

AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER
Oral History Center

Interviewee: Gustavo Garcia

Interviewer: Paul Saldaña

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Subject Headings: Born in Zapata, Texas. Moved to Laredo because father was unhappy with the school system in Zapata. Flunked out of college and joined the military. Came back and went back to college and became a CPA. Was a member of the Human Relations Commission, the School Board, City Council and finally Mayor of Austin.

Key Names: John Treviño, Gonzalo Barrientos

PAUL SALDANA: All right. So my name is Paul Saldana, and it's Friday, September 14th at 2:10. We're here at the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican-American Cultural Center. And I'm interviewing former Mayor Gus Garcia. And so Gus, do you give us permission to record this interview?

GUSTAVO GARCIA: Absolutely.

SALDANA: Okay, good deal. All right, well, let's start with some basic information, basic facts. Let's talk about your full name, where you were born, and how you moved to Austin, what brought you to Austin?

GARCIA: My full name is Gustavo Luis Garcia, G-U-S-T-A-V-O L-U-I-S G-A-R-C-I-A. I was born in a little community in South Texas, Zapata. It doesn't exist anymore because they tore it down to build a lake on the Rio Grande. So the people from the Rio Grande Valley would have water. And the Bentsen's wanted to have water, so they built that lake in 1934. And we spent 10 years there attending public schools there in Zapata. The schools were unaccredited, if you can — that's how bad education was in Texas back then. I went through the first six years of school, I did it in four years. Never had a teacher that went to college. I only had one teacher

that graduated from high school. All the others had gone through the seventh and eighth grade. Went through the whole elementary school, didn't learn English at all. And we moved to Laredo because my dad was angry at the ways the schools were being run. I went to Laredo and they put me in public schools in Laredo, and in junior high and I was 10 years old, didn't know English. I didn't know anything. I had a miserable junior high and high school career, and I graduated age barely 16, graduated in the lowest five percent of my class. And my family didn't think I was ever going to do anything. So my sister, who was the oldest in the family said, "He needs to get more education." They sent me to Laredo Junior College. It had opened about four years before. I went out there. I thought it was a lot of fun because they didn't check roll, so I enrolled and went one semester and got on scholastic probation. Went another semester and flunked out. And my father said, "You're never going to amount to anything, so go home and get to work." So I went to work for three years there in Laredo, clerk, bookkeeper, you know, typist, whatever. And they were ending the G.I. Bill because the war in Korea was ending. So I volunteered for the Army and went in the Army in '54 and spent two years in the Army. And there I learned English. I got into an outfit that had a bunch of people from the northeast that had gone to some of the premier colleges and they said, "You need to learn English." So I spent some time. When I came out, I went back to Laredo Junior College and then from there, I moved to Austin. In 1957, I came to Austin to attend the University of Texas and spent a couple years finishing up my degree and went to work for the Texas Education Agency, and then went back to graduate school. I wanted to pass my CPA exam, which I did. I passed my CPA exam in 1962 and went to work in public accounting. I was determined to be a CPA and practice with a big firm, and I joined not a big, big firm, but a good sized national firm. I spent four years there, left and started my practice in 1965. I was the first Hispanic ever to have a practice as a

CPA in Austin, Texas. And after I spent a few years there, I began to get involved in community work. I met a bunch of the guys who had been involved in the War on Poverty programs, Senator Barrientos and Mayor Pro Tem Trevino, Commissioner Moya, Paul Tovar, Ernie Nieto, all those guys. I met them all and met the people who were in an organization called the Human Opportunities Corporation. That organization handled the War on Poverty funds that the Johnson Administration had put in place. And so I spent some time there and got involved. And in '67, the City had been responding to demands from the community to create a human relations commission, and so in '67, they named it and they named 21 people. I think it was 16 whites, 4 African-Americans, and 1 Hispanic. The Hispanic community got very upset about that, and they went to City Hall. And they asked me to go with them, and I didn't know what City Hall was. I was a businessman. So I went there to witness the proceedings, and low and behold, Dick Nichols — back then, they didn't — you know, nowadays, you have to post everything on the agenda and they have to do it 24 hours before and all this. Back then, they didn't have any of that stuff. They were at a meeting that had been called to listen to the complaints of the Hispanic community — Mexican-American community at that time. And they had all these people testifying, and Dick Nichols, who was one of the Council members, said, "Mayor, I want to make a motion." It wasn't posted or anything. So the Mayor was Harry Akin, the guy who owned the Night Hawk, and said, "Sure." He said, "I'm going to move that we expand the size of the Commission from 21 to 25, and that the four additional members be all Mexican-Americans." So it passed. The City Council chambers were right there in that building at Eighth and Colorado. The room was full with Hispanics, Mexican-Americans. But at that time, as things would happen, if you worked for the state or you worked for the federal government, you could not serve on a City Board or Commission. So all those people who had been testifying to

get people on that Commission, they didn't qualify. They were working for the post office. They were working for this... And so they went through a whole room and found three that could serve. They needed one more. So Dick Nichols came back, Council Member Nichols came up to me and he said, "What about you?" I said, "I'm just here to listen. I don't know what's going on." He said, "Well, do you want to serve?" I said, "I don't know." "That something you want to do?" "Yes, we need one more." So I served on the Human Relations Commission from '67 to '69, and during that time we passed the Open Housing Ordinance, and actually, it never went into effect because the City — the Austin Real Estate Council or the Chamber of Commerce or one of those organizations — filed a petition to hold an election against our ordinance that had been passed by the Council. And they reversed it. So here in Austin in 1969, they threw out the Open Housing Ordinance by local vote. But by that time, the federal government had passed the Open Housing law, and so I was thrown out. I thought I was going to get reappointed to the — no, I was one of those guys that they — all the people that voted to appoint me were defeated in the 1969 election. Mayor Akin, Council Member Long — Emma Long — and Council Member Nichols. And the liberals were all gone and they were replaced with conservatives.

SALDANA: Wow. So that was your accidental entry into the whole politics.

GARCIA: Accidental entry into to the whole thing, but I had been bitten by the bug of doing some public service. So I kept getting involved with some things. And in '68, before we went off the Commission, there was an election for a school board seat. And Gilbert Martinez had filed for it, and he asked me to work on his campaign, which I did. And Gilbert ran for a seat where there were four people running. So they went to the election and nobody got 50%. Gilbert came in second with 30-some odd percent, and we thought he was in the run-off. Low and behold, we found out that at that time, the Austin School Board did not have run-offs.

Whoever got the most votes won. So Gilbert didn't win. And so we went back, and then in 1970, a young lady ran for the school board, a Mexican-American young lady — Edna Canino— but she didn't win. So in '72, they asked me to run, and I said, "I don't know how to do this." We had never been involved in politics. My family didn't have — my dad hated American politics, and so he didn't want me involved in it. But they said, "No, no, you have to do it." So I went ahead and filed, and at that time, the guy who was in that seat was supposed to leave. Well, they talked him into staying. And so before I knew it, I was running against a very powerful local guy. And so then the first polls that came out, it was like 70 for him and 30 for me. But he had a daughter that was going to O'Henry and she was a cheerleader at O'Henry. They found out that she had whiskey in her locker, so the principal threw her out of the cheerleading squad, and the mother — the guy's wife — told him to go talk to the principal and demand that his daughter be put back. Well, he did, and that infuriated the teachers. So they called me in and they said, "We're going to support you." "What? For what?" "School board." And so I won the election in '72 and I got elected to the school board.

SALDANA: And parallel to that, I remember there also being another community movement that we recently celebrated along with your 40th anniversary election to the school board being the first Mexican-American elected to the school board. I think there was a group of community leaders that put together a green book, and in that green book was a list of 17 demands that had to do with education. Talk a little bit about that.

GARCIA: Yeah, actually it started long before my campaign started. They had gotten together, I think it was kind of like a follow-up to the War on Poverty and some of those warriors that had done a lot of work decided to look at the community and ask the community what they wanted to do in education. So they did a very thorough and a complete job in advising what the

community wanted. And so they started listing it, you know, all of them were policy issues like, “We would like to have more Mexican-American teachers that speak Spanish.” All these other things, a list of 17. And they called it the List of 17 Demands, very well documented. Very well done. So I looked at it and I said, “This is my agenda.” I’m going to be there six years. I just picked it up and I ran with it. And it made it very easy because when I got to the school board, I just said, “There they are. These are the things that I want to do.” And the community was behind it, and people like Dave Gutierrez and Peter Reyes and Ernest — what’s Ernie’s last name? You know him.

Male Voice: Yes. I’m trying to think of his name. Perales.

GARCIA: Perales, yeah. Those guys were very instrumental in putting it all together. And so that became the agenda for me, the policy issues that were going to be part of [Speaking simultaneously]

SALDANA: Excellent. And so that was 1972. We just recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of the List of 17 Demands and your 40th anniversary of being the first Latino or Mexican-American elected to the school board. Right around that time, and even before that, there was also another infamous Chicano movement here, Chicano Huelga, the Mexican-American movement was related to the Economy Furniture strike. And then some believe that was very pivotal point for Mexican-Americans here in Austin because that sort of led to the culmination and the development of the infamous Brown Machine. Can you talk a little bit about that?

GARCIA: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, there had been quite a few problems at Economy. As a matter of fact, when I was on the Human Relations Commission, they brought their complaints to the Commission because the President of Economy Furniture was one of the members of the Commission. And they asked us to kick him out of the Commission, which we told them we

didn't have any right to kick him off because we hadn't appointed him. And so they kept going and they brought a lot of things to us, and one of the things that they brought was the manner in which the Economy Furniture people handled the pension plan. And they said, "We go over there and borrow money and they charge us very high interest, and we've lost our pensions as a result of the manner in which they do it." So they complained about that. And I started asking them some questions that had to do with the technical aspects, but one of the guys said, "Oh, where'd you learn that?" I said, "I was a CPA. I know all this stuff." And they need to have vesting schedules in the plan. They didn't have vesting schedules. That meant somebody could work there 20 years, and they didn't have any vested rights in the plan. So that group then organized, and they even had Cesar Chavez here, at the Economy Furniture strike. And it created this group of people that their goal was to improve the situation, the conditions of the Mexican-American. Very well organized group. And they worked and basically formed the cadre that was used in all these elections with the green book people, the Economy Furniture people, and all the others. We had the wherewithal to be able to run an election effectively.

SALDANA: And it's my understanding that strike lasted almost four years, and I think it had a major impact on 400 or 500 people. And to the point you were making, I remember reading and hearing stories from people like Lencho Hernandez, who was one of the organizers, that people had been there for like 15 years and they were only making \$1.12 or \$1.15, and that they —

GARCIA: And they didn't have a pensions plan either.

SALDANA: They didn't have a pension plan. The owners of Economy Furniture would hire or bring in the Anglo community and the Mexican-Americans had to train them. And then once they trained them, the Anglos ended up being the bosses for the Mexican-Americans.

GARCIA: That's another complaint that they brought to the Human Relations Commission. Yeah. So it was a discriminatory practice that they had in that enterprise, and that's what these people were talking about. They brought the whole thing to the Human Relations Commission, and I had an opportunity to learn about it.

SALDANA: So do you think that that was an opportunity for the Mexican-American community to rally behind those issues, and then to figure out a way to get involved in politics? Because again, '70, '71, '72, those were very pivotal years because we started having the first Mexican-Americans elected to government [Speaking simultaneously]

GARCIA: Oh absolutely. There were several things that all came together. The people that had worked on the Human Opportunities Corporation — Senator Barrientos, Mayor Pro Tem Trevino, Commissioner Moya — all those people had worked as part of that team that handled the War on Poverty. And when they brought in Economy, they created basically a “political machine” is what it is. And that's what they called it the brown machine, because the people that were in that machine — and I wasn't in that machine, so to speak, because I never worked for the Human Opportunities Corporation. I didn't work at Economy Furniture, and I wasn't that involved because I was out there trying to run my business. But Moya called me one day and he said, “You're going to be the education guy in the brown machine.” And actually, the first article that was written, I don't know if it was Daryl Slusher or somebody wrote an article on the brown machine, and they only had Senator Barrientos, Mayor Pro Tem Trevino, and Commissioner Moya. They didn't have me on there at the outset. And Moya added me at a later date.

SALDANA: You were the “mero guero”[chuckles] So let's talk about when you decided to — obviously the '70s, that was your, again, accidental entrance into politics and your acclamation

into local politics — talk about the end of your tenure on the Austin Independent School District, what happened then, and then in between then, what made you lead to a decision to run for Austin City Council?

GARCIA: Sure. Well, my term ended in 1978, and there were some people that had taken an interest in running. So Mr. Manuel Navarro, who had been very active as a parent in the Becker area, Becker/Fulmore area, decided he wanted to run. And he ran and served on the school board for six years. And he was followed by Lydia Perez, not the one from Las Manitas, but the other Lydia Perez. And Abel Ruiz came. There's been quite a few Mexican-Americans/Hispanics, whatever we're called, that have served on the school board. And I was out in '78, and I decided to run for the State Board of Education, which I did. I ran for the State Board of Education in '78 and lost. So I told my wife, I said, "You know, I guess I'm not cut out to be a politician, so I'm going to go back to practice my profession and leave politics alone," which I did. I went back in '78 and dedicated my time to the profession. But then in 1980 — we had created the Austin Community College when I was on the school board — there was a move to create a countywide community college district and elect a separate board, because when I was on the school board, I was also on the board of the Austin Community College. The election was held to create a college district and appoint a board. And so I ran and won, except that the proposition to create the college failed. So I was elected to a non-existing office. Della May Moore won, but we were all left out there with a victory and no place to go. And so I went back to run my business. And in '82, there was another opportunity to run for the State Board, and this time I ran against a very popular, very powerful man who had served with — I had served alongside him on the school board. And we ran against each other and he beat me. I could win in Austin, but once I — the district was much larger than Austin. Once I got out of Austin, my name just

didn't sell out there in those rural counties. So I lost out there, and so I went back in '82 and started again building up my practice. And in '88, Mayor Pro Tem Treviño had announced that he probably would not run. So they came to talk to me and I said, "I have not prepared myself for this. I'm not ready." "Well, but..." I said, "I haven't heard Mayor Pro Tem Treviño's not going to run." So actually, Mayor Pro Tem Treviño waited until about the last day to file to announce that he wasn't going to run. So somebody else ran. One semi-Hispanic, I guess. He's now passed away, so I'm not going to mention his name. And Sam Guzman ran in that race in '88 for the school board. And Sam lost in that race, and from '88 to '91, this other gentleman served as a Council member in place five. And what happened was that he used some tactics to divide the community. He's from Laredo, and in Laredo, they use the word "cliqua" to refer to cliques. "Hey, you belong to this cliqua. You're going to that cliqua." I told him one day, I said, "In Austin, we don't have that kind of situation. We have disagreements among each other, but we don't have cliquas, as such," I said, "so get off of that stuff. You're not in Laredo anymore and neither am I." So anyway, low and behold, the community got angry at him, and several of us got together and wrote a letter to the editor, the infamous letter to the editor. And the first letter that we sent out was so full of poison darts that the paper refused to print it. And they called us in and they said, "We can print something, but not this. So you need to write another one." So we wrote another one and they printed it. The morning that it appeared in the *American Statesman*, he called me and he said, "I didn't know you were part of that cliqua." I said, "We're not talking about cliquas." I said, "The community is unhappy with the way you've divided us. We don't have that much in the way of differences in our community. We have little disagreements, but those are not policy differences, and you put us in camps that we don't belong in." And I said, "That's something that is very destructive to our movement." And so I said,

“We decided to send the letter.” “Well, I’m very disappointed.” “Well, you can get disappointed all you want to, but that letter is now of record.” And then some people came to see me and said, “Well, are you going to run against him?” I wasn’t even ready. My firm was doing well. But they came and knocked on my door enough times to where I said, “Okay, but I need to make sure that we can win.” Well, as a matter of fact, I filled in that place against him and he pulled out and ran for mayor against Bruce Todd, Mayor Todd.

SALDANA: And so the significance is that Place Five — for those who are not familiar with the history and how we elect our City Council members here — was a designated Latino seat, a Mexican-American seat, is that true?

GARCIA: Right. That came about in the 1970 Charter election where the Council had all five Council members elected at large was expanded to seven, with a provision that the Mayor was going to be elected separately, at large, and then six Council members were going to be all elected at large. But Place Five was going to be for Hispanics and Place Six for African-Americans. Well, in ‘71, the African-Americans won their seat and they’ve held it ever since then. We didn’t win that one. We actually had Mexican-Americans running in two seats and we lost them both. And it was not until 1975 that Mayor Pro Tem Treviño won the seat in Place Five.

SALDANA: And so do you think part of the concern or argument was that when Mayor Pro Tem Treviño left, some people felt that we lost the Mexican-American seat, even though — we’re not going to name the individual who maybe was considered half Mexican-American — that maybe he wasn’t Mexican-American enough or Latino enough?

GARCIA: Oh, he was a Sephardic Jew. Spoke very good Spanish. Yeah. The Hispanic community started to realize that he was not putting the policy issues in the right place to move

us to improve our standard of living, so that's what this whole thing was about. And so he pulled out and put together a four pack, I would call them, because there were four people then running against me and another one. Oh no, I think there was six of us running. And four of them were together. They had an understanding that whoever of those four got in the run-off with me, the other three would support him. And sure enough, that happened. So I wound up running against one, and the other three were supporting this guy, the other fellow. And so it was an exciting I'll tell, for a fact. We had a heck of an election. Large turnout. And I won with 900 votes. I mean, I think it was like 50.8 to 49.2. I mean barely, by the skin of our teeth we won that election. And I started my service in '91 on the City Council. Then in '94, I ran for re-election and ran unopposed. There are very few times that they've had an election for City Council which is unopposed. I was unopposed on that one.

SALDANA: Wow. Well, then I remember in '97 — 1997 was a pivotal year. I think that's when Council Member Ronnie Reynolds was serving in Place Two and decided to run for mayor, and then a guy who has now become our Senator, name Kirk Watson, decided to run for mayor at that time [Speaking simultaneously]. And then you made a significant or important decision to switch seats. Talk a little bit about that.

GARCIA: Well, what happened was the Hispanic community was of the opinion that we needed to have more than one Council member, that one was not enough. One out of seven was not enough. So when Council Member Reynolds moved out of Place Two to run for mayor, I decided, I said, "You know what," I called some of the leaders in the Hispanic community. I said, "You know what, you can have Place Five, okay? That's been designated the Hispanic seat. You can have it. I'm going to run in Place Two, not as a Hispanic. I'm going to run just as an Austinite, and if I lose, I lose." And it was a very hard fought election because I ran against

the woman that is now the CEO of LCRA. And she was supported by not only Tom Landry, who did — Mr. Landry has now passed away — television commercials for her, but also Coach Royal. Coach Royal, I got the report that he had gotten together a bunch of guys and said, “Hey, we got this Mexican kid running against this lady. You guys need to support her because we don’t want him on the Council.” So I was going up against all that and lo and behold, we won. But the sad part of that one was we won Place Two, but we lost Place Five. In the primary, the Hispanic that ran came out on top. But after the primary — well, he didn’t win. He got 40-some odd, so he was in a run-off. After he got that victory, he started opening up, talking about all kinds of stuff that everybody said, “Who in the world is this guy?” And so in the run-off, he lost.

SALDANA: And he lost to a guy who’s back on the City Council.

GARCIA: Yeah, that’s right, holding that same seat. Yeah. Anyway...

SALDANA: Well, I remember 1997-’98 was also another important year or time because that’s when I think we had put the Mexican-American Cultural Center — the building that we’re in now — on the bond package. And I know that we had tried previous years. So I know we’re going to go back a little bit, but talk — your first remembering the whole discussion about building a Mexican-American Cultural Center, when did that start and then how were we able to get it successful on the bond package?

GARCIA: I’ll be quite frank with you. I was never that involved in the effort to build the MACC because I was in education and I was doing all these other things. When I got to the Council, affirmative action was all very important. But one of the things that happened was they had dedicated this land by resolution as a site for the MACC. And I think that was done during the time that Mayor Pro Tem Treviño was on the Council. And something happened along 1993 or ‘94 or ‘95, somewhere in those years, to where the City wanted to take it back because this

land was used by Public Works as storage for materials and warehouse and stuff. So there was discussion going on about the fact that they wanted to take it back and put it in Public Works and remove that resolution that had set it aside. And so I had appointed Cathy Vasquez to the Planning Commission, and she heard about it and she called me and told me. And so I talked to some of the Council members and one of them told me point blank, he said, “A resolution is nothing more than an expression of intent. It doesn’t mean that that land is reserved for the MACC. The Council just said if it’s there, well, we can use it, but it’s not anything.” So I remember, I think I talked to you about it and we said, “Well, why don’t we make it an ordinance? We’re going to make it an ordinance saying the City hereby ordains that this land is going to be dedicated to the MACC.” And we put it on the agenda. And it passed.

SALDANA: It did. And we added the words “in perpetuity” I think too. That was a good time.

GARCIA: That ordinance was very well written, and it basically reserved this land forever for the MACC.

SALDANA: And when was the first time we had the MACC on the bond package, was it the same year we did SOS?

GARCIA: I think so.

SALDANA: ‘92?

GARCIA: Yeah, ‘92, something like that. I don’t remember. No, it was not ‘92. It was after that. But what they did in that election, which I did not particularly like — and I told them, I told the people that were putting the bond package together — they said the MACC and the Carver by themselves. And I said, you know, people are going to go to vote for it and they’re going to say, “Well, this doesn’t affect me. I’m going to vote against it.” So it failed. And I think you were working in my office when it came back again and we said, “No, it has to be part of a

bigger package, because it's not — the MACC doesn't stand alone.” The idea behind the MACC was to bring the Hispanic community into the whole area of interest in the community of Austin. So they put it in a package together with other Parks and Recreation and libraries. I don't remember what else was on that ballot. And then it passed.

SALDANA: So then you served your first time on Council for three terms, up until 2000?

GARCIA: 2000 was my — yeah.

SALDANA: And then you left and you took a sabbatical. [chuckles] And then I remember getting a call from you, so what made you decide to run for mayor?

GARCIA: Well, in 1997, my name was being thrown around to run for mayor and so was Councilman Reynolds and Mayor Watson. And Mayor Watson called me and wanted to have a meeting, which we met, and he said, “I'm not going to run against you. If you run for mayor, I'm going to support you.” And I said, “No. I still have a lot of things to do that I have to do specifically with the Hispanic community,” and as a mayor, you cannot dedicate yourself to that particular task without leaving other things out. So I said, “No, I'm not going to run.” “Well, I'm going to run, but if I run for mayor, I want you to run for the City Council,” and that's when I ran in Place Two and won. And so I served for three years with Mayor Watson. Then I left in 2002 — in 2000, I announced that I was retiring from the world. I was going to go out and have a good time.

SALDANA: That's where the rumors started you were moving back to Guerrero Viejo.

GARCIA: Yeah. I was going to go back to Saltillo or Guanajuato or someplace. As a matter of fact, it came out in the paper that I was leaving.

SALDANA: Yes, I remember.

GARCIA: And so I spent from June of 2000 to September or July or something in 2001, and the rumor was that Mayor Watson was going to run for Attorney General. And so I was getting calls from people saying, “You need to decide.” I said, “I can’t decide to run for something when there is no vacancy.” “Well, Mayor Watson’s...” I said, “I haven’t heard from Mayor Watson. I haven’t read anything about it. Why should I be making decisions that are going to affect him?” I said, “I don’t want to do that.” And so one day my wife suddenly had a death and one of the tías passed away in Del Rio. So we went to the funeral. On the way over, my son Carlos — who constantly checks the voicemail and all this — you know, on the way over said, “Dad, Kirk Watson called and he needs to talk to you right away.” I said, “Well, we’re going to a funeral.” So I called him anyway. He said, “When are you getting back?” I said, “After the funeral.” He said, “Well, get back here as soon as possible because you need to run because I’m running for Attorney General. And Gardner Selby has found out that I am going to run, and he’s going to announce it in the paper.” So I went to the funeral, came back, and filed. And I thought we were going to get pretty stiff competition. It turned out except for now deceased Eric Mitchell — who did not want to run himself, but some people drafted him in and got the signatures and got him on the ballot — but then we had Leslie and the Bread Man and —

SALDANA: Don’t know if Jennifer Gale ran that year either.

GARCIA: No, Jennifer Gale did not run. Leslie did.

SALDANA: Leslie ran.

GARCIA: Yeah. But anyway...

SALDANA: So then in 2001, you became the first elected Latino — or any minority mayor — in the history of Austin, in 2001.

GARCIA: Yeah.

SALDANA: Wow. You know, Austin professes to be very liberal and progressive, and one of the things that continues to astonish a lot of people is the fact that we've only had one minority mayor elected in the history of Austin. How do you feel about that?

GARCIA: Well, community attitudes about whether you're liberal or conservative basically don't have a clear definition of what that means. They're liberal because they're environmentalists. They're liberal because here's the university. They're liberal, you know... But when it comes to relationships with minorities, they're still very, very *patron* oriented. They are the ones who decide, and they do it basically by controlling the flow of information. They don't give all the information to the Latinos or to the African-Americans. They spoon feed them, they spoon feed us. So we have been left out. That's the reason. I always wondered why the white mayors got so much information that I never got. Well, that's because that's the way they do it. It's just a way of doing things. And they've done it forever. And what happened was that before the brown machine was created, they had the patron system, and they gave information to the chief patron of the Mexican-American community and the chief patron of the African-American community. But they were the only ones who had that information. And they used it. They became very powerful people as a result of, you know, one of them, the Mexican-American patron, could pick up the phone and call the mayor's office. I mean, he had direct access to the mayor. And that's how they did it. They did it by naming who was going to be the boss, so to speak, of the minority communities. And those bosses in the Latino community used to meet at a coffee shop in East Austin. And when the brown machine was created, the act of rebellion that signaled the creation of the new machine was that they went from that coffee shop to another coffee shop, that's it. And Joe's Bakery became the new... But that has been the place, and as time has gone by and you've seen more sophistication among the Latino and African-American

populations, you have seen that that is shifting. That is shifting. There's more inclusion, and it's a different — and of course, there's one other thing that has changed, and that is the population. Back then, when I got elected, we were 15% of the Austin population. Now we're...our schools — when I went to the School Board, 15% of the kids in school were Mexican-Americans. Now, what is it, 60%?

SALDANA: Lower 60%.

GARCIA: And there's all kinds, you know, Hispanics are now attorneys and doctors and this and bankers and everything. It's a different kind of social structure, and I think more change is coming as you have more Latinos getting a premier education. Now all of a sudden we see this guy who is the Chancellor of the University of Texas system. Graduate of Yale, medical doctor. Whoa. Where'd this guy come from? Well, the reality is that the well-to-do Hispanics who had always had a good place found out that if they became part of the movement, they would enjoy a lot of benefits. And that's what's happened. The reality is that that's what's happened. They have used the vehicle that was created by the barrios. They used that vehicle to move themselves up.

SALDANA: That's right. What were some of your most favorite initiatives or projects that you worked on throughout your tenure in the City Council?

GARCIA: On City Council? Well, I think the affirmative action was one of them. The NWV ordinance that allowed people to participate as providers of services and goods in the contracting arena and allowed people to move up into good jobs. And you were involved in some of those things. I had to, I guess, use this interview to ask you for forgiveness for me sending you to do all the dirty stuff that you had to do.

SALDANA: [Laughs] People would complain.

GARCIA: People would come in my office and say, “Do you know what your assistant...” And I said, “Yeah, sure. I told him to do it.”

SALDANA. I remember. You used to call me and say, “Mi’jito, close the door. So and so — the mayor called and is complaining about what you’re doing.” I said, “Well, I’m just doing what you sent me to do.” I remember those. What about — I think another important initiative — one of my favorite projects I worked in your office was the zoning and land use studies that we did in East Austin. Do you remember a little bit about those?

GARCIA: Sure. The idea fundamentally was to organize the zoning situation in such a way that it protected the benefits that people had by holding certain...And we found out, for instance, that a lot of people had their homes in light industrial zoning, and we wanted to make sure that they were in the proper zoning so that, you know — and some people in the Latino community wanted to keep it light industrial because they said, “It’s worth more.” And what we wanted to do was to preserve the quality, the integrity, of neighborhoods, which we’ve lost now as a result of the gentrification because the land became very valuable. And so the City is now struggling. And of course, there’s another thing that has happened in the Latino community, they don’t live — we don’t live in East Austin anymore. Let’s face it, we’re everywhere. And we now have different groups socially and economically. We have had an influx — heavy, strong influx — of well-to-do Mexicans and Central Americans coming here and buying land over there in the hills.

SALDANA: I remember that.

GARCIA: So it’s a different population, different demographic than the one that we saw in 1972 when I went to the School Board.

SALDANA: All right, is there anything else?

GARCIA: Well, the idea behind the MACC, which we were talking about. That particular movement was started by some people that I don't even remember their names. They were very dedicated, and they worked very hard. Like I indicated earlier, I was not that involved in it. I heard about the idea and I liked it because it would be a place where the Hispanic community could come and feel at home and do the things that they wanted to do. This was their place, okay, and we always felt that that was one of the good things about that movement, about the movimiento, was that they would create this place that would have the name Mexican-American on it. The African-Americans had the Carver Museum. And so I think it created that place. It hasn't satisfied everybody, but let's face it, the Latino community is very diverse. You satisfy as one group and you anger another group. And so I've heard some people that say, "Oh, the MACC is not ours." Well, it's not yours if you're not there. And what I tell people is, "Go there. Go to the MACC and you can see what is there and see what you can do." See, the idea behind the MACC is that it provides a venue. If we're going to have a function that has to do with our contributions to the well-being of people in this City, we ought to do it here. And it's a nice place. It's right by the river. I mean, it's not out there someplace in some junky place. No, it's right near the river. So I think the MACC is just in the early stages. I think as time goes by and people get more used to it, it will really do a lot of things, like some of the things in San Antonio where the Latino community has been strong for a much longer period. We're basically relatively new when it comes to using political power. 1970 was when it all started with the election of Commissioner Moya. So you're talking about what, 40 years. Forty years is not long enough to be able to establish, and we have been basically "invaded" by all the people who have come here because they like it here. They like it here. Let's face it, people that come from the south, they like it here. Like me, I wasn't born here. When I came here, I liked it, and so I

decided to stay here. I didn't like it at first because I thought that there was too much discrimination, and when people refused to rent me a home, I told my wife, I said, "What is going on? Why should I not be able to rent this house?" They wouldn't tell me that they wouldn't rent it to me because I was Hispanic or Mexican-American. They would just say, "Oh, we just rented it yesterday." And then we checked the paper the next day and there it is, listed [Speaking simultaneously] So all those things are in the past, and one of the things that ask me, you know, what I'm most proud of. What I'm most proud of is what I did on the School Board, because on the School Board, with that list of 17 items, we had 40 Mexican-American teachers when I started. When I left, there were 600.

SALDANA: Wow.

GARCIA: Yeah. We had two principals, two administrators, when I came to the Board. I think we had 40 or 50 when I left. So it's changed the district tremendously, and I hear about Mexican-American kids becoming valedictorians and graduating with honors and going on to — you have one that's two or three that are going on to bigger and better things.

SALDANA: Yes, sir.

GARCIA: So that is, I think, where we had the most impact in working with Commissioner Moya and Mayor Pro Tem Trevino and Senator Barrientos. Back then it was Representative Barrientos. I think we had an impact on making it possible for Mexican-Americans to feel that they belong here. It's a matter of belonging in the whole community. And the MACC is part of it.

SALDANA: Absolutely. In the stories that I've read, I remember people like Velia Ruiz, Emma Barrientos, I think Martha Cotera, I think some of the Mexican-American women organized probably in the mid-'80s, '84-'85. So here we are, 25-30 years later, and tomorrow we'll be

celebrating the Fiesta de Independencia, Fiesta de Grito, here. And this was, I think, this is a good example of what we had envisioned back in the '80s and the mid-'80s, early '90s.

GARCIA: Sure, and we're going to have lots of events for the independence of our mother country. We ought to do it in our venue. So yeah, I think the people who had the idea and who pushed it — and you mentioned three or four of those leaders, you didn't mention any men. There were a bunch of other guys that were out there, used to — I heard that they used to get into fights and get into all kinds of things. Anyhow and that's a struggle that always comes with efforts to change. It was all an effort to change the way things were being done here. And I think if I look back and just sit back and look at it, I think it was very successful. What Senator Barrientos did in the legislature, what Council Member Treviño did and Mayor Pro Tem Treviño did at the Council, what Moya did at the Commissioner's Court, what we did at the School Board had an effect on the people. And I still find people who tell me that they like what happened. One of the guys, one of the men — and I'll mention his name because he's now passed away — Victor Ruiz, when I was on the School Board, we decided one day that we were going to broadcast the meetings on KUT. We didn't think anybody would listen to KUT. Victor listened to them. And so one day he saw me somewhere and he said, "I need to talk to you." "Okay, when, now?" "Yeah, right now." "Okay. What can I do for you, Victor?" He said, "I've been listening to KUT, those School Board meetings, and you're saying things that I didn't know we're allowed to say those things." "Well, what is it that I'm saying? I don't know what you're talking about." "You're saying that our children have the same right as the white kids to quality education." I said, "Well, I thought that's what you sent me up there to do." "Yeah, but I didn't think anybody would say it publicly." I said, "This is a democracy, Victor. We have to put our issues on the table so that everybody hears it and hears it loud and clear that we're here

asking that our children receive the same quality education — or whatever education necessary for them to have success in this country.” He said, “Well, I just didn’t know that we were allowed to say those things.” And Victor and I had real... Victor was one of the guys who was in Economy Furniture.

CHUNG. Yeah, I remember.

GARCIA: But in those days, they really struggled. The Latino community really struggled, mostly because they didn’t have any way to accessing elected officials, other than through the patrones.

SALDANA: Right. So what do you think, now fast forwarding, 2012? What do you think are the biggest challenges for the Latino community moving forward?

GARCIA: I think we need to do what they did 40 years ago, to stop and do an analysis of what the issues are that are affecting the community, and particularly with the economic pressures that exist today. A lot of our people are losing their jobs, those kinds of things. Or they’re losing it because of discrimination or anything else. But we need to step back and take a look and list the issues that are affecting it so that people who want to serve can take those issues and run with them. The second thing that needs to be done is people that are interested in serving need to understand that it comes at a cost. You’re not going to be able to become a rich person. You’re not going to be able to climb to be a vice president with a bank. They won’t want you there because you’re asking for things that the mainstream community doesn’t want you to ask. But that’s the price that you have to pay. I could have done a lot of other things if I had just not entered public office, but when we came to public office — and all of us, you know, you look around. Moya didn’t get rich. Johnny didn’t get rich. Johnny’s still working. He’s 70 years old. He’s still working. He told me he couldn’t retire because he didn’t have enough. And the

Senator is okay because the legislature has a pretty good retirement system. But he doesn't have personal wealth. I mean, none of us accumulate any personal wealth, because we didn't go there to accumulate personal wealth. We went there to do what the community, the job that the community wanted us to do. And I think that that is perhaps a little bit missing in the younger people. They don't have the same fire in the belly. They were not discriminated as much as some of us were, and so for them it's, "Oh well, life, you know, I graduated *summa cum laude* whatever, *summa cum*, you know, from tacos whatever." [chuckles] And they don't have the same attitudes. I think we need to have people who say, "We have this particular set of issues that need to be addressed, and we're the ones that need to do it."

SALDANA: Well, that's why this interview is so important, because I think it's put it in historical perspective so those people — younger generation — can someday view this video and hear first-hand from you some of your challenges. One of my favorite stories that I tell — and I told recently when we celebrated your 40th anniversary as one of the favorite stories I remember of you — is the day you got elected to School Board and you called your father. Tell that story one more time real quick, and we'll end with that.

GARCIA: Well, yeah, we had — my father had never liked American politics. He said nothing but crooks ran for office in the United States and the system was corrupt and blah, blah, blah. I said, "Well, the system might be corrupt, but you don't have to be corrupt." I said, "You can be a good politician." Well, he didn't believe me. And so I didn't call him to tell him I was running because I knew what he would say. "What the heck are you doing running?" So I waited until I won and I called him. This was '72. He was 81-82 years old. And the first question that he asked is, "How much do they pay for this job?" I said, "No dad, this is a volunteer job that people do. They get elected and they serve on the..." "And how many hours do you have to

work?” I said, “We work about 25-30 hours a week.” “What? And when do you work to make money to feed your family?” And I said, “Well, don’t worry, dad. We’re doing okay.” “No, no, no. You can’t tell me you’re working 30 hours and you’ll be able to feed your family. So what, you won?” I said, “Yes, I won.” He said, “You know what, you’re more pendejo than I thought you were,” and hung up on me.

SALDANA: [Laughs]

GARCIA: And a few years later, before he died, one Saturday morning, my wife and I were talking and I said, “You know what?” By that time, my father was in a nursing home and so I told her, “We need to go see Dad because I haven’t seen him in a while.” So I went to see him, picked him up — my brother and I. My brother lived in Alice. My father was in a little nursing home in San Diego about 10 miles away. So we went to pick him up, and he got in the car and he never — my father never complimented us — he thought my brother and I were about the most worthless people in the world and never gave us a compliment. I don’t ever remember receiving a compliment from my dad. So he got in the car and we noticed something was happening. And he told us, he said, “I’ve been thinking about it, and I think you guys have done okay.” And then he — he had real — you know, I have this short stubby hands, and my father had hands that were twice the size, and he pointed at me and he said — I was driving and he was sitting in the passenger’s side. He said, “Particularly you.” He said, “You never did what I told you to do.” He said, “But you’ve done okay.” We came back Sunday, and Monday he had a stroke and he never came back to me.

SALDANA: Wow.

GARCIA: Yeah.

SALDANA: Well, thank you, Gus. I’ve enjoyed it.

GARCIA: Yeah. I enjoy doing these things because I think it speaks to what has happened in this community, and I think it's very healthy. And it needs to be moved forward by the new generation of leaders, and we're hoping that happens. I think the MACC can be instrumental in developing those leaders by having them come here and enrich...the Center is not just to take. It's a Center where you can come and give to the community.

SALDANA: Absolutely. Well, since we're on tape and on record, I want to personally thank you for allowing me to work for you in your office. That was the best ten years I had in my life, and you continue to be one of my mentors.

GARCIA: Were you there that long?

SALDANA: Almost ten years. Yeah, I had a lot of hair and was about 50 lbs lighter when I started working in your office, but by far has been the best job I ever had, ever.

GARCIA: Yeah, it was exciting times, and you were one of the more gifted, if not the most gifted of all my administrative assistants. You became Chief of Staff.

SALDANA: Yes, sir.

GARCIA: And the only problem that I had was that the public sector found you.

SALDANA: [Laughs]

GARCIA: And you've done well, and I think you're just starting. I mean, you're going to move on and do good things and great things for this community.

(Interview ends)