very, very happy being single raising her children is telling us what we need to do is go get married, something doesn't make sense. I guess she just didn't want us to rough it as much as she did in life.

I don't think she ended up single by choice. I think she had to leave my dad because for personal reasons and stuff. And so I didn't go to college right out of high school. Actually I started going to college right out of high school. I graduated and I started going to community college. I started seeing that my mom really needed help at home.

I had a couple of younger brothers, two sisters and one brother, and I didn't want them to grow up in the projects anymore. The three of us also took on like a parental role; we felt that we needed to bring extra money to help my mom move us out of the projects, so that my brothers and sisters wouldn't have to grow up in a dangerous neighborhood.

Things started changing as we got older. Life was beautiful, but as you get into high school, there are gangs and there are issues and there are problems that kids encounter and stuff. And I didn't want my brother and sisters to go through that.

So I decided, I'm not going to go college yet, I'm going to go out there and work. I went out there and worked and we moved my mom out, we moved into a pretty descent area in the east side. My younger brother and sisters continued driving to Jefferson High School. We used to live way out in the east side off of Pebble Hills and they used to drive all the way out to the central part to go to Jefferson High School.

So it worked. Any more questions?

AP: Well, I wanted to ask you, you said that you started at EPCC.

YD: Yes.

AP: You were working while going to school?

YD:

I was working while I was going to school at El Paso Community College. And then one of the things that the Veterans Administration required, that, you continue to be a student, I needed more hours and they wouldn't give me more hours. A lot of young kids think they know it all.

I went and found myself a full time job and immediately realized that nobody was going to give me the opportunity to work flexible hours to continue going to school. So although the company that I worked for was wonderful to me and they were really great, I loved my job, I made some of the best friends in the world at a very young age, I just left school.

I continued to take night classes. I always continued going to school, but it was a night class here, a night class there. I continued like that for years until I decided, this isn't gonna work, man. I have got to make a choice. I have got to quit my job and I've got to go back to school and get it over with.

By then, I was very fortunate that I had saved a little bit of money. My brother was always willing to help. He was always willing to help the family. By then, he was doing good. He had already graduated from college, but always felt like he was still the father figure. So he decided to actually loan me a little bit of money to go back to school, but I also borrowed a lot of money through grants and loans and loans from family.

By then, my dad became more involved. He got closer to the family and he was also helping. And so a lot of encouragement. Everybody said just get your degree over with. I went back to school and I got my degree at UTEP. I didn't even go to community anymore, I went straight to UTEP. I think I completed my education about three and a half years because I decided to switch.

I started wanting to get into oh, my God, what did I start? I think physical therapy or something like that. And then I decided to drop that and went back into business, went straight into accounting. There was never a doubt about what area I wanted to concentrate in because by then I had already worked for several companies and had the opportunity to learn accounting, learn business.

And so I really wanted to expand my knowledge and education in that. So I went and got an accounting degree.

AP: You said that you were looking at what your brother was doing. You got your degree at UTEP and you were looking at your brother's business and how he was doing.

YD: He didn't have the business yet, but he was doing great. He was working for very large companies like Exxon Mobile, like General Dynamics. He moved out of El Paso, once he left El Paso; he never came back until he opened his company. But we always kept looking at Joe saying he's really our example. He kept pushing education all the time.

"Quit your jobs, don't waste your time. You can't do much without an education. You need an education." He is very big on education. He kept pounding that into our heads. He did, he definitely got through because my sister, Lori, went and got her education as well. Went down the same road I did where she also wanted to help my mom, being the oldest.

She listened to Joe and went back and got into education, got her teaching degree, then become an assistant principal. She's a principal today, works very, very hard. My little sister, Veronica, we always knew that she was going to succeed because she was the baby and we were all taking care of her. She's a nurse, she's a registered nurse.

My brother Pete and Rosy, were the ones who kind of decided not to get an education, but they've done thank God very well in their careers. My brother, Pete, works for me today. He's one of our field superintendents and has been oh, my goodness, I'm so grateful for his support. There's no way I could have grown the company, especially the facilities maintenance side of it, if it hadn't been for his support.

So we're still out kind of all intermingled. But truly, I always go back and thank my brother for a lot of the decisions that we made. I'm not saying we listened to everything, we didn't. It took years to get it together, but it's funny how you always know what it is that you need to do. Sometimes time has to be the right timing and that day comes when all the bulbs light up and you're saying, okay, enough of lying around and enough of not taking life very seriously. I need to look at my future, what am I gonna do for the rest of my life?

I'm sure every young kid goes through that. If they don't go through that when they're 18, then it happens in your twenties and heck sometime it happens in your thirties.

AP: And when was that moment for me?

YD: For me, it was my twenties. I think it was in my late twenties. So I had been out of school for a long, long time. It was ten years after I graduated that finally I said you know what I was running into roadblocks. I worked for very good companies, but when I wanted promotions and I was asking for more money, that same response always comes back, "But Yoley, we're giving you such a great opportunity; we're letting you learn accounting. You're running the bookkeeping. You know how to do reconciliations.

You know all the general ledger accounting. You know how to analyze financial statements."

I really, really had an interest in accounting, so people always gave me an opportunity to learn, but when I wanted more money they would tell me and I don't blame them because sometimes I do that now. It's like best favor that anybody ever did for me is telling me we can't increase your pay significantly, we can't pay the same wage that we pay an accountant because you don't have the degree. You have all the experience, but you don't have the degree.

I finally took one of my bosses up on that. We were sitting through my evaluation, I remember Jerry Kallman, wonderful guy. I loved the Kallman's, they own Airline International Luggage. I still keep in touch with them, good people. Thanks to them, I made that decision as well when he told me we can't do this anymore.

I remember that they sent me to their CPA's so that they could test me. I told them to test my knowledge, see if I can't compete with your bookkeepers or accountants. So they did and I passed all the tests. And then I came back and I said, "Okay, now can I get a significant increase?" He goes, "Yes, Yoley, we're going to give you an increase, but you don't have that accounting degree."

You just need to understand they were all very educated and stuff. At the time I didn't understand, I was being very stubborn because I knew I was doing the work, but then I thought, all these people that are telling me this I think are just trying to help me, they're trying to give me a strong message here, go get your degree. I knew that they couldn't accommodate me with the hours because it was a small business.

I know more than anybody how tough it is to run a small company. You wish that you could help everybody go back and get their degree and make very flexible hours for them. But it's hard because in a small business there's so much going on that you need people there 50 hours a week or 60 hours a week, not 40.

I always make sure that I have a college student working for me that I'm going to make very flexible hours for so that she can go out there and do what I wasn't able to do. I wish somebody would have done that for me. If I had truly had that opportunity, I would have gotten my degree very early.

But I don't blame anybody; it's really my fault that I didn't do it. I definitely want to insinuate that anyone kept me from getting my education, I kept myself. But anyhow, so the comments gave me the incentive, I guess. Instead of saying I accept the raise that you're giving me, I said, "Please accept my resignation. I'm going to give you a month's notice."

I wanted to give them enough notice because they were wonderful to me. And I already knew that the semester was going to be starting. I just said you know what; I'm going back, I'll figure it out. I'm going to quit my job. I'm living with my mom. I can find a part-time job or I can find a way to support myself, and I did. I quit and before you knew it, I was so busy with school that man; I don't know how the three and a half years went by so fast.

Had I known that when I was younger, I would have just completed school really quickly? I wish all the young kids would know how easy it is. It's really not hard. I mean actually it's one of the most enjoyable times, for me, personally. Going back to school was one of the most rewarding times of my life because you always have goals. Every semester is all right, new goals, new classes. You set some goals for yourself.

For instance, you're taking an accounting class; sometimes accounting classes are pretty tough so you say my goal is a B. Well, gosh you get an A and it's wonderful. It just makes you feel really, really good. I think that's why a lot of the college students are truly so happy because of the rewards, the grades at the end of the semester. It's so rewarding. It's time to celebrate. I'm sure you know about the celebration that college students do and they should.

AP:

You got your degree and then what did you do?

YD:

After I got my degree, I went to go work for a company, United Technologies. I'm gonna step back a little because one of the ways I was able to finance my education was also through opening a little business. My sister and I opened a little company. Very informal, but we did set it up, we registered the company and everything.

We were selling clothes, really nice clothes. I've always had real good taste for women's clothing. I've always liked fashion and stuff like that. So we would go to California and buy clothes and come back and rack it up a bit and go out there and sell it, sell it at the school it is, sell it with friends. We even started offering financing that, turned out to be a nightmare.

We learned really quick don't finance if you don't have any money to back it up. So that was a neat experience, but it helped us. It really helped me get through school and pay for some of the bills. You have to make a lot of adjustments when you're going to school. You can't have it as good as you did when you were working full time. You can't buy the nice things that you're used to, but you're so busy that you don't need any of that.

I spent all my time at the library studying. For me, maybe that's what happens when you wait longer to go back to school. When you graduate from high school, everything is fresh in your mind. The English is still fresh, the math, the science, the history. You can go there and breeze through your basic classes. Unfortunately I didn't, so when I went back to school, I struggled. I mean I really had to study I think harder than most of the normal people had to study.

I just remember thinking, golly; I can't believe I have to study six, seven hours a day for this class. I lived at the library, truly. I wouldn't leave until I knew that I was ready for a test the next day. But did well, I really raised my own expectations at the time. I didn't do this when I should have, so I'm going to do it right.

And I did, I was able to ace most of my classes, except for one, horrible intermediate accounting. Golly, that was a rough class, but I got through it. Believe it or not, being an accounting major, you would think that would have been a breeze, but for whatever reason I really struggled with that class.

I got through it, I graduated. That's what matters at the end. But any how right after that, I went and I started working for United Technologies, it's a pretty large company. It was during the times

where the Maquila Industry Manufacturing was really big in Mexico.

So I went to go work in Juarez every day. It was tough, doing accounting. I was like an accounting supervisor, so I used to oversee people in accounts payable and accounts receivable. Pretty interesting environment when you're working in Juarez because you're working with both people from Mexico and people from the U.S.

I don't know if you're familiar with the process, this was I guess a lot more common before so many people from here used to go down there and work to Juarez and end up being manufacturing companies that they used to open. And United Technologies is still one of the largest corporations. I worked for them for a couple of years got some more experience and then I think my next job after that was Petro Stopping Centers.

I started working for Mr. Jack Cardwell. Pretty nice organization, also started as a very small business. And he did fantastic. I mean he's also been one of my mentors. I admire people who can grow companies from nothing. I think they started out a garage as well. Now, he just sold his company for I think \$650 million recently, something like that. I think I remember that number from the paper.

Real good people, I stayed with them for many years, working in their accounting. I stuck in the accounting for whatever reason, but one of the things that I also got very involved in was IT. For whatever reason, with accounting there's always system implementations, you have to implement accounting systems. So I think I was able to get a lot of experience on both those areas.

And managing, also with Petro, I was a supervisor. I had a group of people they did accounts payable, accounts receivable. I did the normal accounting tasks, like general ledger, balance sheet reconciliations, look at how long I've been out of accounting, I'm forgetting about it.

But worked with a real strong group of accountants. They had a pretty large staff at Petro, so again, got a lot of experience, a lot of management experience. I learned a lot on how you run a business as well. Petro wasn't that small anymore, they were doing maybe \$250 million, \$300 million, but they still were very conservative and they still operated believe it or not as a small business. They watched every penny; they were always watching their bottom line. I think that's why they were so successful.

Now, today everybody runs business that way. In today's economy, even the larger companies are more careful and truly look at their bottom line and their profits, even more so than the smaller companies do. I'm starting to see that trend a lot with some of the large partners that we or my brother's company has done business with. I don't even have to go into that, you know how bad the economy right now. People are losing jobs back and forth.

But anyhow, worked for Petro, worked with them for years. And then left Petro and went and worked for other companies, Media Copy. That job just didn't work for me. Okay, don't think that every single job that you get out there is going to be beautiful. Sometimes you work with people that you just don't see eye to eye with. For whatever reason, I wasn't the fit for that particular organization.

And God, I think it's the first time in my life that I got fired.

AP: Wow.

YD: Honestly, it was more mutual, but it didn't work out. And boy, that was hard. When that happens to you, it's like man, this is just not cool. I know that I'm doing everything right, I know my job, I know have the right skills. But then you don't question it. I said, I don't have time to cry. I need to get my resume ready and find a job.

I remember it was Halloween day when that happened. So I went and celebrated Halloween at home and got my resume ready. It took me a while to get back on my feet. Fortunately at that time, my brother already had his company. And I said, "Joe, please let me help you out. I know that there's something I can do for you."

He's like, "Okay, okay, don't think that you're going to stay here with me for full time." He didn't like working with family. My brother has never liked working with family. Now, as a business owner, I can understand why. Family is wonderful, you can trust them, but family tries to take advantage of family sometimes and little did he know that I just wasn't that type. I was there to help him out. I didn't want to stay working for him either, I really wanted to go back and find a job.

With all the benefits still, I still wasn't ready to I guess stick with a small business. So I helped my brother with the accounting. I

helped him implement a system. I helped him I guess improve on some of the accounting controls and procedures. He was a small business, so he needed help.

I went to go work for Texas Gas Service as a regional accounting manager for another seven years. My God, I've already gone through so many years of my life. Am I going too fast?

AP: No.

YD: I had the opportunity to work for one of the biggest mentors, I mean honestly, Richard Flamer. He works for El Paso Electric Company. He is the Vice President there, but he used to be the VP at Texas Gas Service. I was one of his right hand people. I was his accounting person that I saw the El Paso and the entire region that he was responsible for and I learned a lot working for Richard.

Oh, my goodness, a lot about business, business politics. We also had an opportunity there to provide a lot of opportunities for many local small businesses in El Paso. And so I kind of started seeing how small businesses struggled and how good the gas company was in getting them paid timely. I guess giving them the support that they needed to succeed. They didn't really take companies. I could get personal about something else that I didn't, well, let me go back here.

I had a beautiful experience working for Texas Gas Service. And then I left Texas Gas Service to come open my company. That is really what I decided to open actually, I need to slow down more because when I was working with Texas Gas Service, I opened and I started the company, planning to work another year, two years with Texas Gas Service. And then be leaving after two years to try to take advantage of the expansion, I knew it was coming.

I was reading a lot about it. I said God; this is the time to open my company. If I want to open my company, this is it. The timing is right. Gosh, I'm working for Texas Gas Service, I love my job. I love my manager. I love all my employees. It's just a beautiful organization to work for. And so, I was really struggling, had a really good paying job. All the benefits, everything was just beautiful.

And got talking to my brother, Mr. Business guy. I started meeting with him regularly and really picking his brain, guide me, give me some guidance, should I or shouldn't I?

Believe it or not, he told me I shouldn't. He told me, "Yoley, being a business owner, it's not what everybody thinks it is. It's rewarding in a lot of ways, but it's very hard. It's almost like selling your soul, giving up everything. You give up so much."

He just works very, very, very hard. I didn't listen to him. I said, "No, you know what, I really, really want to do this, Joe. For the first time in my life, I'm not going to follow your lead. I really want to do this, but I'm going to need your help. Just guide me, just whenever I need help and answers, help me."

And he did; so I started the company very, very small. It was just me and my brother, Pete. This is a couple years later, I had started the company in 2002. I was still with Texas Gas Service. Pete was running my company for me along with another project manager, James [inaudible], who helped me a lot.

We did good. We picked up a little bit of business, but it was real hard for us to get the company going really without me, the business owner, being in the front line. I didn't want to GTGS. I was working and trying to do the business at night, during my lunch hour, meeting with my guys. We had very little projects going on, small maintenance or landscaping projects; it's how we started.

And then it just got real tough. I realized I've got to quit. So I quit my job and by then, I was a lot smarter about how I needed to do business and what type of business I wanted to go after. I wanted to go after the government business, the federal government business, which is not real easy to do.

There's a lot of compliance with the federal government. You really have to know, it's very specialized. Even going to college, I think I should have taken a government accounting class so that I could have been prepared because I had to go educate myself on the job.

I did pick up a little bit of that experience working for MIRATECH because they do a lot of business with the federal government, but I didn't know it all. Anyhow, once I quit my job and applied for my government certification, I had a couple of years of experience under my belt. I was able to start growing the company a little bit more.

But I think what also worked to my favor was timing with the expansion going on. A lot of opportunities, business was good, all over, everywhere, everybody was doing really good. I came into business at a good time, compared to how it is right now, it's really challenging.

AP: Take me back to working for Texas Gas and starting your business; how did you get funding for your small business?

YD: Well, actually a lot of the funding was coming from me. I had a job, I was earning a really good pay. I started making a lot of adjustments in my personal life, no fancy trips, no more Las Vegas, I gave up the fun Las Vegas vacations so I could have a little bit of money to pay Pete. Somebody needed to pay Pete.

Then James had his business as well, so he kept himself available to his business. So here are two business people trying to get a company going with one poor guy that we have doing all the maintenance work. He's fantastic, he's really great. It didn't work.

Okay, obviously we couldn't do it, we really couldn't. I had to quit my job so that I could grow the company. But I also had to keep myself billable because I still have to pay my rent; I missed having part of my life. I had my son, my beautiful son, Christian, who is now 13 years old. So by now, gosh, I have a family to support, I'm a single parent, unfortunately.

His dad and I, things didn't work out, so I became a single parent. Something I never wanted to do, but there I am. I couldn't cry about it, I just had to make the best of it. And so my brother gave me the opportunity to come work for him and earn some money. They were implementing a big system here. He needed a project manager.

I came with a live experience. I had just left TGS, helping them implement a \$20 million, \$30 million system to do their customer services system that I managed for TGS. It was my last job. They kind of pulled me out of accounting and asked me to manage this project for them.

Right after that, golly, I think I was so burnt out with that project I was like, okay; I'll open my business now. Maybe that gave me a little incentive. But anyhow, so again, it was nice. But I went out there and worked. I went out there; I had to get certifications to be able to do business. The first one that I got was with TxDot.

We got our DBE, Disadvantaged Business Enterprise with TxDOT. And I'm trying to think, so we started bidding with TxDOT, a bunch of little maintenance contracts. And we were winning them and winning them because we were being very competitive. And then we'd bring Pete in and then we'd bring James in. And we were able to get a couple more laborers to go out there and do the maintenance job.

They're not easy jobs, but pretty much out there truly picking up litter. We got jobs out of town; we got him in San Antonio. We got him in Cullen County. We got him in Paygos. A bunch of little areas, little towns, close by. So we started working on these projects. That gave us a little breathing room to be able to bid more, to continue keeping that pipeline full.

But my brother also gave me a contract to do, the contract was TAP; it's Technical Assistance Program. It's also with TxDOT. It's a training program. And that's really the project that kept him billable when he grew his business. When he started his company, if it hadn't been for TxDOT, he would have never been able to support himself and support the business so that he could continue to grow the pipeline.

So he said, "Why don't I subcontract this out to you and help me out with that?" It's not an easy contract, but it worked.

AP: Tell me about how you got the name for your company, and then tell me about TAP.

YD: Oh, my goodness, Mirador, you know what, wow, gosh, I'm just trying to remember. Maybe mirror, vision, I think it started with that.

AP: This is the continuation of the interview with Yolanda Diaz. Okay, Ms. Diaz, you were talking about the name of your company.

YD: Mirador, you know what I just thought of it out of nowhere to be honest with you. I think I wanted it to have like a Spanish touch to it, like mirror and I was thinking at the time vision, like vision and truly at the time I was thinking more of technology. Let me open a more professional-type services business.

I never really thought I was going to get into the maintenance or construction. And so anyway, kind of like look through the door, this is how I looked at it. That's how the name started.

And then enterprises, I just thought business, enterprises; I liked the sound of it. And I bounced the name off of a few people and they liked it. I also thought about the future. If I do well, I'd like to team one of these days with maybe my brother's company.

In business one thing you have to learn very, very early on, don't try to do it on your own, man. You go out there and follow and copy whatever a successful company is doing, go out there and do things the way they do. Talk to the owners, learn from the owners. I thought at an early time, that maybe we could partner up in the future, MIRATECH and Mirador.

I intentionally did it that way. A lot of people don't like it that way, but a lot of people will talk about like the SDA office and stuff like that, sometimes they think you're brother and sister, maybe you guys are the same company. We're not, but we actually got a little heat over the name mirror. I've proven to everybody that I'm doing a good job running the company and working very hard to grow the business, God help me.

AP: And so TAP.

YD: That fun TAP program, Technical Assistance Program. That is a program by TxDOT, Texas Department of Transportation. It's a really nice program that TxDOT has that trains small businesses. They let contractors bid for the contract and then I guess the lowest bidder with TxDOT everything is the lowest bid. They want to make sure you have the capabilities and experience.

MIRATECH won that contract. I was telling you that that's the contract that helped my brother's company, my brother be able to keep himself billable so that he could continue to grow that company. When I went to him and said, "Joe, I'm starting my company, give me some work."

He says, "I'll give you the hardest contract that I ever had. There is no easy way to grow. If you can do this contract, you can do anything." Truly, it is not easy because what you have to do is you have to go out there and find small businesses, like me. Believe me at the time I was small. The only thing that helped me was I had the business experience, I had the accounting experience.

I know what it takes to make a business successful, especially from the budgetary side. I had a lot of experience on budgets and operations. So anyhow, started running this contract which requires us to go out there and find small businesses that need

assistance in accounting, assistance in bidding, assistance in bonding, learning how to go out there and bond your projects.

So I had to learn all that. They give you all the manuals. Joe just passed on all the manuals to me or books and manuals and said, "Read them all. Get very familiar, everything is online."

I had a few meetings with him and then I went out there helping him get clients. They're still prime contractor. I'm a subcontractor. I'm going out there, getting him business. He would come in and close the deal, but the neat thing about this program is that it's free to the small businesses who agree to go through the training.

TxDOT gives you I think it's like \$5,000 to \$7,000 of training. In other words, they paid MIRATECH for all the training that they did for the small companies. The training was done by me and others. We had a group of very talented and educated people, some of them I think were even some professors that were from UTEP that were in the training program that went out there and provided the training to these small companies.

Okay, so that worked for me. I was able to close several of those contracts and keep myself billable until we started getting more work. But with TxDOT, it's kind of ironic that we're the subcontractor for MIRATECH on the TAP contract, and then we're starting to get business with TxDOT.

What happened is that I learned how to do business with TxDOT while I was training this program. It's truly a development program, really, really neat. And that is really where I learned the basics about doing business for yourself, not running somebody else's company. Yeah, I can run a multimillion dollar company, but it's so different when you're doing it for yourself.

Its one bank accountant is the company bank accountant. If there's no money there, then guess what? You can't pay yourself. That is really the hardest thing about doing business. You have to be very strong not to take from the tiny little profits that you're barely starting to generate in a business.

And let me tell you, ours were very, very lean, very little because again, I'll reiterate, TxDOT profits are not very big, they're all very hard competitive bids. So there's very little profit. You really have to use the concept of bidding to win and manage the profits

so that you can start I guess increasing or accumulating a little bit of cash flow.

And again in business, you learn cash flow is key. If you don't have cash, you can't pay your employees, you can't pay your bills, you can't pay your rent, you can't do anything. So I knew that I had to do that. I knew that I had to start accumulating a little bit of cash flow so that I could go out there and borrow, get a little line of credit.

One thing that really helped me a lot is really my personal finances. Thank God, I cannot reiterate this to everyone. Take care of your personal credit. Personal credit is invaluable because when you're starting a small company, guess what? You go out there to borrow money; you're really borrowing you, the owner.

Although you're borrowing under a company, Mirador is a corporation from the start because I went in there with a big plan. I wrote my business plan and I stuck to that business plan from the start. I have not deviated; I have not had to adjust it at all from when I wrote that business plan eight, nine years ago to now.

Again, I'll go back to cash flow. You've got to take care of your personal finances, have good credit. Pay your bills, pay them timely, pay them ahead of time if you can because credit is gonna be everything for a business owner. At least for the first ten years, believe me.

You still have to what do you call it, co-sign on everything, on every loan you go out there to get, whether it's bonding, whether it's a loan from the bank, whether it's vehicles, equipment, renting an office, they're going to be looking at your personal credit.

They're still looking at mine and I've been in business since 2002. I still have to co-sign on a lot of loans and stuff like that. So again, if you're going to be presenting this to a group of college students, please take care of your credit. I cannot stress that enough. If you ever plan to be a business owner, that alone is going to open up a lot of opportunities for you. You will open up a lot of opportunities.

It speaks a lot about your character. If you really take care of your bills and you're really responsible and reliable and you don't go out there and charge up credit cards and just not pay them off, people are gonna be willing to work with you. Customers are going to be willing to work with you.

At the beginning, when they're running a credit check on your company, they're really running a credit check on you. So really looking at you through a microscope, especially when you go apply for a certification, like the federal health zone certification or the 8A certification or the DBE, Disadvantaged Business Enterprise certification with TxDOT.

They come in and they do a very thorough, thorough background investigation, background overview of your credit of years and years of your company; every transaction, everything you've done. So if you can get that right from the start, you're going to really position your company to be able to grow. If you don't get the basics down, forget it, you might as well not even open.

If you don't have very good credit, then find yourself a partner who has good credit or whatever. But anyhow, that's what helped me is really my own, I had some savings. Thank God I had a little bit of savings. I really didn't want to tap into it, but I did. I had to borrow from my own equity. Thanks to my good credit, they gave my line of equity credit, which was fantastic. I borrowed from myself, I loaned the company money.

As soon as I was able to pay myself, I paid myself immediately because I never want to mix one with the other in business. You've got to keep your personal away from your company, especially a corporation. It's very, very important that you don't mix one with the other.

AP: You talked about certification.

YD: Certification - that is really the 8A certification is really the certification that has helped me grow my business. It didn't happen overnight, let me explain a little about that. 8A is a development program; it's a government-funded program, which is overseen by the Small Business Administration. You actually have an office here in town, really good people that help you.

Not get contracts, but they help train you to get contracts. It's a really nice development program. It's almost like going back to school. In business, you have to know about government contracts, what are the requirements to bid on a government contract? One of the first requirements is you have to set up in the Central Contractor's Registration, CCR.

Anybody who is going to do business with the government has to go there and set up their portfolio, kind of like a prequalification process that you go through to even be able to do that. That's the most basic thing. Small business owners don't know that, they learn that.

I learned a lot of that not through TxDOT because although through TxDOT I learned a lot, a lot, it was more doing business with the state. TxDOT is doing business with the state, where the 8A certification is doing business with the government. And then it's a really lengthy certification that you go through.

By the time you apply for that, you have to have at least three years of business experience. It's okay if you haven't done any federal contracts, but you have to show some past performance, experience, contacts. You have to have financials. It's always very important you keep very, very good records, all your receipts, your receivables, payables, cash, transactions, checks.

Nothing more important, again, as important as your cash, all your accounting is very important because everybody is going to be asking you for financials. Anybody and everybody want to see them. For any certification, any time you apply for a certification, especially like one as important as the 8A, you're going to be under a lot of scrutiny.

Really it's full disclosure, on your personal and on the business, you share all this information with the federal government and then they go through a prequalification process and they come back and determine whether you're eligible to be awarded a certification.

All it is, is a certification and it's saying you now have a certification to bid for set aside government contracts. What's nice about that program is government carves out a certain chunk of opportunities for small business. It's small; I mean it's not a lot, maybe it's like six percent for what they call small disadvantaged business.

That's what the 8A certification is; it's a certification for small disadvantaged businesses. These are businesses that are under 500 employees or under \$5 million in revenues. Well, of course somebody like me was probably making \$200,000 in revenues at the time. Companies get into the program very, very early on.

So anyhow, it's real neat because now you've not only had the opportunity to bid against a smaller pool of contractors, but they're

also helping develop you. They put really nice seminars together and bring really high level topnotch trainers to train you how to write proposals; how to understand the proposal process, which is very, very lengthy.

How to understand bonding; how to understand DCAA accounting practices; and compliance. Everything, the government is very specialized. Doing business with the government is very specialized, it's not like the commercial business, all my experience was really dealing with commercial and also with the utility, which is a little different.

So anyhow, the 8A certification was fantastic. It has been, it's a program they allow you to be in the program nine years. The government is telling you I'm going to give you nine years to develop yourself, take advantage of all that training, all those seminars, all that information we put out there.

Bid for set aside government contracts and then after that, you're supposed to graduate, they graduate you. If you're not doing things right, they'll kick you out of the program. But somebody who is doing things right, will graduate after nine years. And by that time what you're supposed to be able to do now is you should be capable of going out there on your own as a small business, competing in a much larger arena, you're competing against everybody.

But by then, you should already know the business. You should already have developed a lot of customers. You should be able to do it without any support for the government. I'm really taking advantage of that. I have taken advantage of the 8A certification to the ends degrees, honestly.

I don't miss a training. I work very closely with the SBA office. And it's the most incredible program. It's not easy; a lot of businesses choose not to go that route because of the compliance. Again, full disclosure, you have to have a compilation of your financial statements done, I choose to have a full audit.

I decided very early on that I'm going to do an audit soon, although it's not a requirement, let's do it. Well, fortunately I did it and now our revenues are at a point where we're required to have a full blown audit. I was already prepared. Our audits are really simple because we have really good accounting practices.

I have a really good accountant, Karen Toman; she's meticulous when it comes to paper work and documentation. And again, with

the federal government, it's really about demonstration. They can come in here at any point and say we're going to do an audit. If you're doing government contracts, you're performing government contracts, they can come in here and ensure and review your expenses and make sure that you're charging the government a reasonable rate for your general administrative rate, your overhead rate.

I can get into a lot of detail about that, but bottom line, there's several certifications that you can apply for that really help a business. That wants to do business with the government. This is only if you want to do business with the government. And I knew that I wanted to do business with the government. I knew that I didn't want to do any commercial work.

I tried doing some commercial work. We were desperate, like every small business, you're trying to get business. You go out there and you go to large companies and say give me an opportunity, I can do this, I can do that. It's very different.

I'm not saying that commercial business is bad because there's a lot of wonderful organizations, but when you're doing construction work, the commercial business is a little tough, especially when you're a woman out there and you really don't understand the business that well, it can be very, very, very tough.

AP: Tell me about some challenges that you might have faced as a woman-owned?

YD: Well, I'll tell you, gosh, this company is no longer around, but I did a business with one of the first companies that I did business with when I started was Sam CORP., unfortunately they're no longer around for a bout of bad reasons. They did give me an opportunity to go out there and do some work for them.

One of the project managers out there said we need some concrete work done, this is for the school districts. They were constructing their, what do you call it, facility or all the football players, their field?

AP: The stadium or the field house.

YD: Yeah, field houses; and they needed a bunch of concrete work done, a bunch of dirt work done. We had the capabilities to do that, so we went out there and started doing work for them. We built them, we completed the work, we completed it timely.

We billed them and then they turned around and said we're going to dock you for this, we're going to dock you for that. I've already paid my expenses and I have to pay for material and I have to pay for equipment rentals. So it's a little cutthroat. I'm not saying all of it is, but you really have to be prepared.

When you're not very prepared and not very knowledgeable, you can run into a situation where you don't know how to defend yourself to justify your position, unless you have a lawyer. I've never liked lawyers, for whatever reason, it's like I've never really needed them. I shouldn't say I don't like them.

Nothing against lawyers, right now I am working with some lawyers who helped us put some joint venture packages together, but I didn't want to have to go for the added expense of getting lawyers to help us go collect our money. So you're just like okay, I'll take whatever you're giving me.

So that was kind of like the experience that I learned early on that made me realize that I don't want to put all my eggs in this basket, I also want to put in a basket. This is going to be challenging. I'm not telling you the federal government business isn't challenging, it is very challenging. As a matter of fact, it is harder. The competition is less is because it's harder because of the compliance.

The government pays you money if you've done your job, if you've done it by meeting their specifications by scope, you get paid. And it's wonderful, it works. It's a win-win for both. You have to be very competitive, of course, but it works. Those are some of the experiences that I had early on working on the commercial side. It's very, very competitive, it's almost like man, they don't let you make money.

Maybe it's my own fault. I found that I did better with the state and the federal government. So I was given an opportunity to do work at Ft. Bliss, early on. I worked as a subcontractor for other companies providing small maintenance services.

MIRATECH gave me several opportunities to do work for them; you're consulting, doing some small environmental work or small maintenance. Whenever they had a contract that had a little maintenance piece to it, they would turn around and ask us if we would help them with it.

We started expanding our capabilities and our past performance in that area. And then I started marketing Ft. Bliss and I was able to start doing some work. Now, again, here I am, I went with a plan that I was going to be providing environmental services, I'm going to be providing professional services, but also I'm going to do facilities maintenance services.

Our primary code is really facility support services, which is very broad. You can really do a lot under that code because I set it up intentionally so that I could do both maintenance and environmental services, but I never thought of doing construction. I don't know if it's my crazy personality or the demand for construction that took me in a little different direction.

Thank God we've done well. We've survived and we've expanded our experience, our capabilities in that area as well. Now, we have two divisions, we have the construction division and we have the services division. And the services, we do the environmental support services; and on the construction, which is where we have the majority of our business, we do the maintenance, doing work for Ft. Bliss, doing work for the National Parks Services, doing work for TxDOT.

And thank God we've done very well. It's up until this year that it's gotten a little challenging. The economy is challenging for everybody. It's just a time for us to get even more creative and more aggressive and really sharpen our pencils to survive, to survive this wave. I guess until the new administration comes in.

I don't want to get into the politics too much, but I think we all understand that Republicans like war and Democrats don't. War is very good for government contractors, although I'm not big on war. But anyhow, overall, we've done very well.

I'll share something, a really nice thing that happened to us last year. We were nominated as a Region 6 Prime Contractor of the Year. For a small company like ours, truly that is a very, very huge compliment. I've used that award to market and position ourselves to compete with the bigger guys. It's given us a really good reputation. We've gotten a lot of attention out there.

So we have larger companies now coming to us asking us to team up. We don't have the bonding. Remember large construction contracts require a lot of bonding. Some of this bonding is \$25 million, our bonding levels are only \$5 million for one single job or \$10 million for aggregate, total. That's based on our credit, the company credit and all that.

Which is good, I'm not complaining. Now, we have larger companies knocking on our door saying let's team and let's go out and chase this opportunity together, which kind of leads me back I should step back a few years about teaming. I'm very, very big on teaming. I mentioned earlier that one of the things that a small business owner never wants to do is try to go out there on his own.

You've got to hang with the big guys; you've got to talk to the big guys. You have to go out there and network and get to know these people and invite them for lunch and pick their brain. How did you do it? I've learned everything through successful business people, truly. And I still continue to learn today through people that I have been very successful in business. That is really where I picked up a lot of the knowledge and information that I need to go out there and compete and go out there and get work for the company.

And then not only myself, my God I have to step back and talk about my team. You also can't do it without partners, but you've got to have the right team in place. You've got to have people with the right knowledge, people that you can trust, people that understand your vision, that truly understand the business.

I surrounded myself with people, my right hand guy, Hector Martinez, Operation's Director; he replaced James because James went off and opened his own company. Unfortunately he didn't do too good and stuff, but he's still trying. He's going to be a business owner some day, he doesn't give up.

But Hector has helped me a lot. Once I started moving into the construction, I realized that oh, my goodness, I have to bring somebody who really, really, really has a lot of experience in construction. He had about 20-something years of experience. He knows how to write the proposals, very technical proposals that require 50 pages of writing just on the management section alone.

Again, we've grown to a position where although we're still tiny, we can manage large projects, we have the infrastructure. If Mirador has anything that really helps us, we're a tiny little company, we have the right infrastructure. We have an accounting department; we have an operations department; we have the estimating department; we have a contracts administrator; accounts payable; accounts receivable; we're bonded; we have the proper insurances. We've done everything right.

Again, to protect the company and our employees, so without the team, I couldn't have done what I've done. I've been very lucky. I've had some good people join my team who really want to see me grow and see the company grow and want to grow with us. So when you find that mix, then take advantage.

AP: Approximately how many employees do you have?

YD: Today, I have like my core staff is small, I have about maybe 11. And that core staff is made up of my accounting, my estimating, my contracts administration, operation support. That's a small group, but that's really your core group. They're all important because we also have out at Ft. Bliss; we have 22 technicians that are out there doing work for us every single day.

Your field is just as critical, if not the most critical because they're the guys who are going to perform. You've got to give them the proper training, the proper certifications to go out there and take care of your customer. So I have about 16 here, 22, I'd say a total right now, the last time I counted, it's about 42 employees that we have, but it fluctuates, it just depends on your pipeline.

If you have a construction contract going on or maintenance or a landscaping, sometimes have you to bring in 20-25 people. Most of those projects are short term. That's what is really hard about the construction side of the business. Everything is short term, get this done, max is really a year.

And then the contract is over, you let everybody go. It's very important have you this other division that brings in some of the steady cash flow stream; those are your multiyear contracts. I have a few of those contracts, not a lot, I still need to go out there and get us some more contracts. But we do have some that bring in that steady cash flow stream.

It gives us a little bit of breathing room to continue to grow the pipeline. But girls, I can't tell you how it's not easy, it's tough. It's almost like this vicious cycle that you're in every day, you can't slow down. Sometimes if you have a three-day holiday, it's terrible. I can't even like holidays anymore. I don't know how to enjoy myself because it's 24/7 business.

I'm trying to modify my behavior a little. And going to church has really helped me a lot, truly, truly, truly. I'm going to a church where they talk business all the time, everything is spiritual, but they relate it to business. The found the right home for myself and

I'm really learning that you've got to balance it out a little, and I've got to let my employees balance it out a little.

Remember, I come with this crazy work ethic where if I have to work 60 hours or 70 hours or whatever it takes to get the job done, I'll do it. So sometimes it's a business, when you're a business owner, guess what, you expect everybody to do it and that's not realistic. We're parents, we've got to take care of our children, we still have to go home and take them to practice, make sure they're doing their homework, make sure they're ready for the next day; they're going to bed early.

It's a balancing act, but for me, that's really been one of the most difficult things is to balance it. Until lately, my son has made me balance it.

AP: I was gonna ask you that, talking about your mother's work ethic and having your son, how has that been for you, in terms of time management?

YD: It's been tough, tough on the personal life, which is okay. I've got to take care of my son. I've got to provide for him. I want to make sure that if I'm never around, that he's gonna have enough for an education and just leave something behind for my little one. From my mom is really where I learned this business ethic.

That lady never stopped, she worked like crazy all her life. She'd leave the house at 4:00 in the morning to go catch a bus, come back in the evening, fix dinner, make sure that all of us did our homework, our clothes was ready, everything was washed for the next day. So I grew up in that type of environment.

Again, it was a beautiful environment. I don't ever remember saying oh, my God, I miss my mom. My mom was always there because she was such a loving person. Even if she's working very hard, she's there. And when we were so blessed to have her mom, my grandma, come live with us. You know how it is with us Mexican families. We were very lucky.

She is no longer around, but she was like a second mom. I learned from my mom. And she really understands that; and so she's helped me with my son, as well. Without her, there's no way I could have done what I've done with my company. My mom has been there to help, she's been there to take care of my son when I've had to travel.

You have to hit the road, you've got to go get in a car or a plane and look for business elsewhere. I just got back from DC, I was out there all last week. We're now in a position where I'm going to have to continue traveling more. Right now, I'm trying to become less of a, what do you call it when you're one of these people, control freaks, a micro manager.

My employees sometimes accuse me of micro managing. I don't do it for a bad reason, that's just the way I am. But I'm trying to moderate, I guess, my behavior a little and empower them more. And I'm seeing that if you empower people more, they are all willing. It's almost like a big relief, things are still getting done.

I'm finding more time to spend time with my son, take care of myself, go walking. As you can see, I probably need to lose a little weight, that's terrible. But empower people, trust them, you have to trust in your employees.

You don't ever want to lose complete I guess perspective of the business. You still have to keep your thumb on everything, but you just implement some good controls and the company to at least capture 80, 90 percent of things that could possibly go wrong, capture the difference.

You can sleep good at night. I'm not saying I sleep good at night, I still have some bad nights sometimes. Sometimes you have that one project that you just wish would end soon and that everything turns out best for the customer and for you.

I went off a different direction, huh?

AP: I was gonna ask you, how does your mother feel about your success?

YD: You won't believe it, you are not gonna believe this one. She wishes that I was not a business owner. Can you believe that? She wishes that I was just a normal person who works an 8:00 to 5:00 job and went home to her kids and cooked and had time to go work out and had more time to go out and do fun things, like going out to dinner with the family.

Like my sister, rosy, has a nice 8:00 to 5:00 job. And she goes home and cooks for her husband every day and she fixes the best lunches and they're out walking and doing fun things in the evenings. I don't have time to do anything of that.

My mom does not like success, it is so weird. She feels that when we're in a role, like we are, myself and my brother, we're exposed to a lot of bad things. And unfortunately being a business owner, although there's a lot of good, there's also a lot of bad. Sometimes your competition wants to take you down or sometimes things don't go as planned and you're all nervous, you're all stressed.

You stress because you have to make sure now that you can keep your company going, that you have enough work in the pipeline to keep your employees employed to ensure that you're going to be able to pay the bills to keep everybody's health coverage going. You take all that home, even if you try not to.

And so I'm not as calm and collected as my brother is. As you can see, I'm a little hyper. He's more down to earth; and me, I'm very different. I think if I'm stressed, it shows. Or even if it didn't show, she can see it; she can sense it and she didn't like that.

I'm fine, I have no regrets. I truly, truly have no regrets. I love the challenge; I love the excitement, the adrenaline. It's really just my personality, I'm just so hyper, I can't stay still.

AP: And you talked about networking, are you a member of any of the chambers?

YD: Oh, yeah, yeah, I attend a bunch of the chamber. I am very, very involved with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. I work very closely with Cindy, she's one of my mentors. I love what she does. I work real closely with Terry at the chambers. As I matter of fact, I was just up there with them in DC.

I'm also a board member of the 8A Government Contractor's Association. That's a really nice association of a lot of government contractors. 8A, that certification, it's a really nice group to be a part of because it allows you to kind of give back. I'm not saying I know everything because believe me, I'm not there yet. I'm still continuing to learn and we continue to train other small businesses that are barely coming into the program.

That also gives an opportunity sometimes to go out there and get work and meet a lot of people at different events with the Greater Chamber. I attend most of the events. Oh, gosh, I'm a member of other associations out of town, I think some of the certifications are out there and stuff, but we're also trying to position ourselves to go do business in Houston, so there's a couple of associations we joined.

You have to join them, you can't just expect to go out there and say I'm here, I can perform work. No, you really have to get involved in their community and their associations and get to know the people that are in procurement. The people, who really control things. I stay very, very involved, especially with the associations here in El Paso.

AP: So you think they've been beneficial in terms of getting to know people or information?

YD: Definitely, oh, yeah, that's why I tell you, you've got to get out there and network. You can't sit in the office all day long and expect for business to come. Business is not going to come unless you're doing the competitive type business that we were doing in the beginning.

We're still doing that, we still behind the scenes looking at opportunities that show up online. We have the guys right now bidding, bidding, bidding, they're estimating, but there's other opportunities that you have to meet with your customer and develop a relationship with the customer before they even talk to you or give you an opportunity to get a contract done.

They also go out there and they ask questions about you. They know a customer, like if we're doing business in Albuquerque and we have a friend who wants to do business in Albuquerque and they know someone in El Paso, they'll ask how well they performed for you. Okay, performance is everything, I cannot tell you enough.

There is no easy way, you've got to go in there and first get your foot in the door, most people are gonna give you one tiny little opportunity, to make sure you don't fall flat on your face. And then they fall flat on your face. If they see that you perform well, they'll come back to you and tell you they'll give you a price for this.

So they start you out slowly, especially in the government. There is no magic to this, it's tough. It's a development program. Okay, with every business, you want to grow gradually. The worse thing that can happen to any business is that you grow too fast. Fast growth is very dangerous if you don't have the infrastructure in place to be able to manage it.

If you don't have the proper people to manage it. If you don't have the cash flow to fund the project. So it should all happen in a certain sequence, it really does. Most of the successful people that I've seen have grown very gradually; they really monitor their growth.

There are opportunities that come to us, people knocking on our doors asking if we'd like to team to go after this as a group. We sit down and sometimes we say no, we're not ready. If we go out there and we bid and we win it, we're going to fall flat on our face because we can't finance a project of that size.

And sometimes I've seen too many companies get into trouble because they don't manage their growth. Although people want to make all this money real fast, that's not real. It takes time to make money. And to be honest with you, with me it's really not about money anymore.

My company now is my job. It's no different than when I was working for somebody else, I go to work every day, I'm here every morning. I go home and I do work. I did do that before, I've always had that kind of work ethic. So it was a really transition for that reason. It's like oh, my God, I'm going to work even harder, but I'm used to that.

AP: I was going to ask you about the way that I understood, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that you had started it kind of like with a broad scope. Why did you do that? How did you decide to do that?

YD: You know why because one thing in business is you really need to diversify. I've always been of the belief that if you provide a specialized service, you better be very good at it. When the day comes that you can't do it for whatever reason, then you're in trouble.

However if you diversify, and this area dries up and for whatever reason the opportunities decrease, then you can still to continue provide service in various other areas.

That's why I've always tried to keep it real broad and diversify. But you also have to be very good in all of the areas; or you have to have the people that can perform in the environmental services side and the construction side and the maintenance side. Providing inspection services to Ft. Bliss, you better find yourself some really good inspectors if we're going to go out there and do that type of work again.

So I say broad because I've always been of the belief that just for my own security and stuff, I prefer to do that just to balance it.

AP: And give me information on the different types, you're doing environmental, construction, tell me about the environmental? What is that?

YD: On the environmental side at Ft. Bliss, currently we have a contract where we provide all of the hazardous waste management services. So we have technicians who hold a lot of certifications. They have to go through real lengthy process to become these techs. They're out there at Ft. Bliss servicing the entire base, picking up hazardous waste material.

They take it back it to the facility. We actually have a facility at Ft. Bliss; it's made up of 22 people. They don't even report here to the office. This little office here is really what we consider our corporate offices. They report out to the field.

We have a really strong project manager lady, real, real sharp, Michelle Bayer, who runs an entire group of guys. It's a female running, like me. She is sharp, just like all our guys, even sharper. So she's out there servicing our troops, every single day, every single building on base.

They go out there and they pick up all of the hazardous material, they bring it back to the facility, they label it, they dispose of it, they label whatever is contaminated to a proper site. They do this day in and day out.

That's one of the environmental contracts we have. At White Sense Missile Range, we have another environmental contract. This is more archaeological-type contract. We're doing mitigation of sites. We have a subcontractor, one of our real good strategic partners, SRI Statistical Research Inc. They're a pretty large business, very specialized.

They have very specialized people, archaeologists, that we use our subcontractor to help us with that contract out there. We've had it for about two years. So they're out there, before all the construction starts, they're actually out there doing analysis and soil samples to make sure that the terrain is okay. And after that, they can come in and build and start constructing the huge BCT's that you see coming up here on base.

That's another environmental; and then recently, we just good the wonderful news through a partnership with MIRATECH, we formed a joint venture. It's called MIRA facilities LLC. MIRATECH, Mirador, so MIRA Facilities. And we were awarded a contract by income, that's the one I was mentioned earlier to service all of the installations nationwide. This is a nationwide contract. We did not win it as an 8A competition.

So we really competed with the entire nation. And we were one of the eight companies nationwide that was awarded that contract. It's a \$44.5 million contract. They're gonna start issuing task orders, starting November 1st. I see a lot of opportunities there. We're already starting to market it and really educate ourselves on how this program is going to work.

This is a branding program, program slash contract that the government awarded in order to stream line their processes as well. And in order to get more competitive pricing, rather than put out an opportunity out to bid to the entire nation, they split the U.S. into half. We won the western region and then there's a group that won the eastern.

So we're going to be able to compete in the entire western region, which is fantastic. We have a real good team, again, it's MIRATECH, our strategic partner, SRI is on our team. And we have some other really good partners on the team. I think we even have a university on our team, based out of California.

That's gonna help us expand the professional side of the business. We're really positioned now, obviously we were able to win this competition to compete I guess in an arena with much larger businesses. Now, I couldn't have done this with little Mirador, again, I'll say you've got to find partners, you've got to trust everything.

With MIRATECH, the SBA, the Small Business Administration of approved a mentor protégé. A really nice program that allows small companies to go out there and find themselves a mentor, which is usually a larger company. You go out there and you disclose all their financials, all your financials, all their past performance and experience. The SBA makes a determination whether they approve or not approve.

Well, part of the approval requires that the mentor and the protégé meet for a while and they have them come in and do a swat analysis. One of the benefits of this program is that now the larger

company can go with us and win contracts that are set aside for the smaller businesses. Well, some of these contracts, even though they are set aside for smaller businesses that are small, are too small to be able to handle.

Remember, small means 500 employees or less or \$5 million in revenues come on, that's not small. We are nowhere close to that. They approved the mentor protégé agreement, which allows you to set up a joint venture and then go out there and bid on opportunities. But they force or expect larger company to a swat analysis on you to identify your strengths, weaknesses and then help develop you in the areas that you're weak.

It's almost like going back to school again, it's a commitment from both and you have to create these really detailed analysis. You present it to the SBA, they send it to Washington. I think it got approved in Washington finally. Okay, so I think that's another thing that's going to really help Mirador grow.

We have a partner that's committed to us. He happens to be a relative, which is great. Who else do you trust better than a relative? He's mentored companies in El Paso and really positioned them to grow and they've done very, very well. You've got another year, two years left in the mentor protégé program.

They review it every year. MIRATECH likes to mentor other small businesses. They expect a lot of commitment from us. I think in my case they expect a lot more from me. Again, I have the best mentor in the world. I'm hoping that with this joint venture, we're going to really take the company to the next level.

We've already submitted a bunch of proposals. We're hoping to get good news on, that maybe we're one of these opportunities we've submitted. We got the mentor protégé approved about a year and a half ago. For that first year, all we did was they were developing, developing, developing, kind of helping us position us to learn how to build, how to write the real technical proposals.

Even getting our employees trained. Taking up, giving us project management support on some of our projects. Bring in one other project manager to coach and train our project managers. It's really neat. That's really how businesses grow. You're going to have to find yourself somebody who is very grateful for all the opportunities that they've had and for all the fortune, I guess that they've had to really share back.

They'll only do it with companies that they see are serious about growing and that do things right. So we've been very fortunate. I have a couple more companies asking to mentor us. And they're very, very good companies. This is one on the construction side. I won't say any names, but one of them is already involved with UTEP, a really good businessman.

And hopefully we're going to be setting up a mentor protégé program with him. Right now, we're team members; we're chasing opportunities together with them and other larger companies. Again, we're very fortunate. In the beginning, no one was even knocking on our door.

But I think because we've done things right and because I'm always out there and my team is always out there, I want to make sure that we're always promoting the company and that we're supporting any events going on in El Paso, that we're giving back to our community.

That our employees are very involved, local and with the army events as well, that's very important because we're great grateful to Ft. Bliss and the government truly for giving us so many opportunities.

AP: Tell me about the facilities maintenance portion.

YD: The facilities maintenance and management is really where we do just any renovation, restoration to an existing government facility that can be historical as well. Historical buildings, we go in there and renovate them. If there is any mediation work required, we have real good strategic partners that specialize in that, so we bring our mediation company and we bring our crews in.

Sometimes we subcontract an opportunity, sometimes we set up crews in house and we go out there and we do all the painting and all the concrete work and the dry wall and the asphalt and the carpet. And we just completed a really nice project at Ft. Bliss, a few months ago.

We were the first company in El Paso who was awarded one of the first stimulus checks, what they call the ARIA, the American Recovery Investment Act. And it was a chapel, I was so happy because it's a church. I thought you know what, this is awesome, we can't go wrong.

Then I thought, well, then if we go wrong, okay, let it stand a church. We did really well. We completed the project on time. Very challenging, we were under a microscope because it was the first ARIA job.

Well, guess what? Everybody from Ft. Bliss contracting, DPW's eyes were on it. We have to be on our tip toes and really performing like we've never performed before. That was a little intimidating and challenging, but we got through it. They did a really nice ceremony at the end and gave us a nice award, the Chaplain did. It was a really nice project. I was just so grateful it was a church.

I'm not this big, big religious person, but when I won that contract, I said this is good. And I know I'm in good hands and I know it's a sign that I've got to continue, I've got to continue. Because as a business owner, sometimes you think how much longer can I do this? I'm one who has said I'll never retire. I can't even imagine it, but there are bad days when you think, golly, can I continue doing this? And you wake up the next day and say heck yeah.

This is really what drives me. Thank God that I'm very energetic and just get up every morning and pray and ask God to help me and help my employees and my family, that we keep going, man.

AP: Is there anything that you do different looking back at everything; is there anything you would do different?

YD: On a personal level or on a business, well, I used to have a lot more fun before the business because I had time to have more fun. Going out with my girlfriends and maybe going out to dinner. I don't go to the movies anymore; I rarely go to the movies. I like watching movies, can you believe that.

My son likes to wait until they're on DVD and we can watch them at home. I think the personal life has changed. Before, I had time to vacation more and travel more. So I definitely am hoping that I can start doing more of that. It's a taken a toll on the personal life, but no complaints.

AP: And on the business side, were there any things that you do differently now looking back?

YD: Looking back, again, I'm still doing not accounting, believe it or not. Even though I'm not there in the trenches, I'm still making sure that our projects, I look at budgets, I'm making sure that our

project is going to meet its budget. I'm always trying to find ways to manage it and cut costs before the projects were going to minimize any losses.

With any business owner, not all projects are going to be beautiful. Sometimes you take on a little project just to show the customer, get them to have confidence in you. On a business side, doing something different, well, sure I work a lot harder now. If I worked hard then, it's more dedication now, even more so.

I mean I find myself with my BlackBerry, it's terrible, who invented all this stuff? I have a computer, you walk into my formal living room, I have a really nice area set up. I've got a computer there, I've got one in my bedroom, I've got one in the family room and then I've got my BlackBerry that I'm always looking at.

I use the different things, so now I'm connected to business almost all day long, except when I'm sleeping. That's really the biggest one. You're really connected, but I think almost every business owner it's like that. I know some that are pretty big. Of course, the bigger you grow, the larger your business gets. It looks like the more time you have.

So I'm still not there yet, I'm still in a very critical stage of still in the transition stage, I guess, of the business. I think I've crossed the development stage. I think I have all the information and the knowledge that I need to know the type of business that I want, to know the size of company that I want.

So again, I said I'm in the transitional stage of the business, which is really where I have to start really finding some multiyear contracts that are going to get us out of the trenches because right now we're still in the trenches, or it feels like we're in the trenches. Give you that little breathing space; hopefully this next year with some of the contracts, we have one.

If we're successful on winning a bunch of those task orders, I'm gonna have a little bit more time for fun.

AP: And the business when they started, do you feel it was different, a lot different then compared to now?

YD: Oh, my goodness, it was a hundred percent different, it was completely different. Right now, it is so competitive, especially this last year has been I mean incredibly competitive. When I

started, I tell you, it was a good time to start. Everybody was gearing up for the expansion at Ft. Bliss.

Everybody knew that there's gonna be billions spent. There is so much opportunity, so yeah; I started at a good time. But then, with the current situation with the economy and all, it's been tough. The government, like everybody else, is looking for ways to cut costs and they're getting a lot leaner.

Sometimes you have to lead blood, even with the federal government. So yeah, your margins will not be the same that they were two years ago or three years ago. I saw that happen last year. We had projects that had really nice margins and really nice profits.

Now, the margins are a lot smaller, so you really have to manage. You have to get very creative. You have to expect a lot more from people. My employees, I'm so lucky, they understand. They understand what's going on in the economy right now. And they see because everybody is so involved in the proposal process. They see how competitive it is. So they're all willing to work a little bit more.

Everybody is putting in their effort. They know it's ugly out there. It's a good time to be a student, it really is. Educate yourself like crazy right now because man, without an education it's gonna be tough. But it's a good time for a student.

AP: I wanted to go back to your brother. I remember he said that education was really big. What does he think now about your success?

YD: Oh, my goodness, he says that I've done incredible. He is very, very impressed. He always says it's my personality; I've always been a marketer. Sometimes as a business owner, you're going to think you have all this knowledge, you're always a little uncertain about your own potential. He's one who is always telling me there's a lot more.

And he still says that there is a lot more that I can do to grow my business. That's my mentor, can you imagine? Gosh, he's a tough mentor. Again, he was like a father at ten, having to go work since he was ten years old. He doesn't feel sorry for too many people that don't want to work. He just works and works and works.

No, he's very proud. He's really very proud of my success. He knows that I do things a little different than he does, not that much different, but we definitely are very different. He works 24/7, I sleep.

And then I have a family, so it's different. With my little boy, when you're a parent gosh, that one alone it drives you, it motivates you. When you think about man, I'm doing this not only for myself, but for my child, especially being a single parent, it's tough. You worry that if something happens to you, who is going to take care of my baby.

Maybe if I can provide for him, before that I want to be around for him. I always say I want to live until 100. Just keep me here to see my baby. I want to live like my grandma. My grandma lived until she was 99 years old, but she was healthy, very, very healthy, thank God.

Knock on wood, I'm still doing good. I need to take good care of myself and grow the company and make El Paso proud. We need some good success stories here in El Paso.

AP: You've given a lot of information and advice, but is there something that I haven't asked you that you think is essential that anybody who is starting a business needs to really know?

YD: Maybe I've seen a lot of businesses go out of business, one the economy and a lot of small businesses just folding back and forth. But I've also seen some that have opened up companies, not understanding the commitment that it takes. It's not for everybody, it is truly not for everybody.

When you start you are gonna go through a lot of sleepless nights. You are going to be staying up until 3:00, 4:00 in the morning writing proposals. Unless you have very deep pockets, and why would you go into business if you had very deep pockets?

I think that the advice is man, know that it's going to be very tough, very, very tough on the first year, the first two years. There's not a lot of money coming in, so be very shroud, don't over spend, give up on vacation, give up on those nice little things that you're used to having.

Especially when you come from a background like I did, nice job, everything like that, the work ethic. It's not an 8:00 to 5:00 job because you know what; things go wrong at a project. Your customers are going to call you at whatever time it is. There's a

spill response, you better be able to send your team down there to respond.

You have a subcontractor, a small subcontractor that you hire that can't pay his bills and you've hired him to do a project for you, then you better have a little bit of extra money there to help him out because believe me, this kind of stuff goes on. Again, I go back to the cash flow, be very conservative on your spending.

First few years, I've seen a lot of businesses that start making money and it's like wow, I had a great year. I can pay myself a \$200,000 bonus. Don't take from your company. You have to treat yourself like an employee of that company. You have a salary, live on that salary. At the end of the fiscal year, depending on your profits, I'm one who believes in sharing with the employees. If we had a good year, everybody is going to get a bonus, including myself.

But I first give my employees a bonus and recalculate and see where I'm at and then determine do I need to give myself a bonus, or does my money need to stay in the company? You really need to have a lot of respect for that. Don't start taking from the company right away because believe me, bad times will come.

In a business, things may be going really, really, really good and then one project changes everything for you. One project where you're losing money, losing money, you just can't bring it to closure, starts dipping into your extra reserve. And the extra reserve should be the larger, larger contracts; you go to finance it so another small businesses do this. They start making money and they start taking it. Then they don't have money to finance the next project and then they close.

The majority of the businesses close. The majority of businesses don't make it. They really end up shutting the doors. I've seen a lot of my friends go through that because they didn't really understand. They go out there right away and they want to buy the expensive car, the real expensive house. You really have to wait until you can really, really breathe and sleep real good at night and say, okay, now, I can start doing these things.

Under the 8A program, it's an 8A certification, you're not allowed to grow, your personal net worth has to stay within a certain amount. You also have to abide by those rules so that you can stay in the program. They do in intentionally. Remember, this is training, a development program. The reason that they force

business owners to follow these rules is because that is what makes you successful.

Truly, those that are not successful are some that can start taking, taking from themselves. It's almost like when you're taking from yourself, leave it with your company, it's for your employees. It's to be able to fund that next project. It's to be able to make investments on equipment, your infrastructure.

I think you have to be very conservative and expect very little in the beginning. It takes a lot of work, but just do things right. I think that is very, very, very, very important. Do things right and pray to God every single day.

AP: Going back to the certification, are you a minority-owned?

YD: Yes, woman-owned, minority-owned. I'm a 100 owner of Mirador Enterprises.

AP: Did you face any challenges as a Hispanic business owner here in El Paso?

YD: Actually, the challenges are a little harder here in El Paso. Golly, it's terrible for me to say, but it really is. Sometimes it is harder on each other, when you go out there and market somewhere else, to be very, very honest with you.

I try not to do that, I try to make opportunities for small businesses, minority-owned, Hispanic, black, whatever. Small businesses, we just have to truly just understand that we were there at one time, looking for that first opportunity. Sometimes small businesses are just looking for information; they're not all looking for that contract. They're just looking for information to know where to go.

Did I answer the question?

AP: Well, I was wondering if there was anything in specific that you would want to share, maybe an example of how you've had to overcome challenges as a Hispanic business owner, or if there's anything that you remember specifically that you've seen a Hispanic owner?

YD: I'm going to be very honest with you, I really have not. I really have not had bad experiences. I mean overall, I've been very, very fortunate. People have really opened their doors, I'm very aggressive now. Sometimes customers will open their doors

because it's me again, I'm here again, do you have five minutes?
Do you have two minutes?

I'm just very persistent. You have to be very, very persistent. But I haven't had nightmare stories; I know there's people who have. I've been very fortunate, if you approach people right, people are willing to talk to and give you information. I think it also comes with you have to build a reputation for ourselves first. You have to be out there networking, seeing people.

Knowing that I've seen her before, I know her. She's an okay person. She's just not someone coming out of nowhere asking for information or contracts. You can't just go out there; you've got to build a name for yourself first. And it's not easy. It's really who you know, sometimes.

Surround yourself with people that know people because it's always this person introduces you to this person or gives you a tip, go talk to this person who knows what you need to do to position yourself on this contract to get information on opportunities that are coming down the road.

But no, no bad experiences, thank God.

AP: So is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd want to talk about before we conclude this interview? Where do you see yourself in ten years? That's my last question.

YD: In ten years, I really hope that I will be positioned to retire. No, that's terrible. I hope to God that I can make it through this rough economy. I know things are about to get a little worse before they get any better. Hopefully I see myself at least a \$20 million company, \$25 million. I'll be very disappointed if I can't get there because I think I have the experience and the capabilities to do it.

I'm going to have to do with teaming partners. And it's really not about money for myself, it's not about personal growth, it's about business growth, creating jobs here in the community. And also leaving something for my son. One of the things that drive me every day is that I say, I really want to leave something for my son. What if I can leave my company for my son to take over or for some family members to take over? I will be very, very happy with that.

But I can't stay at the level that I'm at, I've definitely got to take the company to the next level. I'd be very happy that in ten years I can

take it to \$20-\$30 million. Let's talk in ten years. If anything, I hope to God I'm around in ten years.

AP: Well, thank you so much.

YD: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

AP: Well, thank you.

YD: I hope I answered all your questions.

AP: This concludes the interview with Ms. Yolanda Diaz.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 117 minutes