

AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER
Oral History Center

Interviewee: Laura Esparza

Interviewer: Gloria Espitia

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GLORIA ESPITIA: This is Gloria speaking, the neighborhood liaison to the Mexican American community at the Austin History Center. We are today Thursday, October 18, 2012 here at the Emma Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center in the conference room. It is currently 3:07 p.m. and I am interviewing Laura Esparza. Laura, do you give me permission to conduct this oral history interview on behalf of the Austin History Center?

LAURA ESPARZA: Yes, I do.

ESPITIA: Okay, great. Now, we'll first start off, if you will, I will have you say your complete name and then if you will spell it out for transcription purposes.

ESPARZA: My name is Laura Esparza and it's spelled L-A-U-R-A E-S-P-A-R-Z-A.

ESPITIA: Okay. Where were you born and can you give me a little bit of background about your family?

ESPARZA: I was born in San Antonio in 1958 and my family is one of the founding families of San Antonio. I'm descended from the Canary Islanders and then I'm descended from Gregorio Esparza who died in the battle of the Alamo. His wife and four children survived the battle and I'm descended from one of those children, Manuel, who was five during the battle. My great-great-great-grandfather was a part of the revolution. He believed in it and he had joined in Juan

Seguín's army and so we consider ourselves part of the fabric, I guess; the beginnings of central Texas.

ESPITIA: Did you live in Austin – I mean, in San Antonio, I'm sorry – in San Antonio up until you were a teenager or when did you leave?

ESPARZA: I went to Incarnate Word High School in San Antonio and then one semester of St. Mary's University. Then I transferred to Rice University where I was for two years and then I left Texas altogether. I went to live with my sister in Vancouver, British Columbia and a little bit later, about a year and a half after going up there to be near her, I went back to college at Fairhaven College Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington.

ESPITIA: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

ESPARZA: I have four brothers and I had one sister.

ESPITIA: When did you move to Austin and in what part of the city did you live in?

ESPARZA: I moved to Austin for the job and, although I had been coming here all my life because my brothers moved to Austin when they went to UT and when my parents were elderly and disabled, my brothers moved them to live in Austin, so I used to come back here to visit my parents. When I first got here, I rented an apartment on Brodie, you know, I lived in southeast Austin a little bit, too, so I'm very familiar with Brodie because I don't live too far away from Brodie and Slaughter.

ESPITIA: Were you, during your go at the university and so forth, were you involved in any organizations or student organizations or movements within the areas that you lived at?

ESPARZA: Well, you know, it was really when I went to school in Bellingham and I was just inspired by the work of Bill Strickland who founded the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild that I wrote a degree based on his work called Community Arts Development and I was really

interested in learning about everything that you needed to know to start and run a community arts organization, so I ran the campus gallery, I worked for the radio station, I had radio shows, and, at that time, I was really interested mostly in feminist art and theater. I directed plays and wrote plays and they were mostly in the realm of feminist theater and so I really became much more interested in Latino arts, Latino theater when I moved to Seattle and I met a group of Latino writers there that were struggling to get something going in Seattle because there wasn't a lot of cultural activity. And so together with these writers, we started the first Día de los Muertos celebration in Seattle. The writers' organization that we started is still going on in Seattle right now. So we did a lot of work to try and create some artistic presence there.

ESPITIA: What did you get your degree in?

ESPARZA: My degree was called Community Arts Development and it's a degree that I wrote myself. I went to a college where it was an alternative college where you could go to the university and take any class that you wanted to take as long as it fit into your thesis and my thesis, community arts development, was everything that I needed to know to start and run a community arts organization and, of course, now that's what I do. I run a lot of community arts organizations and so I learned about business, I learned how to, you know, build stage sets and do lighting design, I learned arts administration, I learned how to critique art, art history, and I started a theater called Sister Stage.

ESPITIA: Can you give us a little bit of background about that?

ESPARZA: Sister Stage was a feminist theater that I started with another woman that I met in college and I trained young women in all aspects of theater from stage craft to acting and I directed all of the plays and they were mostly plays by women and about women's empowerment. That's really how I got my start was in women's theater, which was great

because in having a women's theater, it was a very safe environment in which to work in areas that were primarily male-dominated like stage craft. I was really interested in design at this time, lighting and set design, and it was something that I could really explore and do in a very safe environment, but it was during that period of time that I really found my voice as a theater director and I went on in that work as a theater director for twenty years.

ESPITIA: Have you had an opportunity to do something like that here in Austin to be involved in theater?

ESPARZA: Unfortunately, my job takes a whole lot of time, but what I have been able to do was I wrote a play about my historical roots about Gregorio and Ana, my great-great-great-grandparents. And I talk about what it was like to grow up in a Mexican family that was imbued with history and with these conflicts of loyalty and racism, so I've had the chance to perform that. It's a one-woman show and it's kind of a little bit easier to do, you know, as opposed to directing a whole play and so I've had the opportunity to perform that at some of my sites here at the MACC and at the Susanna Dickinson.

ESPITIA: Oh! Is that in some archives right now?

ESPARZA: No, it's not.

ESPITIA: Would you like to have it in the archives?

ESPARZA: Sure! I'll put it in archives. There's probably not many feminist Alamo plays out there.

ESPITIA: No! You could start your own archives and, hey, you know, that's so it'll get in there. So, okay, let's go, like, when you moved here to Austin for your job, what period was that – with your involvement with the MACC then?

ESPARZA: Well, I came and visited here. I was living in San Antonio. I was the director of the Alameda Museum and I was in charge of building and opening the museum. It was a very difficult job. It was fraught with a lot of problems and I knew that it was not going to last, so it was a little heartbreaking and so while I was finishing up that museum and I knew that I wanted to finish it – that that was my goal. I heard that there were some jobs opening in Austin, so I came to Austin with some friends to see the site here of the Mexican American Cultural Center and Jaime Beaman happened to be on site and knew my friend and they got to chatting. I met with Jaime. We immediately hit it off and, you know, this was a project that I had learned about five or six years previously, so I – because I’ve opened so many or worked on so many different Latino cultural centers all over the country, it’s just kind of an avocation to me to understand and hear about another Latino cultural center being opened and so I wanted to come see for myself how it was going. It was very exciting and Jaime was really a beacon for me. He told me that they had filled the position of manager for the MACC, but there was another position that was open and that was the Division Manager position that oversaw the MACC and several other facilities. At that time, there were seven facilities, I believe, in my division – cultural facilities – and now I have twelve.

ESPITIA: So that – it’s grown!

ESPARZA: It’s grown.

ESPITIA: It’s grown from –

ESPARZA: Yeah.

ESPITIA: Yeah, it really has grown.

ESPARZA: And, of course, it grew with the MACC opening, which I, when I got the job as Division Manager, it was the early part of June when I started and moved to Austin. Of course,

all my brothers are here, so they were just waiting for me to arrive and I had plenty of places to stay while I was looking, you know, for a place. But the first task was to get the MACC ready for the grand opening and to finish what they call the punch list process, so walking through the building and seeing what needed to be adjusted, so there wasn't a lot that I could do or adjust at that point in time, it was, you know, pretty much a done deal all the way around. There were some things I would have done differently had I been involved with the design earlier on, but because the architecture was so similar to me to another building that I had started from the ground up and got to open, the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, I knew the kinds of difficulties they were going to have with the buildings. That Mexican Heritage Plaza was built by one of the architects that participated in the design of the MACC.

ESPITIA: And who was that?

ESPARZA: I told you – oh, wait – yes, Martín del Campo. Now Martín was the sole architect of the Mexican Heritage Plaza and, of course, the MACC had three architects. I think when all was said and done, Martín was a little less prominent in the team because by that time, he was quite elderly. He must've been in his eighties and his health was failing and so – but we talked many times, Martín and I, about the MACC. And I knew it was the apple of his eye and so I always felt like, you know, I can tell Martín that I've seen it, but, of course, he died in February about six months before we opened.

ESPITIA: You have given me a list of some of the places that you've worked and some of the different cultural centers that you've been involved with. Can you give us a brief background about each one of those places and the similarities and differences and problems that you might've encountered along the way?

ESPARZA: Do we have enough time?

ESPITIA: Here's the list.

ESPARZA: Well, after I got my degree in community arts development and I finished the theater company that I had started there, I moved to Seattle, Washington from Bellingham where I met a man named Rubén Sierra and Rubén was from San Antonio, but he had been in Washington state for many, many years and he had started a multicultural theater on the campus of the University of Washington called the Group Theatre. And so I became an intern at the Group Theatre where I ran – I was the coordinator of the Multicultural Playwrights Festival and I got to meet playwrights from all over the nation. We would mount their plays in two-week workshop productions and we would have, you know, four to six playwrights there doing rewrites of their plays and then we would mount these rewrites, so we could see the writing process progress. So I was at the Group Theatre for two years doing the Multicultural Playwrights Festival and directing a little bit on the side when I got a fellowship to go to UCSD in La Jolla to be in the first class of the MFA program in Latino arts and Latino theater started by Dr. Jorge Huerta, and Jorge was my mentor and so I was in the directing program there with eleven other students where we solely focused on plays in Spanish and then English from multiple Latino cultures. And it was there that I really got to know the literature and the culture of my culture as well as many other Latino cultures, wrote some plays, and directed lots and lots and lots of plays, so I got my MFA in Latino Theater at UCSD and that kind of got me into San Francisco. I was in San Diego. We started a little theater company in San Diego that we ended up taking to Europe and taking a play across Europe that was in Spanish and English. That was a really interesting time and then after that, I got a job, even before I finished graduate school, in San Francisco at the Mission Cultural Center to renovate and open a Latino theater in the Mission Cultural Center right on Mission Street and 24th. And so that was really kind of my first

renovation project rebuilding that theater and developing. I worked a lot with El Teatro de la Esperanza there as one of our resident theater companies and, you know, built up a really strong program there when I got the NEA/TCG Director's Fellowship which was given to four theater directors nationwide every other year and so it's a very rare honor by the NEA where they supported me for a year to travel around the United States and learn from the great directors. So I lived in New York, in upstate New York, in Hartford, Connecticut, in Los Angeles and Portland. I worked with directors like Ann Bogart and Ping Chong and Peter Sellers and it was a wonderful opportunity to go to lots of different theaters, theater towns, communities, and wherever I went, I would look for where is the Latino Centro? Where are the Latinos in Minneapolis and what are they doing? Where are the Latinos in Hartford and what are they doing? And I found examples of organizations and buildings in several different states, you know, in several different stages of their development, so it was a good – that was a great education in learning how similar some of the mistakes are, you know, how important it is to Latinos to have these spaces – desperately important; what kinds of buildings worked for people, what kinds of stages and furniture and conditions worked for the art. And so while, you know, I learned a lot about directing plays, I was really looking at organizations and buildings and how – what was the practice across the country and so after I got back from the NEA year, the NEA/TCG year, I got a job at the theater where I was an intern, the Group Theatre, and so I went back to the Group Theatre, this time as Associate Artistic Director, not as the intern, and I got to direct all of their educational plays that we took on tour throughout the state or that we did on the main stage. I got to direct main stage plays as well and write and that was very exciting. I managed their education program and started something called the People of Culture Program where I went into schools and I talked to kids about how to understand the plays from the point

of view of the cultures that we all have. And then I left there. I took a brief respite and taught at the Seattle Community College District where I founded a program in Arts Administration and it was focused on people of color who were interested in becoming arts administrators and they asked me to start a program – an academic program there – and I also taught some ethnic studies classes as well. It was at about that time that I got a call from Pete Carrillo to go to San Jose to build the Mexican Heritage Plaza, which was a thirty-eight million dollar construction on an eight-acre site that was shared with a senior housing building and we had – there were five buildings planned at the Mexican Heritage Plaza with about forty thousand square feet of programmable space: a five hundred seat theater, a small museum, an education facility, a garden, and a beautiful multipurpose room; and so that was just a plan on a piece of paper when I got to San Jose. They had gotten the funding and they were about ready to get started on the project and I was appointed to be the organization’s representative on the building committee and so I got to be a part of the process on behalf of the organization, you know, making all the decisions on, you know, upholstery and wall colors and where the plugs were going to go and what kind of lights we were going to have in the theater and, of course, all the theater and technical work that I had been doing and all of the looking around the country that I had been doing helped me do that work, so that I could appoint a cultural center that was not only functional for theater and exhibits, but was functional for the Latino community because our community uses spaces a little bit differently. Every community does, so, for example, we made the orchestra pit a little three feet deeper than it normally is because when mariachis play, they stand up, they don’t sit down. And so we wanted to have the mariachis in the pit, so they could stand up and play for the folklorico and they wouldn’t be seen, you know, while in the pit. When I went and I saw the furniture they had for the lobby, they were all these beautiful upholstered

pieces with these high sides, high arms on them, and I said, no, no, no, no, no. When families come, they come in three generations and they all sit on top of each other, so we need to have good, sturdy benches where the whole family can sit on top of each other, you know, the kids sit on abuelita's lap and, you know, so we were able to craft a place, really a city of art, that in its heyday was serving forty thousand students with Latino arts programming classes and about two hundred thousand visitors and participants in our mariachi music series, and we were a Smithsonian affiliate, and we had a very significant first exhibit on the life and work of Cesar Chavez who grew up in that neighborhood. We had a concert series as well as computer classes and classes in a wide variety of things; every inch of the center was being used.

ESPITIA: How is the population in comparison to Austin as far as Latinos are concerned?

ESPARZA: It's about the same. It's about the same all the way around. It had about a million people and it was about thirty-three percent Latino. Of course, Austin now is a little bit more; it's upwards of forty, but it was about thirty, you know, the low thirties for Mexican and Mexican American populations, so most of the Latinos were Mexican and we, the Centro was right smack dab in the middle of the working class Latino community in San Jose.

ESPITIA: And so that might be a difference for –

ESPARZA: It is a difference here because of gentrification. The Latinos have moved elsewhere into another area away from the MACC and it's a challenge. It's been a challenge here. It also had the big, sunny plaza. We had the same kind plaza in San Jose and it was very problematic to use it during the summer. It was really difficult. Our building had the same deep porches, you know, and so when we really needed extra classroom space, we set up classrooms in the deep porches and had classes outdoors in the cool shade of the porches. So there have been some ways that I experienced that building in San Jose that I have been able to inform the staff here on

how to use this building a little more robustly and make it their own. You know, so there were, you know, some differences – ours was a square plaza very much like hacienda style, which is actually one of the – is a traditional style of building cultural centers in Mexico, in the hacienda style.

ESPITIA: Which would've been – I'm sort of thinking of what Fiesta Gardens, the original –

ESPARZA: Yes. A lot like Fiesta Gardens.

ESPITIA: – that they were going to do.

ESPARZA: Yeah, but only bigger, you know, and they could've made that choice here. I mean, they could've done a hacienda style, very traditional, but instead he left it an open half-circle so that our visitors, our participants would have the advantage of looking at the lake and the beautiful vista and so he – when Martín first told me about it, we were building – were just finishing up the Mexican Heritage Plaza and, in fact, the women on the board from CMACA came to visit the Mexican Heritage Plaza when we were building it and so they came out to visit and I saw that they were wearing sandals and I said, no, no, no, you can't go on a construction site in sandals, you need to go buy some closed-toe shoes. So I think they went off to, you know, a Save Less, you know, Shoe Mart that was in the neighborhood, bought some cheap tennis shoes so that they could tour the site and it was only until years and years later that I learned that they had been – they got into some trouble with city council because they had spent money – grant money – on shoes, which appeared to be a personal expenditure, but it was, in fact, a necessity to tour the site and think about what they wanted the Mexican American Cultural Center to be like.

ESPITIA: Do you remember some of those individuals that went to tour?

ESPARZA: Oh, it was Valerie Menard and Cathy Herron. I remember that distinctly. There might've been one other person, it might've been Roen.

ESPITIA: How did they find out about San Jose?

ESPARZA: I don't really know. Unless they found out about it through Martín del Campo, but I don't know if they knew Martín at that time. It was the largest Latino cultural center being built in the U.S. at the time, so it was right before the big centro in Albuquerque opened. So for, you know, a nanosecond, we were the largest one in the U.S. before Albuquerque opened.

ESPITIA: So that would've been – do you remember what year that was?

ESPARZA: In 1997 was when we opened the Mexican Heritage Plaza and, you know, some of the same issues, you know, marketing issues, outreach issues, although we had done – I had done lots and lots and lots of outreach in the community, getting involved with the Mayfair Community Plan. So I was there for about three or four years when I got a call from San Antonio that they wanted me to come help them build a Latino museum in San Antonio. So, of course, my parents were still living at the time and they were in San Antonio, so I said, ah, that's an opportunity to go be near them and I'm glad I did. I was with them for a couple of years and we completed the plan for the museum, of course, the mission statement and the format of the museum's programming, exhibitory, and the Smithsonian affiliation. I had also done a Smithsonian affiliation for the Mexican Heritage Plaza and had a lot of really, really great exhibition experiences with them when they were really getting going; in fact, I think we were the first or second affiliate of the Smithsonian at the time. And then I moved to San Antonio and started working on the museum, the Alameda Museum, when there was a dip in – I think it was 2001 when there was the recession, right after 9/11, and there was no funding for the museum to be found.

ESPITIA: Well, they'd been having problems, though, haven't they?

ESPARZA: Afterwards, it continued, and, yeah, I don't want to get into the details of that, but anyway, San Antonio led to – there was a changeover/turnover at the Mexican Heritage Plaza and so my friend, Blanca Alvarado, who was on the board of the Mexican Heritage Plaza, long-time elected official in San Jose, called me up and said, we need you. We need you to come back. So I went back and I became the Acting Executive Director and I think I was Active Executive Director for three years for a long, long time and I got the organization back on track, out of the red, got their programming back on track, things were going pretty well when they decided to hire the permanent Executive Director and they chose someone else. Ah, que lástima! So I went on my merry way. I did some more work with an organization called First Act. It was an association of people in technology, creativity, and the arts to develop more of a quality of life in San Jose and so I was their first Administrative Director and did a major international conference on creativity there in, I think it was around 2004. And that was when the Alameda called me back and said, "We need you now! We got the money!" So I went back to the Alameda in 2005 and I saw that some of the old problems were still the current problems and the problem wasn't about raising money, it was about the way money was being spent and, you know, I come from a poor family where you count every penny and we were very frugal growing up. We didn't have a lot and so it was really like, hmm, this is not going to work out because they're not taking care of the basics in terms of the way you manage money in a nonprofit and so I, at that point, ran into Jaime Beaman and Jaime Beaman told me about this job and said, "oh, you know, why don't you apply?" And ever since I joined in 2007, I've been a kid in a candy shop building museums and renovating theaters and building new cultural centers just as fast as they can throw them at me.

ESPITIA: So now let's make a comparison between the MACC and, of course, the Carver was already completed.

ESPARZA: Right. Mm-hmm.

ESPITIA: What were some of the other ones that you were overseeing that were recent?

ESPARZA: Well, when I came, you know, of course the Dougherty Arts Center had been in place for thirty years already. It's now thirty-five and that was thirty years old and, of course, the Zilker Hillside Theater had been there for fifty years and had been an institution there for fifty years. There was the Carver and there was the MACC that was the new one, but then there was also the New Museum and the O. Henry Museum and that was what was here when I got started. I saw an opportunity to use these city resources to build community through the arts by really focusing my staff on how to do more community engagement with the resources that we had. And that really has been part of the theme is to look at, you know, look at the glass half-full rather than half-empty and look at how much you can do with what you got, so I worked very hard. The Carver building had a lot of problems that had never been fixed and it took a lot of perseverance, but we have now resolved them all; problems with the HVAC, problems with the theater lighting. Sometimes when you have lead – it's a lead four, lead five building, I can't remember – I think it's a lead five building. Sometimes lead buildings are not always the most efficient buildings; it's one of the most complicated HVAC systems that the city has and it was very difficult to maintain it without a level of staffing that we didn't have. And so some of the successes, you know, that I saw with the Carver is leading a community, a strategic planning process that is really going to set the pace of the Carver's development for the next ten years. This community group of stakeholders want to see phase two and phase three of the Carver built, not in this bond, but in a bond that may come in 2018. They want to see more turnover in the

exhibits and so I have submitted a Smithsonian application to become an affiliate again and they may host the first Smithsonian exhibit in Austin. We also are contemplating an after school program there, although their education programming has fully ramped up and they have started doing more exhibits of an artistic nature, which was another thing that the community asked for. And so they're, you know, two or three years ahead of the MACC in terms of its growth and like the MACC, the Carver was a dream for the community for many, many years and they had to fight hard for that building and it was hard won. And yet, Rome wasn't built in a day. If they build it, they will not come. You have to work and work and work to bring the community in and to let them know what is happening in their center.

ESPTIA: I guess their history in a way – and by their history, I'm referring to those individuals that they had a more cohesive working together to get it built, to get it going versus that of what the MACC has encountered.

ESPARZA: I would agree with you. I think there was more cohesion in terms of the – and also they had the advantage of having had a cultural center in the old library and so – in the Carver library – and they had been doing programming in there for a long, long time. For them, the challenge was transitioning from a little, you know, thousand-foot space into a space that's thirty thousand square feet and that had a lot of challenges with the building. And I think for the first five years, they were really quite – they were adjusting, really kind of trying to figure it all out, how to make it work. And things have improved. I mean, things are – their theater schedule is all booked out, so they have a very, very busy theater schedule. Their education programs fill up. They have a great summer camp called Broadway Bound that went from ten children to fifty-three children last summer in which the kids learn how to, you know, act and sing and build sets and run lights and do everything that you have to do in a theater and they're eight or ten, you

know? And so I've seen them really grow around that theater in particular and right now we're trying to create some growth in the museum area where, you know, the founders found it so important to tell the story of Austin's past of the – and the ancestors, you know, that they put a lot of money and time into their permanent exhibits. And now that it's been six years, the community's going, saying, now what? What's next? Let's change it up a little and see, let's tell the story from a different perspective.

ESPITIA: But they have a good concept because when I was working on the trailblazers, I went there to get ideas for an exhibit that would only stay six months at the history center, but, I mean, that tells the story of their community.

ESPARZA: That is so important. You know, it is very important, but what I've seen at other centers is that's a phase. That it's important to have that information around or maybe in a pamphlet or as an exhibit that comes back on occasion, but people move past that phase and they begin to ask for more. And so that's where they're at right now. With the MACC, it's a little bit different in a certain sort of way because first of all, there are more Latino artists and the center is really more focused on art than the Carver, which has been very centered on history and has an archive and a collection where the MACC has been really focused on mostly visual arts and artistic development. Well, when we built the wing after this first phase was built, when we built the education part of it, there was a classroom, the bottom floor was supposed to be classrooms, but we have had a lot of problems with the multipurpose room for intimate theater because it's big and the houses look empty if you only have fifty people there and it's echoey for the spoken word and it's white and theaters are never white. And so I decided that we needed to transition that classroom downstairs into a black box theater, not – well, for theater – for intimate theater because that's the size of audiences that most Latino theaters have in town right now and you

want the house to look really full. We built it out with dressing rooms and a shower, storage for the company, and a way of doing a flexible space, so that the stage could go anywhere in the room and it would – it's also a very nice space for film, very comfortable, very black, you know, so it felt like a theater space. And that black box theater has served the community in this certain period of growth. With the next phase of the MACC's growth, we're going to be introducing the Latino Arts Residency Program and this is very similar to a program that I had introduced at the Mexican Heritage Plaza – the RAP Program or the Resident Arts Partners was what it was called. We adopted four Latino theater companies – theater and dance companies to live with us, rehearse there, and do their performances there. And some of the RAPP partners are still there. The residents here are going to apply competitively and we'll be able to pick two or three resident theaters that will live here for three and a half years. They'll be able to office here, have rehearsals, and performances here at a cost that they can afford.

ESPITIA: So they will pay for it?

ESPARZA: Yes. Instead of paying a rental fee, they will pay a dollar of every ticket that they sell, so they will pay, you know, predicated on how successful they are at the box office, you know, so it won't be a hardship. With the recession that we've just been through, we have seen that our Latino theater companies and dance companies are really struggling and we fear that if we don't do something quickly, that we're going to start losing them.

ESPITIA: And those are going to be local?

ESPARZA: Oh, yes. It's just Austin artists. We also will offer a three-month residency for these companies, smaller companies, that are just kind of starting out, they're on their training wheels and they need an experience to start building their resume of productions and so we'll be able to offer them a three-month residency with the same terms.

ESPITIA: What is the next phase do?

ESPARZA: Well, it's all based on the bond. And, of course, we're not in the 2012 bond. The 2012 bond really focused on things that needed to be fixed in the box – in the parks department. The next phase, which will be over behind the museum over there, will be a theater and probably a parking garage. We've debated on whether we want to have the larger theater that was originally slated to be an additional two theaters built here, a three hundred and fifty seat and a one thousand seat theater. And I run theaters and I know that staffing-wise, we would have to really ramp up. That's expensive and I'm not sure who would be able to fill a thousand seat house. So before we get very far into that investment, we need to create a business plan that could really validate who would be able to afford to use it and would we be able to fill it, i.e. in terms of audience members. Because you, you know, having a theater that you use twelve times a year, it's just not worth it, you know.

ESPITIA: Yeah. Well, I know in Victoria, which is relatively small, they finally did do one that was four hundred and fifty seats, I believe. We were able to – the very first time that there was a bilingual organization that I was founder and president of, we were able to bring in Las Nuevas Tamaleras from San Antonio and that was two performances on a Saturday night and it was sold out at four hundred and fifty. We were so surprised. Both! We didn't know that that many people would attend something like that. Of course, that was the first time ever a bilingual, so you might be surprised. I mean, you know, it could be done, I guess, but, yes, like you said, it would take a lot of work and definitely a lot of –

ESPARZA: I think that perhaps the theater companies would need a little more time for growth in order to build their audiences, so before we get to the one thousand seat house, we need to grow our theater companies, so that they can put together, you know, successful shows, shows

that can bring in larger audiences. So in some ways, you have to scale the size of your theaters so that the companies that use them can be successful. We had a five hundred seat house at the Mexican Heritage Plaza and most of the time, it looked empty, so it looked like the theater wasn't successful, like the theater company in residence wasn't successful. They had a solid audience of two hundred and fifty people, but when you spread them out over a five hundred seat house, it doesn't look very full, you know. And one of the advantages of the Carver Theater, which was a bone of contention with the community, was that they wanted a very big theater, too, but a smaller theater, a one hundred and fifty seat theater, was what was built. But that theater is very user-friendly because the steep rake in the house makes – kind of closes in the space and you feel a little bit closer to the stage and it feels a little more encapsulated because of the steep rake that they have in that theater. So, you know, they sell out. They have full houses, so it looks successful. Now that they've had a lot of success with that theater, they're going to be ready for a bigger theater, you know, in 2018 or if they get the next bond.

ESPITIA: When is the MACC scheduled to be placed on a bond? Is there something?

ESPARZA: If there is a 2018 bond, that would be the bond it would be on. But, of course, it's up to community activism to get something on the bond. It is on a master list of bond projects that the Parks Department has developed, but that's, you know, along with 1.3 billion dollars in infrastructure repairs and so when things are selected for a bond, they pick and choose the projects. This bond that's currently coming up is going to be really the smallest bond for the parks piece of it that the Parks Department has ever had and that's like 350 million. It's three hundred and something million and that is the smallest bond they've ever had. The only new buildings that are coming out of that is a new Montopolis Recreation Center because it really needs to be replaced and, hopefully, a new Dougherty Arts Center because it must be replaced.

ESPITIA: Now let's go to the Asian American Center. What, in comparison to the MACC, in comparison to the Carver, is there a comparison?

ESPARZA: Well, in comparison, it's been a much shorter period of time of activism to get that project going. I think they've been working on it only ten years as opposed to thirty, so a much shorter period of time. Very, very political, so the political savvy of that group is on a very high level. It's also a Pan-Asian effort and so they've been more successful in drawing together communities that have never been at the table together and I think that's another difference. You know, all of our communities are somewhat divided and have issues. Doing the grand opening of the MACC was a doozy because there were some people who objected to other people even being invited, let alone recognized for their contribution, and, you know, it was a relay race. It was someone took up the torch for a few miles and then they passed the torch on to another group and they kept it going for a few miles and then they passed it on to another group and so, you know, it took a lot of different organizations to keep it going for the Mexican American Cultural Center and at the grand opening, we made a special effort to thank everyone and since we've opened, we've had an expressed policy that everyone is welcomed here. We don't make, you know, we are blind to all of the conflicts of the past, you know, we just invite everyone here.

ESPITIA: I think that's what I see in so many ways and that's why I wanted to talk about the three ethnic –

ESPARZA: Yeah.

ESPITIA: Because in making that comparison, you can see the differences and at the end, you know, at the end, everyone as you said is welcome and there shouldn't really – I mean, this is, after all, a building that was created by the community itself working together and that's what should be unifying. The end result is going to be the future and the future has to see the current

working together, so that they can, you know, otherwise, they're not going to come because they will have seen all this infighting and so forth.

ESPARZA: Right. And I think adopting the Latino Arts Resident Projects, which council passed in September, will help a lot because what I found when we had the resident partners in San Jose was that when you have a lot of artists around all day, they start to talk to one another and they start to be creative with one another and they create this sort of currency in the facility that is really open and fluid. It begins to feel like a party every day, you know, like people are – then they start collaborating and doing things together that are greater than anything they could imagine alone. And so I think that that's going to be a really important step. I would have liked if I had been here when the Carver opened, I probably would've done a similar thing at the Carver in developing resident artists, but the way the Carver was designed, it doesn't have as many of the discreet spaces that the MACC has where you could carve out a rehearsal space, or carve out an office space for resident companies, so in some ways, the design of their building has been a hindrance. They also don't have very many classrooms and so it was built to be a museum and a theater mostly, the Carver, and has a lot of difficulty with being flexible with being anything else, the spaces aren't there and that's something that I talked with at length. Now, the Asian American Resource Center is very efficiently designed. It's one of the most efficient uses of space I've ever seen in a cultural center environment where they are going to have the capacity to have nine classrooms, a resource center, and a great big multipurpose room that can be divided into eight more classrooms, so they have a capacity for seventeen classrooms there, a big outdoor space for festivals, and because we're partnering with one particular nonprofit, the Asian American Resource Center Foundation, they have been working ten different communities, not just one – Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian, Indian, ten different

language groups, in fact, Vietnamese – that are going to – have already started booking their spaces. The community has already brought us fifty-three different festivals to put on our calendar, so they're going to open with a bang and be able to sustain it.

ESPITIA: They have learned a lot. They have taken a look at all that has been going on and what, you know, other Bullock and some of these others, what they had, and they have gone in and been able to do that. They sort of put everything whereas with us, it's – if you put the Hispanic community total, its umbrella for statistical purposes, they have their umbrella, but it's, again, beyond that statistical. Instead, they're all working together to have something and to be able to use that. Again, I wanted the listener, those individuals that will listen to this, to have a better understanding also.

ESPARZA: Well, I think another big difference between the three is that certainly the African American community was a much more landed American community having been U.S. citizens for a longer period of time. The Latino community, fifty-fifty, you know, in terms of new immigrants and landed or assimilated Latino Americans and in the Asian community, there is a much, much higher immigrant population and so it's more like seventy-five percent of the population is immigrant and so the needs that we will be serving at the Asian American Resource Center are a bit different because it is really an orientation to this country, to this language, to how to access city services, much more of an immigrant orientation center.

ESPITIA: When are they scheduled to open?

ESPARZA: If all goes well, we'll reach substantial completion in April and our community is hoping and praying that means that we can have a grand opening in May, but I warned them that I've never been on a construction project that delivered the building on time. It's very rare and

so this building was considerably late when it opened. And so it's very optimistic to say May, although they would like me to say May. It probably will be more like August when we open.

ESPITIA: Is May – is it Asian American month?

ESPARZA: Yes. That's why they wanted to open it in May, but they're not ready and building – we may have a soft opening, i.e. we may be able to cut the ribbon and be able to show everyone an empty building because it just may not be ready, yet.

ESPITIA: Who is their architect? Do they have an architect that is –

ESPARZA: They do and I don't know who it is. I haven't met them. I haven't been able to – I haven't worked on the building for very long because it, again, it was like the MACC, there was a nonprofit, the Asian American Resource Center Foundation, that was supposed to operate the building. And so when they went into the bond, it was with the assurance that this nonprofit would be supporting the building and so six months ago or so, the nonprofit came to the city and said, we're not going to be able to support the building and it became a city project and then they gave it to me and they assigned it to the Parks Department and to me. So I'm very excited, you know, I'm like really into this and so I'm very excited about they're getting their center and they're making it their own. And I think probably, you know, one of the hardest things to do is to be a city employee and to run these centers because you can have very strong allegiances to your culture group, but at the end of the day, you have to uphold policies and procedures, you know, you've got to do the city bureaucracy thing and some community members, I mean, they just cannot see that you're on the same side – that we're all on the same side, just because you've got to take care of city business.

ESPITIA: We just went through the policies training yesterday, three and a half hours, and the scary part at the end was, okay, the last part was records management. It's just like – and I'm,

you know, it's like oh my God, for three and a half hours and they used puppets and all of that and I'm sitting there thinking, okay, come on, you know, but it is true. I mean, we've got to abide. I mean, those are policies that, you know, sometimes you think well, could it be something else that we can do away with this and instead let's use this, but something is always happening that, you know, and you have to get all these changes.

ESPARZA: I have a lot of city council interaction. A lot of things come my way, you know, from city council that I have to do and, you know, you have to do them. In a way, this is a job that has – how should I put it? Because it's in a city environment, because it's in a municipal job, I'm identified more as a city worker than I am with the artist that I have been for thirty years. It created this, you know, separation between me and my past.

ESPITIA: That's what I was going to ask. One of the questions that I was going to ask is to, you know, because you have – I mean, you were – when you were in San Jose, you had to deal with a lot of that. When you went to San Antonio, you were there with the Alameda, you had to deal with a lot of that. Then you come here and you obviously started running right from the get-go. I mean, you're right there at the opening, you're having to get everything ready, you're having to oversee this, and then you see this increase of the number of facilities, the number of staffing, the number of, you know, so many things.

ESPARZA: And construction projects. After that, we completed and opened the Susanna Dickinson Museum. We renovated the Zilker Hillside Theater. We're doing the restoration of the Ney Museum. We're also doing a renovation of the old Carver Library to make it into a genealogy center and we're in strategic planning process right now with the Zilker Botanical Garden to reframe the Zilker Botanical Garden as an educational center and garden, but really kind of repositioning it so that it can be more successful. I also have the Austin Nature and

Science Center and the Splash Sheffield Education Center at Barton Springs Pool and we don't have any construction projects there right now, but, you know, those were the new pieces that were brought on board. I also oversee the Umlauf Property that the city has just received from the Umlauf since Angelina Umlauf died last June and left the city their property and about two hundred pieces of sculpture, so there's going to be a long trajectory of developing that into a part of the museum as a studio museum. And, of course, now the Asian American Resource Center and if we're able to be successful, designing and building a new Dougherty Arts Center, you know what the story is.

ESPITIA: That's a lot of work. Yes, that's a lot of work there.

ESPARZA: So, you know, when I came to this city, it was like leave your ego at the door. You have no self. And it is – you have to completely commit to the idea of you are a public servant from sunup to sundown.

ESPITIA: Yeah. And everybody's got a different opinion and it is very hard. I can definitely, you know – I see that it's one of those things that you can be a friend or you can be a foe to the same person. You just never know.

ESPARZA: You just never know. It depends on the day.

ESPITIA: Right. Yeah. If you were to look into this crystal ball and say another five years from now, what would be your vision for the MACC in as far as where it will be in the direction?

ESPARZA: You know, there's a couple of things that I'm working on right now that are going to help manifest a vision overall for my division, but in which the MACC plays a very important role. I'm working on a program called Any Given Child, which is a program of the Kennedy Center, in which they took us through a process of writing a ten-year strategic plan for how every child, K through 8, is going to receive the benefits of an arts rich education and so every child in

AISD, K through 8, in the next ten years is going to receive an arts rich education and part of that formula is by partnering with community organizations, including Parks Department organizations, to fulfill out of school time, after school time, weekends, summers, spring breaks or what have you, with activities that are not only fun, but that support academic achievement, so we become partners marching in step with AISD to support academic achievement. Now the reason why this is so important to the MACC is because of the majority of children in AISD are Latino and we know from statistics that a lot of these kids are coming from working class backgrounds and have parents whose English is a second language, so they have some disadvantages starting out. We have, right now, the opportunity to impact students between the ages of three and eight to support academic achievement in places like these by providing fruitful after school, out of school experiences so that they can exceed in school because if we miss this opportunity, we will be growing the largest working class population that Texas has ever seen; working poor. And so we have a challenge to use this space and use the resources and opportunities that we have here and to get all the artists involved in the project as well to really focus on uplifting our children and particularly Latino children.

ESPITIA: There if you get the children, parents will come.

ESPARZA: Uh-huh. And parents will come.

ESPITIA: And they're the future.

ESPARZA: Now one of the best magnets that I have used in other cities has been the Smithsonian Institution and so I was able to complete a Smithsonian affiliation application and they told me yesterday that it's looking really good. So I hope that by next year, we will be welcoming the Smithsonian Institution who can bring not only the best exhibits the nation has to offer, but also educational opportunities, visits by curators and researchers, opportunities to learn

through films, and they have a Latino center at the Smithsonian. And so I think that that relationship is also going to help uplift the MACC by providing some very high-powered, high-level cultural influences and a nationwide network of affiliate museums that can help support our work. And so I'm hoping that all of this will wrap up into a vision of creating a network of support to develop communities through quality arts, arts making, and educational experiences.

ESPITIA: This brings back what I've always thought that it should be and it's, again, when you work so hard to have something like this created, built, then you bring with it that pride and I think in a way some of it has been missing, but you've just, you know, painted this picture of the future. It seems like, you know, y'all are definitely looking into bringing back that, you know, that pride and getting it all to where the community can see that, hey, they're trying. They really are trying to get it and I just – in listening to all of these interviews, it seems that that's the direction that they really want it to go.

ESPARZA: In terms of building back the pride.

ESPITIA: In building back the pride because they saw it when you had those little buildings here, you know, you had people coming in, la familia, and they talk about how people will bring in food, you know, and they would be in this warehouse that was this, you know, place for them to gather for theater and all of these different types of events and it didn't matter whether it was hot or cold or whatever, people would show. They would show up and they would be there and that, I see, that, you know, but, again, as you said, when you're working with the schools, when you're working with organizations, with other art groups, and all – it's just five years since it's opened. It's been a little time. It still has more growth.

ESPARZA: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

ESPITIA: It has more growth and the history is one that –

ESPARZA: I think it takes a full ten years to really, truly manifest. You know, and speaking of pride, pride is something that I don't think as city employees that we can just sort of dial up. You know, we can't say, come and be prideful. Pride is something that is a collateral effect of people coming together and finding a common ground, finding their community, you know, having a good time is part of it, too, but finding their reflection of themselves in their neighbors and seeing something of quality happen that is a reflection of themselves, so that they can see that this is part of us, you know. It is a collateral effect of making something happen, but we know that you don't make things happen alone. You make things happen in partnership and by inviting people in and saying you're needed. You really are needed. So I'm hoping, you know, that – this was my first five years in trial by fire and, you know, I survived it and I learned a lot. Martín del Campo would be proud. Martín was a short man and he always wore a bowtie and he had these Coke bottle glasses, you know, these really thick, round glasses. He was very dapper. I learned later that he spent money on having his chin lifted and his hair dyed and he was a little vain and he had a cane and a little black valise and when he showed me the drawings, there were tears in his eyes. He carefully unfolded the vellum paper where he had hand-drawn the layout of the MACC and he pointed out to me in Spanish that this was the moon and the plaza was the sun. And when I'd see him on occasion, he'd come over to the plaza every once in a while. I'd ask him how it was going, if they had found the funding and he'd shake his head, you know, but it will happen, he'd say. It will happen and he had a great belief that this would be a great place and a great center.

ESPITIA: From a vision to reality, that's what I always say, you know, yeah. You have that vision, it will become. It will come true.

ESPARZA: And I'm glad. I'm glad that it was his vision and Jaime's vision and Theodoro's vision to see this place manifest. Sometimes we found with the Mexican Heritage Plaza, it was a very beautiful building, beautiful gardens, very well-kept, and people would go up to the gate and just kind of peer in. They'd open the gate and they'd peer in and say, am I supposed to come in here? Can I come in? And in some ways, this building has been a little bit of the same and that is so beautiful. It is so nice that everyone is like is it okay to come in? Because we've never had anything this nice; we're not used to it. And so part of the challenge is inviting people in to make it their own.

ESPITIA: Well, it's been great talking to you. I've learned a lot and a lot of this definitely, I think, needed to be stated. It is – everyone, as I said, with this particular project, everyone that we've interviewed, some of them have different ideas, but I've also – I wish that I could've done them all myself because I know that there's so many questions and so many questions as you know now, in depth questions, but this is the only way that the future, when whoever is sitting and listening, will at least have a better understanding of what. You know, you could read what other little piece of article might be written, and the statements or whatever, but it's still not the whole thing and, as you said, you know, because this is a city entity, but it's also a community and so everyone, you know, it's got to work together and we have to better understand. But in another five years, it will be the tenth year, so we'll see. And we'll see exactly.

ESPARZA: We'll see how much we've done and accomplished.

ESPITIA: Yes. Yes. Well, thank you very much.

ESPARZA: Thank you!

(Interview ends)