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Oral History Project of Colton, CA - 05/2/14

Dr. Rivera: Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Tom Rivera and we're here this afternoon at the Pfau Library at Cal State San Bernardino. [Mr. Frank Acosta is the videographer,] and we're on the 4th floor of the library. We are continuing our oral history of South Colton – and our guest this afternoon is Mr. Charles Cervantes.

Charlie, do you mind if I call you Charlie?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, please.

Dr. Rivera: Charlie, welcome, and thank you very much for being with us this afternoon.

Mr. Cervantes: It's an honor to be here.

Dr. Rivera: Totally appreciate that, and we have your wife, Cynthia, here with us, and she's gonna try [to add] anything that you have to the discussion.

Now, your Grandfather, Jesus Cervantes, was one of the few businessmen that we had in South Colton. Tell us, when did he start his store in South Colton?

Approximately, when did he start his store?

Mr. Cervantes: You-know, [after] finding some kind of old paperwork it seemed like it was about 1938. The property where the store was located on was 7th Street in South Colton's. Then it moved to its 8th Street location I would speculate about 1940.

Dr. Rivera: So, *mas o menos*...

Mr. Cervantes: 1938 is when it started...

Dr. Rivera: And the location was 'M' and...

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Mr. Cervantes: 'M' and 8th Street or La Cadena.

Dr. Rivera: On the northeast corner?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Okay. I see you have a picture of the store.

Mr. Cervantes: Yes I do.

Dr. Rivera: What I'd like to do with all the pictures that you have, Charlie, is perhaps you can let us borrow them, and then we can scan them and include them later on into our conversation this afternoon.

Mr. Cervantes: Sure. It's got my Grandfather's store, it's got a delicatessen that my Father used to own, and then Brill's Store – you-know, well known to the community...

Dr. Rivera: Brill's shoe store, clothing store...

Mr. Cervantes: Their very first location across from Valley College; and then the second location was right there on a property that my Grandfather owned; and they were there for a number of years.

Dr. Rivera: Next to Brill's Shoe Store was your house.

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, where we lived...

Dr. Rivera: You-know, Colton back in the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s was quite a busy little area.

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Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes it was. It was a Hub City.

Dr. Rivera: They called it Hub City because the railroads met there: Santa Fe and Southern Pacific. Santa Fe went north and south, and Southern Pacific went east and west – so that's why they called it the Hub City. We were extremely fortunate because the freeway went through there also: Highway 99 from Los Angeles to Palm Springs --it was a busy area.

Now, tell me about your Grandfather: when did he come to Colton?

Mr. Cervantes: You know what, it had to be in the 1900s somewhere there; and he met my Grandmother here in the United States. He worked at the cement plant like a lot of people from South Colton did.

Dr. Rivera: The Portland Cement Plant in Colton?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: What years? Do you remember what years?

Mr. Cervantes: This must have been maybe in the 30s.

They started the grocery business, I guess they saw a need for that. The idea came from my Grandmother's brother; I don't know his name but he had the idea that he gave my Grandmother about opening up a grocery store. I don't know what her educational background was, but she could read and write, and my Grandfather's [education] was very limited – [this was my] Father's father. As I was told, she was the one that kind of taught my Grandfather to read and to write.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about your Grandmother, where was she born in Mexico?

Mr. Cervantes: She was born in Durango, Mexico.

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Dr. Rivera: Do you have an idea of where your Grandfather came from?

Mr. Cervantes: I have no idea. I'm sure I heard it, but I just don't remember.

Dr. Rivera: You said both of them met here in Colton?

Mr. Cervantes: They met here in the United States but not so much in Colton.

Dr. Rivera: Do you know when they got married?

Mr. Cervantes: That would have been somewhere in the early 30s.

Dr. Rivera: Your Grandfather worked for Portland Cement, and your Grandma said, look, we have to open up a store?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes, it was kind of her idea. I didn't know this until later on in my life.

So they went from 7th Street to 298 South 8th Street or La Cadena, which is what it's known as now. It was a thriving store. They had what I thought was a huge truck, maybe a two-ton truck, to go into Los Angeles and buy wholesale groceries. They would go on a weekly basis, I think it was.

This was when those little stores flourished. They had a pretty diverse population who used to come in. My Grandfather's brothers worked there [in the store].

Dr. Rivera: So it was kind of a family business then?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, it was a family business.

Dr. Rivera: How many of your Grandfather's brothers worked at the store?

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Mr. Cervantes: He had Donato, Pilo, and his other brother Carmen worked at the cement plant. He had a sister, Shirley, she didn't work the store.

Dr. Rivera: Okay. When they opened the store, were just the brothers working the store or did your Dad and your Uncle work at the store?

Mr. Cervantes: They all worked at the store. Then World War II broke out; so everyone was drafted somewhere in 1942, 1943.

Dr. Rivera: So tell me about your Dad and your Uncles? Your Dad's name was Carlos?

Mrs. Cervantes: Carlos, your Dad, was born in 1918. Your Grandparents were married in 1916 or 1917. You said [earlier] the 1930s.

Mr. Cervantes: Okay, thank you. I was thinking about...

Dr. Rivera: (He talks to Frank, the cameraman, about the correction) Correction, your Grandparents were married in 1916 [or 1917] and Charlie's Father was born in 1918. He had 2 brothers, who were the brothers?

Mr. Cervantes: My Father was the oldest, and there was my Uncle Tony, and my Uncle Ralph was kind of the baby of the family. My Father was drafted into the Army Air Corps; and he had met my Mother in the grocery store. My Mother grew up in Highgrove, which was Riverside County just on the vey lip of Riverside County.

Dr. Rivera: Your Mom from Highgrove came to shop for groceries at your Grandfather's store?

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Mr. Cervantes: Right, right.

Dr. Rivera: Your Mom and your Father saw each other – and that was it!

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, and my Mother's father was very, very strict.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: They had to kind of do it on the side – meaning, those were the years, right?

So they were married in 1943, May 16th; and then I was born July of 1944.

[My Father] was stationed here in the area – they used to have a lot of military bases in the area: Redlands, and I forget what other city.

Dr. Rivera: Where did he work?

Mr. Cervantes: He worked the store, and after he got out of the military he worked the store, again. Then he opened up a delicatessen and a Mexican restaurant.

Dr. Rivera: Next to the store?

Mr. Cervantes: Next to the store, yes. He ran that for just a number of years. [Then it was a matter of] either you grow or you get overwhelmed by other restaurants. So he closed down the restaurant and he worked at a liquor store there in South Colton. [The name of it was Al's Liquor Store... I mean, [that liquor store] was there for forever in South Colton. From there, he went to Kaiser Steel in 1959 until they retired somewhere around 1983-84.

Dr. Rivera: Well, you-know, I do remember your Dad working at your Grandfather's store, and I must have been about a 4th or 5th grader. My parents used to shop at your store. [I remember one time] your Father buttonholed me and said: Would you like to sell magazines and newspapers for me? We have them here at the store. [I want

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you to] grab your bike and go around the neighborhood and sell the newspapers and magazines, and I'll give you a percentage of what you sell.

So I did that for your Dad when I was a 4th or 5th grader.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: Wow!

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, that was kind of interesting.

Now tell me, was it hard to get the store going?

Mr. Cervantes: I would imagine it had to be kind of pretty labor-intensive at the very beginning just to set everything up. But I never saw that kind of hard work – I just saw the grocery store just flourish. It was one of the hubs in South Colton; it was right there in the main the drag. There was a lot of traffic, a lot of people...

Dr. Rivera: I guess your Grandfather knew [what] kind of products he could sell at the store that would be popular with the residents?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, oh yeah, with kind of the local population.

I remember, vividly, Christmas because they used to have Christmas trees out in front of the store: 20-30 of them, and people would shop for their Christmas trees...

As a child, this store was huge, but as I grew up—as an adult, I thought: Gee! This was a small place.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well, you had a *carnicería* in the store?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: You sold *carne molida* (ground beef)?

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Mr. Cervantes: Yeah – oh-yeah.

Dr. Rivera: I remember buying bologna from the store, and also the weenies (hot dogs). You had some steaks?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yeah, it was kind of full service...

Dr. Rivera: How about vegetables, did you sell vegetables?

Mr. Cervantes: Oh yeah, we had everything. As a matter of fact, they had a cross-section of just a lot of different racial groups who used to shop there.

Stater Brothers came on the scene around, I think, the middle 50s; but for the first 2 years, my Grandfather's store kind of out sold Stater Brothers.

Dr. Rivera: You're kidding.

Mr. Cervantes: No, for the first 2 years. And then, of course, Stater Brothers took off. My Father told me that...

Dr. Rivera: Right, right. That was a popular place.

Charlie, what made it popular? Because you had businesses that opened and businesses that flourished, and some that didn't. What made it so popular?

Mr. Cervantes: You-know, it was like an episode from a few decades ago, "Cheers" – "...where everybody knows your name..." – it was kind of like that only in a grocery store. I mean, everybody knew everybody's name [including the] kids, you-know. [You could go to the store and ask for] a pound of bologna – and say, I'll pay you later, and they will put it on your account.

It was a real extension of peoples families, sometimes people wouldn't come to shop, they'd just come in to say, hello. It was like a grocery store and community center.

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My Uncle and my Father were very friendly with everybody.

Father Valencia, you-know, he was one of the icons of South Colton.

Dr. Rivera: Right, right.

Mr. Cervantes: Back then there were a lot of, what they called, hobos – that used to get off the train there.

Dr. Rivera: That's right – the train was close by.

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: And they would get off there... and maybe transfer north or south because most railroads were there.

Mr. Cervantes: Wherever they were headed – they knew Father Valencia. Father Valencia had a reputation of helping to feed these folks because he would go to my Grandfather's store about once a week, or as needed, with about 20 or 30 men in tow, and my Grandfather would feed everybody sandwiches, and in whatever they needed to kind of sustain themselves. This happened on a regular basis; and this was kind of the first time that I saw [my Grandfather & Father Valencia] taking care of our fellow-man.

Dr. Rivera: So it was service, direct service...?

Mr. Cervantes: It was direct service; and, you-know, you have a reputation that's out there.

Dr. Rivera: The friendliness...

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Mr. Cervantes: Friendliness, yes.

Dr. Rivera: And the products that people needed was there?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes. And there was credit, people had credit [accounts]...

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about credit. I know what it is but, would people go there and buy products?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, they would buy products, and there was a little box where they had your name... I don't even know if there was a credit limit, or not. But if people would come in and if maybe payday was too far away, they would [write down] your name and the amount and give you a receipt, and we'd hang onto the receipt. Then, when payday came you would pay [what you owe per the receipts].

When the store closed around, I think, 1955-56, or so, somewhere in that area, I remember my Grandfather took me around to collect some old bills. Unfortunately, he wasn't very successful.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: Peoples memory kind of disappeared...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: That was one of my questions on my list.

Did people pay regularly?

Mr. Cervantes: They paid regularly. When the store was open they paid regularly.

Dr. Rivera: If payday was on Fridays, they would come in and take care of their bill?

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Mr. Cervantes: There was never those issues that I can recall when I was kind of in and out of the store. But once the store closed, people's minds got fuzzy as far as what they owed.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: And you said the store closed about maybe in 55-56?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, about 55-56, around there. By this time, my Father had the restaurant going. My Uncle Tony was working for the State, I think; and my Uncle Ralph was working for MACCO.

Dr. Rivera: MACCO was located in South Colton.

Mr. Cervantes: So the sons (my Father and Uncles) kind of drifted after the war. But my Grandfather's brother still worked there [at the store] for a while. Everybody [else] aged out.

Dr. Rivera: [Earlier] you said Father Valencia would bring the hobos to your Grandfather's store, and your Grandfather would provide food for them. Did your Grandfather participate in the Fiestas Patrias?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes we did. One year we had a float, at least one year that I can remember. I remember we were up there in little tables... [Anyway,] yes, he participated in events...

Dr. Rivera: Fiestas Patrias was a parade?

Mr. Cervantes: Oh-yeah, it was a big time parade. Whatever they have now is very small scale. But back then, it was like South Colton closed down for these events.

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Dr. Rivera: They closed down the 8th Street / La Cadena?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, yeah they had to. And like I said, at least one year we had [a float] because we had a truck, you-know, to deal with the grocery delivery, and whatever, so they made it a float. So we were in the float along with some of my cousins.

Dr. Rivera: And the float paraded down La Cadena?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Where did the parade start? Do you remember?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, I don't [remember] where it started but I know it ended where I think there's a 7-eleven right there...

Dr. Rivera: Yes, on 'N' and La Cadena?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, yeah. It's right there as you're going south it's on the right-hand side. Actually, that's where my friends and I used to play baseball there in that lot for 2 or 3 years – it was hotter than heck but we were out there playing baseball in August and September.

Dr. Rivera: Why did it end there? Was it because that was the place where they had all the activities?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, they had different activities there. Small carnival-type groups would come through there...

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Dr. Rivera: And the stage for the Queen...

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, the stage for the Queen. It was an area that the community used for just different diverse events...

Dr. Rivera: In the parade did they have bands and marching groups?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, it was kind of your regular type of parade, festivities, Boy Scouts marching... I mean, no one ever got told 'no' – everybody was in the parade.

Dr. Rivera: So it was Troop 45 that did the marching?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, I mean everybody looked forward to it, it was big. If you were going to be out of town, you would cancel your plans if you needed to be there.

Dr. Rivera: Did they close one of the streets next to 'N' Street where they had the Fiestas Patrias dance?

Mr. Cervantes: Oh yeah.

I don't know how they did all the planning, but it's like South Colton took over that weekend or those days, and there was a lot of cooperation from city officials and law enforcement...

It was just a very festive time...

We used to have those eggs...

Dr. Rivera: *Cascarones*

Mr. Cervantes: *Cascarones*, yes... you save the shells and you put some confetti in there, and then you break it on peoples' heads.

(Laughter)

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Mr. Cervantes: There was a lot of that going on and we had a great time.

Dr. Rivera: How long did the Fiestas Patrias go on? Was it September 15th and 16th, for 2 days?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah. You-know, it started to kind of die out or it got scaled out probably in the late 50s, I think.

Dr. Rivera: For 2 days it was a celebration of the Mexican Independence from Spain.

Mr. Cervantes: *El Grito* [is Independence Day].

Dr. Rivera: Besides the Fiestas Patrias, Charlie, [was your Father or Grandfather] involved in any other community activities? Didn't we have a Chamber of Commerce back then, or any organizations like?

Mr. Cervantes: My Grandfather, I don't recall if he did, but my Father belonged to the Exchange Club in Colton, it was a business organization. He was in it for a number of years, and this was a club that was on the north-side of Colton. I remember they used to have Christmas parties for dads and sons, and I must have been about maybe 5 or 6 [years old], and for about 2 or 3 three years running there was always a Christmas party. I remember being taken to this event [because] it was my Father's club that he belonged to.

My Grandfather, per se, was too busy working 12-18 hours a day.

Dr. Rivera: What were the store hours?

Mr. Cervantes: I remember a couple of times I said, I want to get up with you and be at the store—and my God—it was dark when he opened the store. It had to be about 5 or 5:30 a.m., I mean, the doors were open and there wasn't anybody out there, but he

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had the store wide open. He scaled back little bit in the latter part of the 50s because he used to go to a church in San Bernardino, Our Lady of Guadalupe, because they had a 5:30 a.m. mass. So my Dad used to go, I used to get up and go with him, and my Grandfather would go to church and then come back and open up the store as soon as possible.

Dr. Rivera: So they were quite religious?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes, yes...

Dr. Rivera: Because the church in San Bernardino must have been a half-an-hour away?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, I think, it's the one that's currently there...

He wasn't a show off but he went to church on a weekly basis, as did my Grandmother.

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, you mentioned that your Grandfather worked long hours?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Did he take any time off on Saturdays and Sundays?

Mr. Cervantes: Finally he did, but in those years he was always working...

In the beginning of the 50s, he used to take me to the, I think it was called the Temple Theatre, in San Bernardino. They knocked it down – it was next to a restaurant called the Rice Bowl.

Dr. Rivera: I remember that.

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Mr. Cervantes: On Sundays, I think, they used to kind of force him to take the afternoon off. So he used to take me to the movies on Sunday afternoons, and that's the only time that I can recall that he ever took any time off.

Dr. Rivera: Where did your Dad and your Grandfather live? Did they live on 'M' just next to the store?

Mr. Cervantes: There were apartments over the store, so they lived in one of the apartments; and they had 3 other apartments that they rented out.

Dr. Rivera: I thought they had a house next to the store on 'M' Street, was that your Uncle's?

Mr. Cervantes: The house was my Father's – that's where I grew up at. (He references a picture to explain the layout or structure) There was the grocery store, there was a delicatessen, there was a Brill's Store, and next to Brill's was a white house – and that's where I grew up.

Dr. Rivera: What about on the other side of the store, Charlie?

Mr. Cervantes: Oh, towards the back of the store is where my Grandfather's brother lived, Carmen Cervantes.

Dr. Rivera: Okay, I was confusing Carmen with your Grandfather.

Mr. Cervantes: No, my Grandfather lived above the store and his brother lived behind the store.

Dr. Rivera: Did they always live above the store?

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Mr. Cervantes: Yes. Again, to me [as a youngster] it was such a big place – and then as an adult you go in there and, wow!

Dr. Rivera: Well, they had a balcony where they could watch the parade...

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, we used to have friends up there, and my wife, Cynthia, was up there enjoying the parade. I mean, we had everybody because we had the best view in South Colton.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: My parents used to have a lot of parties, and they had a patio put in...

Dr. Rivera: Where was this?

Mr. Cervantes: This was at our house in the backyard. There was a special patio that was put in, a special bar, a barbecue, and one of the things that got left behind was my little hand prints. When they put in the barbecue, they got my 4 or 5 year old hand prints.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: Before we sold the house I think I took a photo...

Dr. Rivera: It seems that the Cervantes' owned that corner...

Mr. Cervantes: Well, we did.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: You said you were born and raised there?

Mr. Cervantes: I was born in Riverside, and I was raised in South Colton.

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On my Father's side of the family there were 3 brothers; on my mother's side of the family there were 5 brothers; so in retrospect, I'm glad they kept me, you-know, because another boy in the family... I think they wanted a girl.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: But I always felt safe in South Colton; and the family on both sides were just beautiful.

Dr. Rivera: So it was very secure? The neighborhood was secure? The family provided a good and secure system?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, they worked hard. My parents sacrificed a lot for us to go to private school.

Dr. Rivera: Where did you go to private school?

Mr. Cervantes: I went to Immaculate Conception. St. Bernardine's had a great school back then. I started kindergarten at Wilson School.

At home everybody just spoke Spanish. So here I start first grade at St. Bernardine's, and I think I was the only Mexicano in the whole school back then.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: And I didn't speak English... From there, I went to Our Lady of Guadalupe in San Bernardino... [I learned English and became bilingual].

They opened up a school in Colton, Immaculate Conception, so I started going there in the second grade. I graduated from there in 1959.

There was the boys [Catholic] high school, Aquinas [High School,] and maybe I mentioned it before, there were 3 Silesian priests [who] served with honor. So we had that family characteristic, let's say, so I went to Aquinas High School. [During my] first year it was just boys back then, it was very strict, and I didn't want to go back. But my Father said you're going back...

(Laughter)

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Mr. Cervantes: You didn't argue, you said, okay.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: After Aquinas High School, you went to Cal Poly (California State Polytechnic University, Pomona)?

Mr. Cervantes: After Aquinas I went to Valley College (San Bernardino Valley College). I wasn't the best of students back then; and I just didn't know what I was going to do at Valley. I ended up going one semester, I ended up going another semester, and then I flunked out of Valley College.

I went to work for one of my Uncles who owned an electrical wholesale house in Montclair. He had married into the Luna family, [which is] my mother's side of the family. [While working for him,] I used to drive a truck delivering the construction materials to different sites in Orange County.

After that job, I left to go in the Navy, and as you well know, in the 60s the war was heating up on Vietnam.

Going back a little ways, there used to be this movie theater: The New Colton Theatre, and I used to go with my cousins to the matinees to see all these terrific movies: Lewis and Martin; Abbott and Costello. [I remember] there was one matinee when I saw this movie titled, "Men of the Fighting Lady", it was about an aircraft carrier with – Walter Pidgeon and Van Johnson – and said, wow! There were these shiny ships and all these planes... Well, little did I realize that ten years later – I got assigned to that ship in the Navy.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: I met the ship in the Philippines, after doing boot camp in San Diego, and my first glimpse of the ship was: That doesn't look like the ship I saw in the movie. It doesn't shine as much.

(Laughter)

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Dr. Rivera: So you didn't see Van Johnson on the ship?

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, I didn't see him... this was [an actual] war ship! It's not supposed to sparkle.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Let me get back to your Grandfather. You-know, your grandfather was not ostentatious, you-know, he didn't spend [a lot of] money, he didn't have a fancy car, he didn't have a fancy house, he was just a very frugal person. But he was a very giving person in terms of providing food and providing service, and also being a good Grandfather.

Mr. Cervantes: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: So, did he save his money? Or did he invest his money?

Mr. Cervantes: He saved his money, and I think that's one of the characteristics that I picked up from him.

My father should've picked up a little bit...

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: But I picked up, I think, a lot of the characteristics from him as far as saving and working hard. He was not a fancy guy...

Dr. Rivera: No, no.

Mr. Cervantes: I've heard stories from the grandchildren of people who used to shop [at the store], and I didn't know this, you-know. [For instance,] I'm at a New Year's party, and somebody knows who I am, and they start talking about my Grandfather – that he used to not only [give store] credit to people, but if somebody needed a loan for

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an important thing – that he would loan [money with probably no interest] but, you-know, just pay him back. He would loan money to people – not for a want but for a need, in their particular family. I never knew that he was like maybe a local bank, I guess. I'm not saying it was to a great extent but...

Dr. Rivera: But if he knew people were in need...

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, like I said, there were no frills.

My Grandmother, she liked to shop.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: Whatever my Grandfather was saving, my dear-beloved Grandmother loved to shop. She used to go into Los Angeles with my Mother, and go to Macy's, Clifton's Cafeteria...

Dr. Rivera: Yes. I remember your Grandpa, on many occasions, would say hello to us and give us a little piece of candy.

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah. He was just a very happy and joyous type... When he was ill and in the last year of his life, I remember the priest who did the eulogy, he said, you-know, he was always smiling, he always had a positive disposition.

Dr. Rivera: Did he get together with other business people in the community?

Mr. Cervantes: He seemed to know a lot about his competitors because there were a lot of grocery stores.

Dr. Rivera: Well, Rodriguez' [store] was down the block from you.

Mr. Cervantes: And there was Martinez – they had a bakery on 7th Street, I think it was...

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Dr. Rivera: La Tiendita next to the park in South Colton. Navarro had a grocery store...

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, yeah.

He never had any harsh words for anybody; and he knew these folks really well, you-know, from some of the events in South Colton...

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned to me that your Dad was in the service, your Uncle Tony was in the service, and your Uncle Ralph was in the service.

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes.

Dr. Rivera: Now, during that period up until '53 when there was 'Brown versus the Board of Education' to integrate the schools in Colton, prior to that, South Colton was a segregated community. Then, in '53 they combined Wilson Junior High School with Roosevelt Junior High School – and they became Colton Junior High School, they integrated the communities. That's when the community started getting together... When your Dad and your Uncles came back from fighting World War II, did they get involved in activities like: voting, running for office, buying property in North Colton—where we were prohibited from buying property?

I remember your Uncle Ralph wanted to buy a house in North Colton, and he was refused, he was denied from buying that house. So what impact did the war have on South Colton?

Mr. Cervantes: Well, I'm just [going to move] back to my Dad, and then I'll talk about my Uncle Ralph.

My Father ran for office in 1950, and [he was involved in] progressive leadership as a native son of Colton for community progress (he holds up his Father's membership card/certificate of the leadership organization) – we can show this later. He was involved to be a city councilman. I remember as a kid of about 6 years old – the stories

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that I've heard from people... Some of our own folks in South Colton didn't even support my Father. [He was considered as] being too much of a gringo; and unfortunately, he didn't come close to winning anything.

[During the '40s or '50s, folks] had a certain boundary, I guess, and you couldn't work in a political office because you weren't going to get supported by your own group, regardless of your progressive ideas. Of course, I didn't know any of this, but later in life I was told that. I never solicited this information but people just kind of told me how things worked.

Back then, at the same time, my Uncle Ralph was trying to buy a house, and I think his kids still own it. [Anyway,] I don't know all the details other than it took a lot. He just wasn't wanted in the community [of North Colton].

Dr. Rivera: The house was located across the street from the junior high school?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes, exactly. They just didn't want him in the neighborhood. [I was just a child at that time,] so I don't know all the back-and-forth that kind of went on – other than his racial group was not wanted in the north side.

I never felt the stain of that when I was growing up. If I was there, I guess, maybe it went over my head.

Dr. Rivera: But for him, it must have been a very trying, stressful type of experience.

Mr. Cervantes: It was more so because he was wounded [in the war], he was a Purple Heart veteran, and I have to say it's one of the things that ruined his life – being shot during World War II. He was able to work, then later went on disability; but it was such an injury that he always had to be careful and needed medical care. So to have been in World War II [and a] Purple Heart recipient, and then to have this happen – that he couldn't live on the north side – had to be a double-whammy, I think. And I can only imagine how it was.

Dr. Rivera: But, you-know, your Uncle Ralph was a fighter.

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Mr. Cervantes: Oh-my-God, yeah.

Dr. Rivera: He was a fighter—he never gave up the battle.

Mr. Cervantes: I've had a lot of people in my life that supported me to be a college graduate: my parents, [and my] uncles on my Mother's side, but it was my Uncle Ralph who was always there...

Dr. Rivera: How long did the battle last? Because he finally bought the house.

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, he finally bought the house, but I don't know what the timeline was. But it wasn't a short situation, I think it was long, you-know.

Mr. Acosta: Where was the house located?

Mr. Cervantes: On Terrace Ave. and Bonita.

Dr. Rivera: Was it a corner house, Cynthia?

Mr. Cervantes: It was a corner house and it was a second house.

Dr. Rivera: But your Uncle was tenacious.

Mr. Cervantes: Oh-my-God! Yes, yes he was.

Dr. Rivera: I remember him going through that ordeal, and he said: I'm not giving up the fight because I won the privilege by going in the service and serving my country; and there's no reason for people to treat me like this—like a second class citizen.

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Mr. Cervantes: Yeah. I have his card from his obituary, [and it reads:] "...a man of great character whose judgment, humor, and friendly spirit brought out the finest in those around him." And he had a sense of humor that was out of this world; and I picked up some of his characteristics, I think, in my life... and his wit, even though his life was very challenging a times.

Dr. Rivera: He was smart and he was articulate.

Mr. Cervantes: Oh-my-God! Yes. He could lead you into a swamp and say, we'll be safe.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: He was one of the first pioneers that led the charge to buy property in North Colton.

Mr. Cervantes: I'm sure he did. I'm sure he kind of set the groundwork, you-know, as far as what the law was... [He didn't have the kind of attitude that] they owed it to him, but he sacrificed a lot for this country, and all he wanted was a house over here.

Dr. Rivera: He wanted a house of his choosing.

Mr. Cervantes: Right, yes.

Dr. Rivera: Where he can bring his wife and his family.

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, a simple request.

Dr. Rivera: You-know, getting back to Colton being a safe community, we were very lucky in Colton, in particular, South Colton because the Portland Cement Company

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gave our grandfathers and our fathers jobs. So there was a stable population that worked there.

Secondly, the PFE (Pacific Fruit Express), the railroad provided jobs for our grandparents and parents during the 30s, 40s, and 50s.

Then we had the citrus industry provide lots of jobs for our people too because we had 2 crops: we had the Valencia crops and we had the Navel crops. When we were through with the Valencia crops then the Navel crops kicked-in, and that was the agriculture, of course. So that gave us a stable community to help, not only your Grandfather's grocery store thrive, but also the other stores that we mentioned. So it was a very stable community.

Did you mention your Dad worked at the PFE, also?

Mr. Cervantes: No, it was my Uncle Tony. He used to have a bicycle... it was like about a mile and a half, or so, [ride to work]... I remember all these cars... and him on his bicycle...

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: I don't know how long he worked, but later on in his life after he got married, I think he used to work out of Camp Pendleton; he used to paint the barracks. He lived in San Bernardino, and he would meet somebody in the city of Perris – and carpool in to Camp Pendleton.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, that's a long drive.

Mr. Cervantes: He did that for over 20 years.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned that your Grandfather retired in 54, 55, or 56? Did he sell the store, or did one of your Uncles take it over, or anybody in the family take it over?

Mr. Cervantes: He kept the property... [But] I remember the day that one of my friends said, gee, you-know your Grandfather's store doesn't have as big of stock on the shelves as they used to. Well, I hadn't noticed that -- that's when the store started

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slowing down as far as business; and that's when I began to notice, you-know. Suddenly, instead of 20 cans of stewed tomatoes they only had maybe 10 cans. I wish [my friend] hadn't said [that to me], you-know, I wish the reality hadn't [been] recognized that the store wasn't as busy as it used to be...

Dr. Rivera: What led to that, Charlie? I mean, was [it because] people [were] able to shop at North Colton? Or was it that people had transportation so they could go to other places? Or was it store ownership—that your Grandfather was not there anymore?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah, you-know, I think it was just [things were] changing – that the north side opened up a little more for everybody; and I think instead of always having to work at the cement plant, or [other menial jobs], let's say, people started to kind of expand. It wasn't just my Grandfather's store, [but] it was the other stores also – that saw a decline. Of course, Stater Brothers was a gangbuster, and I think it was a change in the demographic. It was going to happen one way or another. My Grandfather could have been there every day, but things were just changing...

Dr. Rivera: It became a different Colton.

Mr. Cervantes: It became a different Colton.

We owned the property up until about maybe 8 years, or so ago. After he retired, somebody else leased it; and then he had it for a few years. [Later,] somebody else leased it, again. Finally, it got leased out to another family (inaudible) around 1957 or 1958.

Dr. Rivera: You sold the property when?

Mr. Cervantes: We sold the property maybe about 10 years ago.

It was kind of bittersweet to sell the property that had been in my family for such a long time. I still drive by there – I was there just a couple of weeks or so ago. I had a dentist

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[appointment] and my dentist is still in Colton. I said, well, I think I'll stop by the store and drive through the neighborhood to see how things have changed, or remained the same.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about the most impressionable, wonderful moment that you had while you were there on the corner of La Cadena and 'M' Street?

Mr. Cervantes: I think I'd have to say it was December – it was festive, there were Christmas trees out in front of the store, and there was a new life in many communities that occurred. And everybody was always kind of upbeat, usually when they came into the store. It was such a pleasant time of the year anyway, for most people. But I can still see those Christmas trees out there.

Of course, las fiestas that we used to have in September – that was also a lot of fun right there. You-know, a lot of the excitement [such as] my Father getting ready for-this-and-that. So those would be two of the highlights...

Dr. Rivera: Now tell me, Charlie, you're Dad, Carlos, who your Mom married, they had how many children?

Mr. Cervantes: There were 3 of us: Me, Irene, and Mary; and we were all raised in South Colton. Irene lives in Highland, and Mary lives in Redlands.

Dr. Rivera: So they're close by? And you live in Redlands, also?

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned that you graduated from Cal Poly Pomona?

Mr. Cervantes: Cal Poly Pomona, yes.

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Dr. Rivera: And after you graduated Cal Poly Pomona you worked for the County of San Bernardino?

Mr. Cervantes: Right.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me what you did at the County of San Bernardino?

Mr. Cervantes: I started in 1974, and I started working for the probation department, juvenile hall...

Dr. Rivera: Juvenile hall, who did you meet in juvenile hall?

Mr. Cervantes: (Laughter) Well, I met a lot of people... I met my wife (Laughter).

Dr. Rivera: You met your wife in juvenile hall?

Mr. Cervantes: Yeah...

Dr. Rivera: Was she doing time there?

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: (Laughter) Yes... (Laughter). Yeah, she burned the potatoes so they gave her 3 months.

Dr. Rivera: How long did you work for the county?

Mr. Cervantes: I worked [over] 30 years. I worked in juvenile hall for about 5 years, and I met my wife about the second year, she was a part-timer. From there I went to the public health department working with adolescents, again, and I was there from '79 to '87. From '87 to about '94 I went with children services, I was a child abuse

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investigator for about 5 years. And then the last 10 years of my career with the county, I used to train and recruit foster and adoptive parents, and set up big events at Cal State. I used to organize and plan appreciation picnics for foster parents – 500 foster parents and kids out here on campus, on Sundays. Simultaneous to working for the county, I started the school that had thrown me on the side here [at Cal State], for academic reasons. I came back as an instructor, an adjunct instructor.

Dr. Rivera: So you showed them.

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: I showed them, yeah! I had a very special value, if you try to disqualify me academically, I'll come back and be an instructor. So I came from the low end to the high to be an instructor...

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: I've been an adjunct instructor at Valley (San Bernardino Valley College) for about 15 years.

Dr. Rivera: When did you retire?

Mr. Cervantes: I retired in 2005, but I still teach at Valley, and I also train foster and adoptive parents [because they need a certain number] of hours to maintain their license. [This program] is independent of the county, there's a different division at Valley – so I have about 10 training sessions...

Dr. Rivera: So you're still pretty busy?

Mr. Cervantes: Still busy, yes.

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Dr. Rivera: Well, Charlie, we're coming to the end of our interview. We've spent almost an hour together. Is there anything that I didn't cover that you would like to add to our conversation?

I see that you have some pictures...

Mr. Cervantes: Just to tie up some loose ends. (He holds up some photos) In 1949 we had a snow storm that hit South Colton, and that's 'A' Street kind of right behind me in this photo.

From about age 3, 4 or 5 – I was a ring boy in about 4 or 5 weddings; and here I am in a military wedding and they fitted me in an air force uniform.

Dr. Rivera: You were a ring boy for how many weddings?

Mr. Cervantes: 4 or 5, yeah...

Dr. Rivera: Is that because they were trying to butter up your Grandfather?

(Laughter)

Mr. Cervantes: Some years back, about 15 years, or so ago, it took 3 phone calls to get in touch with me about one of the weddings I had been in – they were having their 50th wedding anniversary and they wanted to know if I would attend. It was going to be in Colton at the Colton VFW Hall – so I said, sure I'll be there! After 50 years you found me. So they had a professional photographer and they took a photo of the people who still survived (he shows the photo). As you can see I'm the tallest one there – and as we were lining up I said: last time wasn't I the shortest one? Because I was about 4 or 5 years old.

But that's certainly something that very few people know about me being a ring boy.

Dr. Rivera: You have a couple of other photos there.

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Mr. Cervantes: Here's a photo of my Mother and her registration card, she was born in Mexico; and here's a picture of my Grandmother, my Father's mother; and, of course, a picture of my Uncle Ralph.

[When I was] in the Navy, I had gone to Aquinas in San Bernardino, and there was a family in South Colton by the name of Dela Rosa. So I'm on this Navy ship with 4,000 guys, and my division has about 100 guys. Who reports on the ship [, to my surprise,] is a guy from Colton, Saul Dela Rosa, and I never knew him because I was going to [one high school] while he was going to another high school – and [on this Navy ship] is where we met. Here's a photo of us on this ship... and we had become the best of friends, we went overseas together one year. He got out [of the Navy] about a year, or so, before I did. But of all the surprises in life: 2 guys from South Colton on a ship with 4,000 and a division with 100 guys, and he ends up doing the same job I did.

Dr. Rivera: And he's about 2 or 3 blocks away from your store...

Mr. Cervantes: Yes, yes. It was just amazing what life throws out at you.

Dr. Rivera: Like people say: "It's a small world."
Well, Charlie, thank you so much for being with us this afternoon.

Mr. Cervantes: It was such a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Rivera: Thank you so much, and it's totally appreciated, not only for your time but also the information that you provided about your family, and in particular, about your Grandfather.

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