

David Cuevas

Interviewed by Sierra Vela
September 17, 2022
Interviewed conducted in San Antonio, Texas

Transcribed by Sierra Vela

[Sierra Vela]: So, we are going to have about three seconds of silence for the room sound starting now (pause). And now we'll begin. So it is September 17, at 1:15 p.m.. We are in San Antonio, um, what's your address? (laughs)

[David Cuevas]: 1165 Mesa Blanca.

[Vela]: Perfect! Um, and we have David Cuevas here, um, and I am Sierra Vela. And, do I have your permission to record?

[Cuevas]: Yes, you do. we're

[Vela]: Okay, so we are going to go ahead and get started with the interview. So, first we're just going to start with like some family history kind of such. So, um, when and where were you born?

[Cuevas]: I was born in 1947, September 1, in Corpus Christi, Texas.

[Vela]: Nice, okay. And then, um, what about your immediate family? Like what about your parent's names, or any relatives, your siblings that you had?

[Cuevas]: My father's name is Ruben Cuevas, and my mother's name is Ninfa Salinas. I have an older sister by the name of Imelda, um, my older brother, one year older, is Ruben Cuevas. Um, then myself, David Cuevas, I have a younger sister (clears throat), pardon me. I have a younger sister, Carmen Cuevas, her actual name is Mary Carmen Cuevas, and then my younger brother is Carlos Cuevas, and then yet another younger brother, Alfonso Cuevas.

[Vela]: (Coughs) It's contagious, the coughs. (laughs) To clear your throat, um. Interesting! Okay, so cool. Um, next question is, was your immediate family close, and how does your family compare to when you were young to how it is now?

[02:11]

[Cuevas]: Well, my father was a shoe cobbler, an occupation that he learned from his father. My father was born in Mexico, and learned the trade of repairing shoes or in his case, he called it "rebuilding shoes," because he would take a pair of shoes and not only repair or replace the soles or heels, he would completely rebuild the shoes as a brand new pair of shoes. Um, my mother was born in Leesville, Louisiana, to my grandparents, Alfonso Salinas and María de la Luz Villarreal, both born in Nuevo León, Mexico. They came to the United States, in 1915, my mother was born in 1920, in Louisiana. And then, my grandfather who at the time worked for the

railroad, went to Corpus Christi and found employment there with the railroad company. The on exciting thing about my mother's family, because I've done genealogy, is that I've discovered that my mother's family, it comes from the family that originally found the state of Nuevo León in Mexico, in 1516, I believe. They were sent by the governor of Mexico, his, my 16th great great grandfather, Diego de la Montemayor was sent with sixteen families (clears throat), from Mexico City all the way to Monterrey, at the time it was called something else, but they were the ones that discovered Monterrey and many of the town that surround Monterrey, especially the town of Cerralvo, where my grandfather was born, so that is a very proud history that I have about being related to those people, that have carried the history of the founding of Nuevo León, Mexico. My dad's family, were Sephardic Jews, uh, which came from San Luis Potosi, in the state of San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Um, my grandfather, uh, and I haven't been able to go too far on my father's side because the Jewish population did not always volunteer the births of their children because it had to be done through the Catholic Church. And the Catholic Church was not quite very good with the Jews. So all of the people that came from Portugal and Spain back during the 1500s, uh, even though they were Jewish, they had to be converted to Catholicism, or they hid their religion, uh, keeping the Jewish tradition and behaving like Catholics. Those were called Sephardic Jews, or also Crypto Jews. They practiced their religion at home. So, as a result I have not been able to accurately depict all of the past generations of the Cuevas, on my dad's side, or the Ayala, which is my paternal grandmother's side—maternal side I mean. And uh, so I'm stuck at the year 1721 on their side.

[Vela]: So, obviously, you know, we can tell you've done some research (laughs) on your, history of your family—

[Cuevas]: It's-it's been, it's been something that I've done for the past, I'm going to estimate, thirty-five years.

[Vela]: Nice, um, well now that we're talking about your past, maybe let's fast forward a little bit for your history, or for your, future. So, um, you are my grandfather (laughs) on my mother's side. Um, so how was that like growing up, um and then being an adult now and raising your kids, you had four kids, um, and then now you have grandchildren, me, your favorite, obviously. But, um, how's it like doing that, you know, what was that journey like?

[Cuevas]: Um, you mean being a child and then growing up to be an adult?

[Vela]: Yeah, like a little bit of a, kind of like a little summary of your life, kind of.

[06:48]

[Cuevas]: Well, as a child, uh, because my dad did have his business as a shoe repairman, or shoe cobbler, uh, it was our duty, both my brother and I to, after school have to travel to the shoe shop. And back then, in the '50s when we were younger, we would have to take the bus because my mother did not drive at the time, we took the bus from our home to the shop on Leopard Street. Um, when we were even younger, and we lived closer to the shoe shop, we lived on Massey Street there on Corpus, which now is—the house is gone because of the police station that was added in the mid-'60s. Uh, we would be able to walk from Massey Street to my dad's

shoe shop on Leopard Street. And of course we couldn't walk from our current house that we had growing up to the shoe shop, but the typical life was working at the shoe shop after school, until about 7 o'clock was the normal time that my dad would close, and he would drive us back to the house. We would eat, and then we'd do our homework. And then, it repeated again every day, including Saturdays. That was my lifestyle. As I progressed as an adult, uh, I recognized that, having a father who was not, um, who would not participate in, in the joys I think of a father-son relationship, uh, it was pretty difficult not having the time for my dad to play with me. Baseball, touch, football, whatever it was that dad's normally do with their son. My dad's ambition and goal was to make money for the family. And my dad was a very, very good provider, I can never take that away from him. He just wasn't a very good father as far as being a father figure to the children. He did, very well, after hours, when he came home. We would be lectured on literature, the classics, art, music. It was very demanding because, coming from a Jewish background that he had, he was also forced to learn the classics, literature, art, that's part of the Jewish religion. So he wanted to make sure that we understood the values of that part of culture. Not so much having a father-son relationship or father-daughter relationship that my sisters also missed. So, as I became an adult, I told myself that I needed to be a better father, if ever I grew up and had children, and got married. So, I was able to try to, be a better parent because of my background, be, uh, being a child without a, supporting father as far as father-son relationship. But it was rather difficult because it was during the time of Vietnam, that I was sent away, right after I got married to Ofelia Sierra, and I had to serve my time in the military. Now, I had already had two years of college, I had already enrolled in my third year at UT [University of Texas] at Austin, when I had to quit school because my father injured himself in the shoe shop. He broke his, his leg moving, uh, heavy equipment. So the only person who could run the shop, was myself and my mother. My older brother was already in his third year at UT, and the draft, um, board would not allow two sons of the same family to be exempt unless they were both in college. So I got stuck working at the shoe shop, had to quit school, but then the draft board caught me in September when I did not enroll in college. I tried to maneuver myself out of that, by giving them reasons why, because of my dad. And my dad was well-known in Corpus, uh, being a shoe cobbler that he was, being there since the early '30s with his father, um. It was a name that everybody knew in Corpus, and Corpus was not as big as it is today. So, even the draft clerk in Corpus, or for the Nueces County draft board, knew my father. And she knew the circumstances, and she tried to be as gentle as possible, but she had a job to do, and that was to enroll all of the eligible, uh, young men into the draft. So I was drafted in October, I left and in between my basic training, I was able to marry Ofelia Sierra. Uh, I went back in, back into the service, and did some more training, I was able to send for her, to uh, Minnesota where I was stationed at a missile base, in a place called Cambridge, Minnesota. And that's where my first daughter, Denise was born in 1969. The army wanted to send me to Europe, as early as July of 1968, and, I'm sorry, 1969. And I could not go, I got an exception because my wife at the time was pregnant. So they give me an exception for September, still no baby, and they finally give me an extension till the end of October, the final extension and then Denise was born October 13th. So once she had the baby, we had to pack, and I think Denise must have been ten days old when we had to pack the car, and drove down to Corpus Christi so that I could drop off her, our belongings, and little Denise. And then immediately I had to drive to Europe to continue my tour in the army. Ended up in U.S. Naval Missile Base, and then unfortunately, I had a surprise that I was reassigned to, what I believe was the CIA. And this is not supposed to be out, but it's been out for, for quite a while. I was drafted into the CIA for three weeks, to work on a project that I

had no knowledge what I was going to be doing and flown away to a jungle, which they never told me where I was. But through my research, I figured out it was either Cambodia or Laos. Although we were not supposed to be in Laos at the time. It was not Vietnam, I know that for a fact. But it was probably Cambodia, did a—worked on a project, and then came back. Everything was silent at the time, but finally when I left the service, uh, it was 1970 in October, I was able to rejoin my wife and my daughter. And from then, because Hurricane Celia had just hit Corpus in September 6 of 1970, there were no apartments available, because the city had been pretty well damaged with the—with the, uh, hurricane. So I ended up staying with my in-laws, Pauline and Frank Sierra, they were very nice, they were able to accommodate me and my wife and daughter. I was able to find employment working at a TV repair shop for a couple of months, and then I was told that the US Navy was hiring ex-veterans, so I was able to find a job at the Navy station, Naval station there in Corpus Christi. Very, very good pay. And I worked there for two years, and then I was told by a former classmate, that Southwestern Bell was hiring. And I was able to get a job with Southwestern Bell, after a lot of, um, negotiating because I was a Hispanic. And at the time, they were not hiring Hispanic but there was a federal order that demanded all of these corporations hire enough Blacks and, and people of color by then, including women. So I was just lucky to have been able to find that position. But after I got that city job at Southwestern Bell, I had two more, uh, we had two more pregnancies but three children. We had a pregnancy in 1974, of two, of a set of twins, Roger and Richard, which was a surprise to us because we thought we were carrying just one. It also surprised our doctor because he had no knowledge that there were two babies in her. And then our final child was Rene, born in 1974. But, as far as a father, I—I did try to, instill values in my children a lot more than what my dad did. Uh, that I taught them the same thing that my dad did with music, culture and literature. But I also played, I did spend more time with my kids than my dad—my dad ever did. As much as I could. And, of course the demanding job that I had with Southwestern Bell didn't make it easy for me to be a good parent. And then unfortunately, my ex-wife had other issues, marital issues, that caused the marriage to be terminated nine years later, nine or ten years later. Um, it was a very nasty divorce, um, but it was all better for the children, and for both of us to have terminated that marriage. As a parent of separated children, um, it became even more difficult, because I was then promoted to San Antonio, on a promotion as an engineer. I was in San Antonio for six months, and then I was promoted again to St. Louis, Missouri, on a senior engineer position. And it was during that time that I had—I had already met, uh, Estella, that I told her that, and she had put in for a transfer to go to St. Louis, and, or, I'm sorry, to San Antonio and, I told her to stop doing that because I was already being promoted again to, St. Louis. So, we went ahead and quickly got married, to hopefully helped the transition of her moving from Corpus to San Antonio, to St. Louis. But again, the distance between myself and the children because very difficult for me to be a good parent, because I didn't see them but once or twice a year. And that made it very difficult, uh, and certainly it—it, I think I did affect the children. Especially the boys, because it was not enough bond between, the father and the son type of relationship that I had also encountered in my own, uh, youth with my dad and, and the kids. So I, again, I've tried to do that as well, as I started having grandchildren, again I've tried to instill the same values that my dad had given, and today I am very proud that my grandchildren do recognize, the culture, the reading, the literature, the art, and also musicals to this point, because it's something that I needed to give my children and my grandchildren, so that they could experience the same, type of enjoyment I've had all these years. So that's about it.

[Vela]: Nice, and then, do you want to name your, uh, grandchildren?

[Cuevas]: I will!

[Vela]: (laughs)

[Cuevas]: My eldest, is Sierra Vela, uh born to Denise and Alton Vela. Uh, the second one is Sofia Vela, also born to Denise and Alton Vela. My son Roger married a gal, a beautiful lady, Stacia, in Denver, Colorado. Oh! I'm sorry, Alton Alex who was born also to Denise and Alton Vela, and then my son Roger and Stacia had a son, William, who lives in Denver. And then, um, our son Rene Cuevas, married, um. Oh my god I'm losing—I'm losing track. I'll think of it in a minute, it's my senior moment. They have a beautiful daughter named Ava, who looks exactly like Rene. Um, and uh, and then we have our final granddaughter, is, uh also—

[Vela]: Bella.

[Cuevas]: —to Roger and Stacia. Isabella, um, she is really cute (laughs), and really spunky. In the meanwhile, my-my younger son, I'm sorry, the younger twin, Richard, um married a beautiful lady, who had two children from a previous marriage. He name is Kat, and she had twins also, identical twins just like Richard and Roger are identical twins. And they're Camille and Emery, and they are, uh, I think they are the youngest. I think they're younger than, yes they are younger then. So, it's been a lot of fun, I don't get to see, William and Ava, or William, Ava, and Isabella as often as we'd like to, because they're either in Denver or in St. Louis. [21:49] A valid grandparent when distance is in the way. But, the closest ones of course are Sierra, Sofia, and Alton Alex, and the new girls, Camille and Emery. So I, again, we try to, give them the value of culture that we have in the world, with painting- with art, music, and literature.

[Vela]: I would like to state that Uncle Rene's, um, wife is Aunt Erika.

[Cuevas]: (gasp) Erika, thank you! (laughs) I don't know why, my, my brain just went silent at that point, but you're right, yes, Erika. Erika is a darling lady as well. Uh, and sometimes I wonder why she puts up with my son, because he can be difficult. Well, I shouldn't say difficult. He can be a card, if, if you know what I mean. Lot of fun, he has a college degree, but he's a little bit silly at times.

[Vela]: Well, um, now that we know about your life, thank you for that, um. What about, after you retired? So you're retired now, any like, hobbies or stuff that you pick up on?

[Cuevas]: Yes, I, I was very fortunate to have retired at age fifty-five in 2002. Um, Southwestern Bell went through a series of changes, um, serious changes. When I first went up to St. Louis, they were going through a reorganization, and it went from Southwestern Bell Telephone to Southwestern Bell Corporation. And in that, reorganization, they closed a lot of, um, some of the smaller engineering and marketing centers, business offices throughout the five-state area. And they consolidated centers, uh, in St. Louis as part of the corporation. While that was good it made our jobs, especially, well, every job but, it-it directly affected me because now I was doing, a lot of the planning, the forecasting, and engineering for the whole five-states, rather than each state doing their own planning. And the pay was excellent, I cannot complain about the pay. The

hours not so much, um, both my wife and I, Estella, worked for the company, and it was not, uncommon for us to wake up at 4:30, 5 o'clock in the morning, and head out to work. And we were always at work at, at or before 7 o'clock. Not so much that it was required, but we needed, at least I needed that much time, before the other people started walking and stopping by your cubicle and talking for twenty minutes when you're trying to get some work done. And we also worked late, uh, it got so bad that, uh, we had- the company, the corporation needed to have meetings during the weekends. There was just too much going on. So it was not uncommon to have meetings, even on Sundays, because there was just so much to do. And I traveled a lot, in- not only so much in the five state region, but also nationwide, because what we were doing in our corporation, and I'll speak only for the engineering department, um. My team would come up with these new plans for engineering the equipment that the telephone companies needed, and, not that I'm bragging, but our group was, at the top of the spectrum, because other companies were copying our procedures and the way we did our plans for engineering and for casting the telephone equipment. So as the lead, I would have to go out to different companies, even in Canada, to present our procedures and methods for providing a more efficient way of, and more economical way of-of placing new telephone equipment. Uh, for the, for the use of long distance calls, local calls, and data. So yes, I did require in, uh, retire in 2003, very fortunate, because of the compensation I was getting, as well as my wife Estella. She was also compensated very well, and it had to do with being part of the corporation and the reorganization that they did. But as, I guess about a year before we retired in the year 1999 or 2000, the Southwestern Bell Corporation started buying New England Telephone, and also were looking at buying Pacific Telephone in California. Which meant that we would have to have a lot more coverage of, also doing those plans for New England Telephone and Pacific Bell. Pacific Bell was probably the second, I think, in command as far as procedures and methods for running a telephone company, or a TelCo. But they were very interested in being bought out by Southwestern Bell, but I knew what was happening. And then I knew how much money I had already saved up in my 401K, and what the value of my pension was. And right before we retired, that's when, Southwestern Bell Corporation was very close to buying out AT&T, and they did. Uh, and then they retired and I'm very glad that we did because once they did that, Southwestern Bell owned AT&T itself, but they decided, the board of directors decided that it was better to keep the logo and the name of AT&T rather than the SBC Corporation because it was a better known company worldwide. And that was a good choice. So yes, after my retirement, uh, I had already done some photography, which is something that I've loved since I was in the 5th grade, that was when I first got my camera. My first camera. And it was more of a stress relief for me to do studio photography, and I started by photographing still life objects of pictures and flowers and stuff of that nature but then I got into photographing faces, and I would get volunteers, mainly from my neighborhood, family members, and then eventually coworkers. After I retired, I wanted to concentrate more on that, and I opened up a small studio in my house and I started working with several of the models on the internet, and after interviews, whether we would click or not would mean whether I would work with them or not. So that kept me very busy and it was very fulfilling because that was my passion. Not, not engineering, but I knew that working in Art would not provide me the right amount of financial support that I would need for my retirement. And that is what I do today, uh, I'm still trying to get back into my studio work which has been closed because of the pandemic. I also do a lot of reading, uh, I do a lot of history research, reading history books, so that's been my pleasure.

[Vela]: Nice. Thanks for letting us know, um, now we're going to go kind of back. Um, rewind, so, we're going to see—what was your family's financial status like when you were younger, so we know that your, um, father as you said, uh, was a shoe cobbler and such. Um, what was the family's financial status, um, and how did that like affect, your lifestyle and such?

[30:25]

[Cuevas]: (clears throat) Well my father, um, his background of course, he-he is the only- he has, four siblings and when they came over from Mexico, being from a Jewish family of course, everybody has to have a college degree, has to have an education. Unfortunately, my father was already preparing to go to medical school when his father passed away in 1938, and he had to run the business. It broke his heart, but he had, the finances that he had was just on that shoe shop. He took over the business and was able to somehow support his siblings, his mother, buy a house for his mother, and put his siblings all through college. Everyone one of them, my uncle Efram became a chemist, my aunt Noeime became an English teacher I believe, who traveled worldwide as a missionary. My aunt Mara, uh, became a schoolteacher as well, and my aunt Martha, who just recently passed away, uh, had a business degree. So, I don't really know how much money my dad supported my family, but yet the college tuition back then was not as expensive as it is today, but that's one thing that he was really proud of, but also very disappointed that he did not get a chance to become a doctor. Um, so our finances, by my dad trying to- to scrounge up some money, to support his own family was difficult. Um, we never went to bed hungry, there was always food on the table. But my brother and I also had to work at the shoe shop, the one thing that I do remember working at the shop is that we would get paid 50 cents a week, for working at the shop after school, till 7 o' clock at night. And then we would get all the proceeds from shining shoes, whenever somebody dropped off a pair of shoes we would get that money, which was 10 cents. So, while it's not a lot of money, it was something we had in our own pocket that we were able to raise ourselves, that we were able to figure out, yeah I can make money by doing this. But, there, again there was never any time we were hungry, my mother was able to be—was very good at buying the produce and the foods by shopping very well. And she was a very, very thrifty shopper. So, she made everything last, um, we never left any food on our table, like a lot of people do today. We made sure that our plates were clean, and mother didn't have to tell us, finish your food, we ate everything they gave us. So as far as my dad's finances, I would say that I know that when he retired, my dad finally retired after I retired, from the shoes shop only because he injured himself again, he was probably bringing in, at that shoe shop, probably \$9,000 a year, which is nothing. Unfortunately, his building lease was like \$12,000 a year, so he was actually losing money every single year. So it was my sister and my older brother and myself who convinced my dad that it was finally time to shut the place down because even after he was injured, he had plans to go back to work and we talked him out of it. And at the time he was seventy-seven years old.

[Vela]: Hm. Really interest—I haven't, I hadn't, you haven't told any of that so this is all, all new stories (laughs).

[Cuevas]: Oh good!

[Vela]: Aside from the many stories that you told us when we were younger, um, so you talked about, you know how your mom would always, uh, make sure there was food on the table. Um, but how important was it, would you say, like, in your like culture and stuff like that, like what kind of food, like did you eat and was it like important- was like mealtimes, so like for our family, or for my family with my mom, your daughter Denise, um and my dad. Our mealtimes are always eaten together and that's whenever, while we have a lot of family time, the mealtimes are when we spend the most and we kind of catch up on each other's days, kind of like our recon, was that what your dinner was like, or what your meals were like, um, growing up and such?

[Cuevas]: No. Um, my mother, while she believed in family time and eating, she was more determined in feeding her children, so because my dad would fluctuate in coming home, especially during the times when he had a lot of work, sometimes he would come home at 9 o' clock. And mother had told my dad, "I am not going to have the children wait, for you to get home. These kids are hungry, I'm going to feed them, and whether you're here or not, that's too bad." So my mother made that decision that if, she understood that my dad was making money for the family, she wanted the kids to eat. So we ate, usually around 7 o' clock at our house, whether my dad was there or not, and my dad didn't mind, he understood that. He understood that the kids came first, not him, and that we had to be fed and he had to make the money. So there was never any argument or any ill feelings about us eating alone, without my dad, my mother was always there with us, but not always my dad. And we were all okay with that, it didn't matter that we didn't eat together, that was not important. The important thing was eating, and the important thing was that my dad was making money.

[Vela]: Did you kind of implement those roles when you had your kids, with your four kids and your family, um, did you kind of implement that idea that the importance was having the resources necessary to have a good life, or um, did you—'cause I know you talked about how you spent more time with your family than your dad did with you. Um, how did you kind of incorporate—

[Cuevas]: Well, when I first started working for Southwestern Bell, I had a switchman's position. And being that I was the low man of the totem pole that I had very little seniority, I didn't have the pick of the time shift that I could work. So, I was always given the time shift of 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.. So, during the time before I was sleeping, I would sleep from 5 o' clock to 10:30 before I went to work. And that was normally the time that Ofelia and the kids would eat. So again, that was not, it was not necessary for me to wake up, and eat with the kids. I was making money like my dad.

[Vela]: Mm-hm.

[Cuevas]: Now later on when I got promoted to a network administrator 1974, uh, I was promoted after two years of being with the company, uh as a first line supervisor, then I had normal hours, usually. I think, 98% of the time my hours were 8 to 5 (clears throat). During those times, yes, we did eat as family, we did catch up. The kids would talk about their schools, and that was fun. But, the—I did miss out on the first two years of the kids, while the kids were young, because the twins were born in '72, so they were two years old by the time I left to—or

by the time that I started working the normal 8-5 shift. So that became every nice, but I did miss out those two years of not being with my daughter Denise and the twins, as a family time.

[Vela]: Mm. Um, well, thanks that wasn't really on my question list I was just curious. (laughs) Um, next is, what was like to be a Mexican American growing up in the 1960s? Uh, did you ever experience discrimination of any kind in Corpus Christi?

[Cuevas]: Me personally, no. Um, and I'll go back to the time that I said that my dad was well known in Corpus, um. Again, Corpus was a very small town at the time, I can't even tell you the population, but my dad knew just about every businessperson in Corpus, because he did work on Leopard Street, um. I'm going to say about a mile from, the downtown area (clears throat). On Leopard Street, and he was the—he was one of two shoe shops on Leopard, there was one shoe shop closer to the downtown section, there by what now—what used to be the Wilson Building. But, for some reason, my dad's work impressed the people, the downtown people, that they would take the bus and drop off their shoes and go back to downtown. For him to work on, my dad was that good, so he was well known. And as a result of that, and by my brother and I working at the shoe shop, those people got to know us. We were either in the front, we were shining their shoes, waiting on customers, so they got to know who we were. And I think a lot of that is a result of, the White population knowing who my brother and I were, that we were never, discriminated, we could go into any store downtown or any store on Leopard street that was run by White people, and not be told to leave. And I think a lot of that goes back to my dad's, uh, awareness of knowing the people and his, his experience with his business and his expertise and that the people knew who he was and that they knew who we were.

[Vela]: Nice, so that kind of respect, kind of like, carried around Corpus—

[Cuevas]: Yes. Mm-hm.

[Vela]: —which is really cool. Um, so when you went to school and such like that, for like lunches and such, the topic of this interview, um, what would you talk for lunch, normally?

[Cuevas]: Well, um, when I first started school, I started school when we were still living on Massey Street there, which is not close, by the old police station. I went to parochial school for a couple of years, um, we had, we had our meals provided to us there at, um, not too far from our house. It was a Carmelite Sisters day nursery or day center. It was on North Alameda Street. We were there a couple of years, I must have been probably four and five years old when I went there. The foods were provided there by the nuns, and then at age five, I started Sacred Heart school, uh, and I- we got free, um, schooling even though the parochial school at Sacred Heart Catholic school did charge an amount to attend that Catholic school. But again my dad, who was, again, well known and well known with the priest at, uh, Sacred Heart, we were able to get in for free. So it was my sister, my brother and myself that went to the Sacred Heart for a couple of years. And also they provided the food. When we finally moved from Massey Street to Horn Road, 1952, then I had to enter Prescott Elementary. I entered the first grade, and because of my previous education from Sacred Heart, I was bumped up to second grade within two days after they found out that I knew everything they could teach me in first grade. During those times, yes, we would take lunch, and I can't not think back on what we took to school at elementary, but

undoubtedly it was something like tacos or sandwiches, of some sort. Um, mother always had meat, some kind of deli meat or some kind of pressed ham, which was very, very inexpensive back then. Meat and usually mustard because mayonnaise would spoil and it wouldn't keep. So we always had something to eat, it wasn't very much, we never got chips, we had a sandwich or tacos of some sort. But I didn't recognize the value I think of tacos until I entered Cunningham Junior High, and I remember distinctly, let me back up a little bit. One of the things that my mother would tell us is that we would get a bag to take our lunch, and it was a number four, number six, I remember distinctly a number four and number six brown paper sack. And they were the ones that were just the right size for sandwich or for tacos, but she told us distinctly, "You need to bring this bag back if you want lunch tomorrow," so we couldn't throw it away, so we would fold it up, put it in our pocket and bring it back. The same thing for wax paper, and this is back when they had wax paper not cellophane. Cellophane was not used back then, so we had to bring back also the cellophane but when—the one thing I need to mention is that sometimes when there was not a roll of cellophane paper in her pantry, she would use the liner from the inside of a bread, a loaf of bread, because there was a slice or a small sheet of wax paper. And every time that she emptied out the bread, she would wash and clean out the wax paper, because she would reuse it for our sandwiches. Now keep in mind that my mother and dad grew up in the depression, and they had to save everything, nothing was ever thrown away from the depression people. And she was very thrifty at knowing what to save and what could be thrown away. So that was one thing, so whenever we took any kind of lunch to school, we had to bring back the wrapping and the bag. But going back to Cunningham Junior High, I remember distinctly taking tacos, uh because we had a cafeteria and we would sit in groups, the majority of the students which was all, Hispanic, where my dad bought a house was in the John Joves Edition Number Two in Corpus, which was a subdivision that was built primarily for veterans coming back from World War II, and only veterans could qualify to buy one of those houses. My mom and dad paid \$9,200 for that house, three bedroom house one bathroom. Probably less than a 1,000 square feet, it was a bargain. But all of the people that lived in that neighborhood were veterans, the majority probably 99.9 or 8 were Hispanic. There were no Blacks, there were a couple of White people, that bought houses there, I remember one was Mr. Plochek, and uh, Mr. Lewis, which I went to school with both their kids. But, most of the people that took lunches were probably tacos, or sandwiches.

[47:17]

[Cuevas]: But I do remember the story in s- in eighth grade at Cunningham, was I was eating my tacos (clears throat), and Mr. Garcia who was my math teacher came over to me one time and he had a tray of food that he got from the cafeteria, and he said, Mr. Garcia also knew my dad, like the other teachers knew my dad, he came over to me and he said, "David, I haven't eaten tacos in several weeks, would you like to trade your tacos for my tray of food?" And I said sure! And we traded, and the other students kept looking at me saying, "How did you get a tray of food and we have to eat our tacos?" So he went over and ate the tacos, and he would do this on occasion, like maybe in that one school year at eighth grade, he must have done it probably six times. And I, I felt good about that. What I didn't know, is that he felt sorry for us, for me. He knew how dedicated my dad was. In making money. And he—and he, I'm sure he knew that the other fathers of the kids were in the same predicament, but he didn't know the other fathers of the kids. He knew my dad. But that's the one story I remember about T\tacos.

[49:00]

[Vela]: That's, that's wonderful, that's amazing, um, to hear that. Um, well, as you were talking about how, you know he, reached out a hand to help because he knew how dedicated your dad was and such, um, tacos were kind of seen, um, back then especially as kind of like a cheaper food. They were easy to make, you know, um, you can make them at home fairly easy, and so they were kind of seen like that at times. Um, so I do—now of course, I'm noticing how it is now and they're such a popular, um, meal choice now they're a common delicacy in the United States they definitely raised up, they've come up from the bottom. Um, when did you, did you ever start to notice tacos getting more popular around the population, um, both with White people with anyone like that, or just in general in the community?

[Cuevas]: Wow, um.

[49:54]

[Vela]: If you didn't, that's still an answer too, but—

[Cuevas]: No, the, the, the one thing that I do remember, I think it was already—no it was also during Junior High (clears throat). Excuse me. There was a, when my dad had to move from his Leopard Street shoe shop because of the construction at the Crosstown freeway, he found a building at Ayers Street, right across—close or right across the street from the Ayers bowling lanes. Um, on that, on the opposite side of Ayers Street, a block away was this little restaurant, a very tiny corner restaurant called the Taco Village. And it was a Taco Village Number Two, so there were other Taco Villages in Corpus, but the one thing that Taco Village had was, these tacos that were made of picadillo, which we now call puffy tacos. And I don't know where puffy tacos started, if they were in San Antonio or—I don't think they were Mexico but either San Antonio or the Valley or in Corpus, but I do remember that it was the best taco I had ever eaten. And my brother and I had gone over to the Taco Village, they were ten cents at the time. So this must have been probably the late '50s I would think. No, it can't be the late '50s, my dad had to move out of the shoe shop, in—no I'm sorry it was 1958 when he had to move, so it was probably '58 or '59, at the time I must have been ten or eleven years old. My brother was a year older. We went to the Taco Village to see the menu and we were surprised that a taco would cost 10 cents. So we each bought one, because we had some money from our shining shoes. We took it back to the shop and I started eating it. And my mother had asked what we had bought, and I showed her my tacos, so she took a bite of that. And she says, "I have never had a taco like this before, this is very very good," and I think it was the fact it was puffy, a puffy taco, and that it had the picadillo inside lettuce and tomato. But those people that don't know what a puffy taco is, it's a corn tortilla that's folded in half and it's fried. Not hard (clears throat), but it's fried (coughs), pardon me. It's fried to the point where—(clears throat), it's fried to the point where it becomes somewhat soft yet not crispy. Not as soft as a raw, or not as a cooked corn tortilla, and for some reason I think it was the grease, that's inside the tortilla and the puffy taco with a combination of the meat, that made it such a delicious, delicious taco. When I did allow my mother to take a bite of that, and then my brother gave a bite to my dad, my dad says, "Hey go buy six more for us!" So we had to go back and buy more tacos, and the Taco

Village became a good spot for us to have lunch, that we would go pick up tacos, uh, just because of the delicacy and the consistency of the meat and the puffy taco. But I do remember that very, very well. I never saw any White people at the Taco Village at the time, so this is the late '50s maybe early '60s, but it became a very popular spot that eventually they had to grow into a larger building, and they left, where they were at, and I think they moved somewhat close to Six Points, to a bigger location, that people could actually sit down, because the small corner building that was there close to the shoe shop was just a, pick up order type. So that was my—the first experience I had with store bought tacos, or restaurant bought tacos. But, I didn't really notice, um, the popularity of tacos until much later in my life, probably, when we were in St. Louis when, the population of Hispanics were very, very minute, um, the majority of the people in St. Louis were Black, it was a Black city. Uh, I'm going to say probably 55% of the population was Black, and maybe 4-something percent was White. And the rest were, other nations, there were some Asians, the Hispanics that were there were primarily from South America, not from Mexico, so it was—the St. Louis at the time was not a draw for the Mexican people that were migrating over to the Midwest. But I did notice that more and more taco stands started growing in St. Louis, but it was always to the Blacks and to the Whites, they were the customers. Uh, it was also a way that, that we as Hispanics in St. Louis could eat tacos, because you couldn't get a taco. They were virtually no Mexican restaurants, and if there were, they didn't serve tacos on the menu, they served plates of food, like you do at other Mexican places. Um, so we would get our fill of tacos, including your mother who started living in St. Louis with us after- when she was going to college, we had a joy in going to Taco Bell. Of all places to have a taco, we went to Taco Bell, and to us, it was—they, they were good tacos!

[Vela]: When you don't have anything else up there—

[Cuevas]: That's, that's, that's true. Eventually they had, a restaurant, um, and it was run by Eddie's, I cannot recall the name of the restaurant but your Uncle Rene worked there because he also lived with us in St. Louis. He got a job, I think initially as a bus boy, and then became a bartender there at that restaurant. Uh, the owner's name was Eddie he was from Austin, and he uh, he was very successful that he opened a second type of restaurant, a second restaurant in St. Louis, but it was for Tex Mex. And that's where you could get the authentic Mexican taco, or Tex Mex taco, there at that place. I still can't think of that restaurant's name, and you Uncle Rene would probably get mad at me because he worked there for so long. But yeah, that was probably in the mid-'80s when I think, I noticed a popularity of tacos in St. Louis, at least out of Texas.

[Vela]: Nice. Well, um, how did it make you feel, to see it, um, so much more populated when you saw it? Like up in St. Louis when you saw, I'm sure in St. Louis you were probably excited because you were like, "Finally, I can have something that you're used to," but um.

[Cuevas]: Well, I, I was excited that they had tacos, I don't think from a standpoint of being Hispanic or Mexican American that it brought me joy. I, I don't, I don't really see myself saying, "Yes, we have White people eating Mexican food." I don't think I felt that. I didn't—it didn't play any part of my emotions as far as being Hispanic that, White people or Black people were eating tacos. Or that the tacos were now in the Midwest, especially in St. Louis, um, I didn't feel bad about it, but it didn't, it didn't really bring me joy. Other than I had tacos to eat.

[Vela]: Mm-hm. Just finally. (laughs)

[Cuevas]: (laughs) I was okay with it, yes.

[Vela]: Um, well, that just about ends the end of our interview, we've been going for a little bit now, is there anything else you'd like to add, either about um, your own history that we were talking about or about like, tacos or anything like that. Um, and the progression of it through the United States and in Corpus Christi and such.

[58:11]

[Cuevas]: I do find that, here in San Antonio, there's always been a battle I think, um, between cities of who makes the best tacos. And there's always a battle between the city of Austin and the city of San Antonio as far as getting the best tacos. And they do have an annual competition which brings, thousands of people from both cities to come to the contest to see who has the best tacos. And you find these food trucks at this one particular big park or whatever it is and you get to- to get to venture out and test- taste different types of tacos. And they're virtually the same, some might have more cilantro, some may have more spices, some will have all this concoction of sauces. But, the one thing that I have noticed about tacos is that I'm a traditionalist. You know, I eat tacos the way I ate tacos as a kid. There's people today, the younger generation, we- I have three generations now be above me, that change things around. And they'll start adding different spices or different additives or different ingredients to a taco (Vela coughs). They add different ingredients to tacos which to them is good. To me it's not. And when you go to these food trucks and I want a regular taco, I can't find a regular taco. I have to pull out onions, I have to pull out carrots, I have to pull out spinach, you know, that—and that's what sells these tacos to the younger generation, but not to the older generations, so I see there is a progression of tacos in not only in the state of Texas but I'm sure everywhere else.

[1:00:10]

[Cuevas]: And, the Hispanic culture is so vast, that if you were to go to Cuba, they will have a taco that may not be called a taco, because they also use tortillas, they use corn tortillas because the natives in Cuba just like the natives in Mexico only had corn before the White people came over on those ship from Europe, they brought over the wheat, they brought over the flour. So, the original natives never knew what a flour tortilla was in Mexico, South America, or in Cuba or in the Caribbeans, and that's when they started making these different types of meals, with folding a tortilla whether it's corn or flour. But all the ingredients are different in every country, so the taco has grown, and I don't—again I don't know where the taco originated, but it has grown to all these other countries in South American, the Caribbeans, and in Mexico, that it's flowing all over the world. And that, I think that does make me feel good, that at least that small portion of a meal that originated in my mind, in my culture, has grown worldwide. So I'm happy to—I'm happy to see that.

[Vela]: I think that's a great place to start off—to stop then. (laughs)

[Cuevas]: Good!

[Vela]: That's wonderful. Thank you for, um, letting me interview you today.

[Cuevas]: You're welcome.

[Vela]: Okay, I will be turning off the recorder.

[1:01:47]