

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH SEN. CATHERINE CORTEZ MASTO**

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada  
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White  
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## PREFACE



In 2016 Catherine Cortez Masto made history. She became the first woman elected to serve the state of Nevada as US Senator. This also came with the benchmark of being the first Latina to serve as senator in the US Congress.

In this oral history, Sen. Cortez Masto discusses growing up in the 1960ss and 1970s. The era was a more rural Nevada community and far cry from modern day Las Vegas. The Latino population was also far smaller and assimilated that today's population.

Cortez Masto also reflects on her parents and her multi-ethnic heritage. From her mother, Joanna, being of Italian heritage to her father, Manny, being Latino of Mexican ancestry and radiates as she honors her roots and pride in being a Nevadan. She is a graduate of the University of Nevada, Reno, in 1986 and earned her law degree at Gonzaga University in 1990.

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August 10, 2018  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Claytee D. White

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**Claytee White: This is August tenth, 2018, and I am with Catherine Cortez Masto in her office in downtown Las Vegas.**

**If you could please pronounce and spell your name, I'd really appreciate it.**

Absolutely. Catherine Cortez Masto. It's C-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E, C-O-R-T-E-Z, M-A-S-T-O.

**Can you please tell me about your early life here in Las Vegas and what it was like growing up here?**

Las Vegas has changed so much over the years. When I was growing up, there was probably about two hundred thousand people living in the valley. I grew up on we call the west side of town, which is west of the Strip, at the time. Actually, I lived the first fifteen years in the same house. It was 4624 Pennwood Avenue, and it was probably the second house my parents purchased. If I remember correctly—my sister just found this; I don't know if she was going through my parents' documents—that the house they purchased was probably only fifteen, eighteen thousand dollars, somewhere between there. Can you imagine? It was a three-bedroom home.

**Is that near Decatur?**

Yes. It was on Pennwood between Arville and Decatur. My elementary school was Doris Hancock, my middle school was Cashman Junior High School, and then my high school was Clark High School. When I got to middle school and Clark—there's apartments now, but before then it was all desert. You literally could walk across the desert to Cashman or walk down the street to Clark High School. Growing up I took the bus to elementary school, to Doris Hancock.

It was a great neighborhood because at that time it was more on the edge of the community. The major street was Decatur. I remember when Rainbow was still just two little lanes, each one direction, and everything beyond that were little streets. The major parkway at

the time was Decatur and then everything beyond that was desert if you looked west. We were kind of on the edge, but it was a nice young neighborhood, lots of kids.

One of my best friends that I met—in fact, my girlfriend that I've known forever, my best friend that I went through kindergarten all the way through college with—grew up around the block from me. She lives in Elko now.

**Elko?**

Elko, Nevada.

**What happened?**

Actually, she loves it. We went up to college together. We were freshman roommates at University of Nevada, Reno, which is funny. Every single one of my friends from Las Vegas—I have a group of girlfriends; there's probably about five of us—we all came from Las Vegas up to UNR and they all stayed. I'm the only one that left and came back to Las Vegas.

My girlfriend that I grew up with since kindergarten, Leslie, she stayed in Reno and then she moved to Elko and loves it. She loves the rural community. She never wanted to come back. Then my other girlfriends are the same; they all loved and stayed in Reno. One finally came back, Randi. She's back here now in Las Vegas.

But it was a great community. It still is. It was just different times, right? And very rural, people don't realize. My girlfriend Leslie had a horse. Literally on the other side of Decatur is where she kept her horse, and we would go up there and ride horses. She was in what we called gymkhanas; they were little rodeos. I don't know if you remember, way, way out off of Ann Road when there was nothing out there, there was a corral. Was it Los Rancheros? They would do little, mini rodeos.

**Kids participated?**



Oh, yes. She did. She did barrels. She did barrels and she did everything. She talked me into doing rescue with her. [Doing rescue] was you're in the corral. I'm at one end of it and she comes out at the other end on her horse. And you're timed. She runs to where I am, turns around, puts out her arm, grabs me and throws me on the back of the horse and takes off to the other end. It's timed to see how fast you can do that. We did that growing up.

She had the horse and I liked motorcycles. I started when I was young. My father, to the chagrin of my mother, but she later accepted it, got me a minibike when I was little because we had the desert right across. I was on the minibike all the time. I was always riding that, or she was on the back of my minibike with me, or I was on the back of the horse with her.

That was the community. There was a lot of family. There was a lot of ruralness. There was a lot of open space and people utilized it. When I say I'm a “desert rat,” I am a desert rat; I grew up in the desert.

The other thing is I come from a big family. I'm half Mexican, half Italian. We were all very close. I grew up in a neighborhood with eight of my first cousins. Just one house over was my mother's brother and he had four daughters. Then down the block, one block over, was my mother's sister and she had two kids. There's eight of us first cousins. We're all a year apart and we all went to school together.

### **How did your family get to Las Vegas?**

A couple of things. My father grew up here. He was five when his parents brought him here. He was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, as was his mother, my grandmother Mary. She was the oldest of thirteen kids. Can you imagine thirteen? They had a tough life. She worked the fields. She did a lot of things growing up.

She met my grandfather. My grandfather came from Chihuahua, Mexico, as a young man

across the Rio Grande. Then he ended up in California for a period of time and joined the military, served in our military and became a United States citizen.

When my father was five, they came out to Las Vegas. Now, at that time Las Vegas was much smaller, twenty thousand people, if that. It was this downtown area where we are now, which is where everybody lived. When they came here, they had a little trailer in North Las Vegas; that's where he lived growing up until they were available to afford a house, which I remember because that's where my grandmother lived until we moved her when she got later on in life. Then they moved to a house off Decatur and Washington on Minnesota and that was her house.

My grandfather was a baker, and she was a salesclerk. I don't know if you recall—there's a family here called the Von Tobel family, and they had the store, Von Tobel Store right there on Maryland Parkway and Sahara. That's where my grandmother worked, my dad's mother. She was a salesclerk and that's what she did her entire career.

My grandfather unfortunately died of a heart attack at a young age. I was probably about eight or ten years old when he passed away.... My dad has a sister, my aunt, and she was still young, going to school. She had to care for my grandmother. Obviously, my father by that time had been—as a young man, probably about seventeen, joined the army and served and went to Korea, came back to Las Vegas, and then met my mother and that's when they married.

My grandmother, I can always remember her working as a salesclerk. It was either at Von Tobel's, until they closed, or then she went over to—I think it was a Skaggs off Jones and 95 in that little shopping center and she worked in the store there as a salesclerk until she retired.

That was that side of the family. That's how they came here, for a better life, for an opportunity.

Then on my mom's side, same thing. She's Italian. Both of her parents are Italian American. She was born in Kansas City, Missouri. Her grandfather came from Italy through Ellis Island to this country. They ended up in Kansas City, Missouri where my mother, her brother and sister were born. When she was about sixteen, the family moved out to Las Vegas for a better life.

My grandfather at the time came here to work because he worked in the casinos. He was a pit boss, I remember, at the Frontier—the old Frontier because I was old enough at the time to know that. But when he first got started, he was over at the Thunderbird, which doesn't exist anymore, and some of the old casinos. That was at a time, too, when all the casinos were either family owned or everybody knew one another, connected casinos here and in Reno. She would tell me stories as a young girl that my grandfather would take jobs in a sister casino at Lake Tahoe every summer, so then the whole family would go up to Lake Tahoe and spend the summer there while my grandfather worked in the casinos there.

**Tell me about your father Manny Cortez.**

An incredible human being. My mother and I talk about this. First of all, I just think they were soul mates. They were meant to be together, and they had an incredible relationship, loved one another, loved their family, loved this community, loved giving back. They were a team. My father succeeded because of my mother and vice versa.

He grew up poor, and I told you, but he was committed to succeeding and doing right by his family and working hard and giving back to his community. As a young man, he went early into the military. He got his father to allow him to join early and sign the waiver so he could.

When he came back from the army after being in Korea, he came back to Las Vegas. It was soon thereafter he met my mother even though—this is funny. There was only one high

school at the time here, so they went to the same high school, but she was a year ahead of him. You've got to remember she came probably about sixteen or seventeen. When she got here, she was coming in as a new student in her final year or two. My father, having grown up here, went to the little elementary school...The Westside School because that's where they lived. They lived in a little trailer there when they first got here. He started in the Westside School. I think he eventually came here and he was at Saint Joseph's for a period of time, but ended up at Las Vegas High School, and that's how he knows—everybody knew one another at the time. I don't know if they ever met then, but they eventually met afterwards when he came back. Actually, as they tell the story, they met at one of the dance clubs.

**Do you remember which dance club?**

I don't. I'll have to ask my mother. There were only a few of them. That's the one thing that also is a memory because my parents were good dancers and they loved to dance. They're very good dancers.

**And you?**

We do, too. We grew up in a family of music and dancing, yes. That's why I love all kinds of music because we always had music in the family. My dad had a good voice, a good singer. My grandfather, his dad, was musical. His dad played the piano, the guitar. He had banjos. He always had music. Actually, that's how I started playing the guitar. I had my grandfather's guitar and at a young age started playing it.

They met, married. My father, as he was raising his two daughters—so when we were young, my youngest memories of my father—he was a parking attendant at the Dunes Hotel and Casino because you work hard and make good money.

**Yes, because he was a valet.**

He was a valet, yes. You could actually buy a home. My mother, her entire career after she graduated high school, was a bookkeeper. She was good with numbers, so she was the accountant or bookkeeper. At the time I believe it was Chicago Title Insurance. She thereafter always worked in the title insurance company as a bookkeeper. Then they owned some businesses along the way. I remember him being there. He was a strong union man. He was a member of the Teamsters.

I remember growing up in a family of parents who were very social. Whether it was as part of the Teamsters family or the Dunes family, we would go to picnics or Christmas holiday parties or events. They were strong in the Democratic Party as well. They would move all the furniture around in the living room and invite and have a precinct meeting and everybody in the neighborhood come in and talk and have conversation.

He worked his way up. He worked very hard. At the Dunes, he then—and I'm going to get the whole timeline of it wrong, but I recall him then wanting to do different things. He went to work in the DA's Office as an investigator and that's how he got to know the DA and many of the attorneys here at the time, because he was an investigator working there. The DA at the time, I think it was Franklin. I'll have to look and see. Then he learned to be a polygraph examiner and went to the Public Defender's Office to do that type of work.

**How do you learn that?**

I don't know. You'll have to ask my mother because I was so young. I remember him bringing the machine home and he was showing us, his daughters. "This is it." Hooking us up and showing us everything. I was too young. He did that for a period of time.

**What kind of education did he have other than high school?**

Here is his challenge. He was smart. He was one of the smartest men I knew. He actually went to

UNLV before it was UNLV—it was Southern Nevada—but that was while he had kids and a family. He got himself through three years, but was unable to finish because of the family, because he had kids and they were both working.

There was a period of time, because he was active and knew folks, and I don't know if that was right from the Public Defender's Office, this jump, but he ran for the assembly. He decided he was going to run for state assembly. I remember that because we had all of the family involved.

**Did you knock on doors?**

We knocked on doors. We did all sorts of things. He lost unfortunately. But because of his run, he came to the attention of then Governor Mike O'Callaghan who really took a liking to him. Mike appointed him to be head of the Taxicab Authority for Southern Nevada, so that's what he did for a period of time. During that period of time, it was a little tumultuous because that was at a time there were grievances that the taxicab drivers had against the taxicab companies, and the taxicab drivers started protesting.

I remember one evening my sister and I were home with a babysitter. The babysitter happened to be my older cousin who lives two streets up. The drivers came to our house to picket on Pennwood. We were young kids. We didn't know what the heck was going on. They came up and knocked on the door and then walked back in front of the street picketing back and forth. My cousin Connie called my parents who were out having dinner, to say, "Something's happening in front of the house." We were all hiding and didn't know what was going on. My father came home and took care of it.

But he did a really good job. He got the respect of everyone, and he did a fantastic job in that position. From there is where he ran for county commission for the first time and won. That

race I remember clearly.

**Do you remember the year?**

That had to have been in the seventies.

**We could easily look that up.**

I want to say it had to have been '74 or '75 because we were all young at the time and this was *the* big one. We knew he ran for assembly, but this was the big race. This is when he had Dave Cooper as his manager and Linda Faiss, who was married to Dave Cooper at the time. That's how I know Linda, from so far back. They had a campaign headquarters right there on Sahara, right across from Commercial Center, right there on Sahara and Maryland Parkway. Actually, the building is still there and still looks like a building from the seventies, but it's still there. The headquarters were there. It was a family affair literally because we had so much family. This is at a time when you could have a pickup truck and in the back of the truck you just load everybody in and then you drive to the neighborhood. We had fliers. We walked all of the doors, left the door hangers on. We had red shirts that said, "I'd give Manny Cortez the shirt off my back." We still have those shirts. Everyone had them in the family. Everybody was involved. They would drop us kids off in different neighborhoods and we'd start doing this. My dad would be walking the neighborhoods, talking to the neighbors.

**And it was safe.**

It was safe. There were no concerns. It was hot, and that's why I commiserate with those that were out there walking with me and helping me.

**But you were outside anyway.**

But we were outside anyway. That's what's so fascinating to me. I can remember my whole childhood outside playing. That's all we did. It was from morning until night when you knew you

had to be home for dinner. My mother and father, because it was safe and the neighborhoods were safe and we knew the kids, had no concerns about what was happening. They knew that we would be home; we would be there. I can remember early on Pennwood because there were so many kids in the neighborhood, including the Reid kids. They lived around the corner from us as well. That's how I know Rory Reid because he's my sister's age. She's two years older than I am.

**We're sitting in Senator Reid's former office right now, aren't we?**

Yes, we are. Everybody knew one another because they all went to Cashman in high school and all the schools together. I can remember being younger, waking up with the bright sun coming into my window, and I can hear the kids outside playing. It was like a Saturday morning. It was still quiet in the house. Everybody was still sleeping. I remember putting on my shoes and clothes and sneaking out the door so I could get out there to play kickball or tag or go out in the desert and build a fort. We were big on building forts in the desert. It was an incredible childhood and it was fun.

**Good. Getting back to the campaign, did he realize what an important position that was early on?**

I don't know. I don't know if he did or not. I've never had this conversation with him other than this: He recognized, I think either before or after he got on there, the important role it played in what Las Vegas is and could be and the management of oversight and working within the community to help people thrive and businesses thrive and grow and build the infrastructure that was necessary. He had a lot of respect for the county commissioners that were already there and he learned from them. That's what he said, "I learned from them. There were some really incredible commissioners that I was able as a young commissioner to learn from, to work with, and learn what to do and what not to do."



At that time, they were very forward thinking. It wasn't just about one year or two years. They were thinking five years, ten years down the road. I was young—and this is probably a conversation you should have with my mother—but I remember—

**I would really love to have a conversation with your mother.**

Yes, I'm happy to set that up. I remember—and this is only because I read all the clips. My mother kept everything, and we still have everything. She kept all the clips, everything my father...Yes, we've got them everywhere, all of the clips, everything that he's done. I remember going through them at one point in time and talking to her about this. When McCarran Airport, when they wanted to invest and put more money into McCarran, people were having a fit. "Why are you putting money into that? Why are you expanding it? It's a waste of taxpayer money." But they had a vision of what Las Vegas could be. Same thing with the convention center back then. "Why are you investing?" They had this vision and that's why you see we were able to keep up with that growth and that infrastructure and build, because there was vision of what we could be and investing in that and preparing for that.

We'll make sure you get all of the clips. Then he went and served. He served for sixteen years as a county commissioner.

**Did he serve with Thalia [Dondero] at all?**

He did, of course, absolutely. That's why I know Thalia so well; I grew up with her. She was wonderful. He had built relationships and worked hard around this community. I'm still learning of the things that he had done and the people he had touched along the way and helped along the way.

**Do you remember any of the specific issues that he was passionate about?**

Oh, absolutely. Education was one of them. A big proponent of education in this community of

making sure every child had equal access to an education in public education no matter where they came from. Again, these are things that we learned after the fact. That's why he was big on scholarships and put money towards individual scholarships for students and helping students. That's why he and a group of his friends created—and it's still there today and we'll have to get you the name of it—the youth alliance where they actually raise money for kids for scholarship.

He was a big supporter of the Latino community here, regularly got together with members. At that time, it was really small. But he regularly got together with the Latino leaders to support and promote the community. He was a member of the Las Vegas Chamber. My father was so engaged in so many issues. He was a member of the Lions Club. He was a mentor for young boys. He was on the board of Boys Town and things like that. He was part of Ducks Unlimited. Every group that you can imagine, he was a part of and in the community and active and engaged.

Education was the most important thing for him. When he became president and CEO of the Convention and Visitors Authority, he was the one that was instrumental in creating that first magnet school. I think it was at Valley High School where they have the tourism. It's tourism and service industry kind of magnet school, and there's a name for it and we'll get that for you. But he was the one that was instrumental in creating that and starting that.

He was very proud when we were able to have an elementary school named after him. He was actively involved when he was still alive in that elementary school. He believed it in passionately in helping these kids. That was his main thing.

Here is the other thing that I also learned. He was also one of these individuals who respected and got along with everyone. Literally, I don't care what station you are in life, who you are, what your background, he treated everybody with respect. He liked people and he liked

having conversations, and that's why they liked him so much. I don't care if you're a Republican or a Democrat, everybody got along because it was about for him not just treating him with respect, but giving everybody an opportunity to succeed.

There are many business owners in this community who I have gotten to know who had their first opportunity because my father helped them as a county commissioner. I hear it all the time. That's not just here in Southern Nevada. He was active statewide. When I became Attorney General, all around the state, including some of our rural areas, people are like, "Your father is Manny Cortez? Wow. He helped me do this. I remember him. He was great." So he had a lot of respect from people because he just really cared and was involved in so many things in trying to help everyone.

**Is that why you decided to run to become Nevada Attorney General?**

I think it's why my sister and I are both civic-minded; that we believe in giving back to the community and doing what we do. She's a counselor at a middle school. After she graduated from University of Nevada, Reno, she's always worked with disadvantaged youth, young girls. Her first job out of school was working with the Home of the Good Shepherd, which was a home that was there for young girls who were either physically or mentally abused and needed help. She's always done that.

I think that's why I like what I do; I like public policy and being engaged in helping others, because we saw our parents doing the same thing and learned those values from them. I think that's why we do what we do today.

**Going to law school was your idea?**

No.

**How did that come about?**

My parents worked hard. The one thing that my sister and I always were told in our family from our parents is that it was not "*if* you go to college;" it's "*when* you go to college, then you can do this." They worked hard so that they could put us both through college. We were the first in our family to graduate from college and we graduated from University of Nevada, Reno. I was a finance major. My sister was a political science major.

I wanted to work, believe it or not, on Wall Street. I wanted to be an analyst. My grandfather was good with numbers, my Italian grandfather, because he was just a numbers guy. He got me started at a young age in reading the stock market because he would invest in stocks. He would pull these things out. "Look at this." Actually, he liked the horses and he would say—I probably shouldn't tell you this—he would say, growing up, "If you have somebody you don't like, teach them how to read the racing form because once they get hooked it will drive them crazy." He loved the horses. He was a numbers guy and so he liked all of that and the stock market fit right in.

At an early age—I was good with numbers, good with math—he would say, "Come on; look at this. We're going to invest in this stock." I think that and just the fact that I was a numbers person, and I liked the analysis of it, I was interested in being an analyst in Wall Street. I learned through my education and finance background all about that.

After I graduated, I decided instead of going all the way to Chicago or New York on the exchange, I would go to San Francisco and start smaller and maybe try to get in and be an analyst. But when I started going around and knocking on doors and applying, I couldn't get in. The only thing I could get was maybe an entry level receptionist job. I thought, *wow, first of all, I can't afford to live on that.* It's tough, right? I thought, *wow, I may have to go back and get a master's degree.* I was looking at the Wharton School of Business because it was keeping in line

with everything I was doing.

I went home. With my father, we talked about it. He said, "Why do you want to do that? Why does that help you? Where do you think that's going to get you?" I said, "This is why I think and where I want to go." He was right. He basically said, "Well, shouldn't you look at something that's going to give you the opportunity to open more doors and not just one door?" So we started talking about law school. He was right. As I thought about it and went through it, I said, "I can get a law degree, but I don't have to be an attorney. I can literally use that degree to walk in at any situation, whether it's a corporate board room or back in Wall Street, whatever, and have that different degree."

I took a year off and worked at Carson Construction Company here in Southern Nevada with Doug Carson and his family. Unfortunately, he has since passed away and so has his dad. A great family business. It was a great year. I learned a lot about construction. We actually built the first Targets that were in this community, the one at Maryland Parkway, the one at Nellis. They were the big deal then. Then I saved enough money and with my parents' help and with some school debt, I went to Gonzaga.

### **Why there?**

Again, it's all about who you know and meet. I had applied to a number of schools on the West Coast. As I was working at the construction company, they knew I was applying to go to law school. The woman I was working with who worked the HR and ran all the payroll, her brother was an attorney here in the community and had gone to Gonzaga, and so she was telling him about me. I got the chance to meet him. Her name was Linda. He said, "You should look at Gonzaga. It's a really good school." He said, "If you're interested, I know folks there and I'll hand walk your application up there." I said, "Oh, wow, okay."

I started looking into it and I really liked it. I liked the fact that it was a smaller school and the student-to-teacher ratio was small. I thought, *wow, I'm going to apply here as well.* And I got in there and I got into Pepperdine and a couple of others. I decided, *I'm going to go to Gonzaga.* It was the best decision I ever made.

**That's great. After law school, tell me what you decided to do.**

After law school, I had this idea along with some of my colleagues that we were going to go to Washington. I wanted to work in Washington. The young man that I was dating at the time who was in law school with me, his sister was a year or two years ahead of us and she was already in Washington working, I think, for the EPA. We had both decided, *we're going to look at going to Washington, D.C.*

Prior to doing that however—I was always told, and it's true, when you get out of law school, you should do a clerkship. I still had to apply for the bar and I knew I wanted to practice law in Nevada. I wanted to come back to Nevada and practice law and still had to apply for the bar and all that kind of stuff. Before I even graduated, I started applying for judges down here.

This will tell you a little bit about the family again. My father, of course, growing up here he knew everybody and all the judges. He worked with them. I applied for some of the judges, some of them very good friends of the family, and got accepted. A number of the judges wanted me to work for them. There was one judge in particular, however, who we knew, but he wasn't a family friend, wasn't a connection, one that I had actually sought out myself. I went with him and his name is Michael Wendell. He was phenomenal. I learned so much from him.

What was funny is that some of the other judges said to my father, "Why didn't she work for me?" At the time I had an independent streak and I wanted to do it on my own. I didn't want to do it because I was Manny Cortez's daughter. I wanted to do it because I earned it, I worked

for it, and I made that decision. Looking back, I'm sure there was still...But that's how I was at the time.

I worked with Michael Wendell and it was the best decision. Listen, all the other judges were phenomenal. They're fantastic. At the time Michael was—and still to this day as I appear before judges—he was one of the best. He had it all. He was very smart. He had the right demeanor. He had the right respect for people. He called them out when appropriate, but he didn't abuse his position. When he did something and realized that was probably the wrong decision, he would come back and correct it. He would literally bring the attorneys back in and say, "You know what? This was wrong. We should have done it this way." And he would do it. He just respected the law so much. I miss that because not all judges are like that.

I was with him for a year and studied for the bar at the same time. Again, very small community. You could only sit for the bar at the time once a year. So if you didn't pass, you missed it, your opportunity, for another year. The worst part about it was all of the law clerks working for the judges were studying at the same time. Again, because it was a small community, the judges and their legal secretaries—and the legal secretaries are really the ones that are the bosses of the chambers—they had a connection to somebody at the State Supreme Court, and they would get, before anybody knew, the results of who passed the bar and they would let everybody know. It was a nerve-wracking experience because you're studying there and they know it and you're working there at the same time. Then you know, *oh my gosh, they're going to know before I do*, because they literally all get it into a room...Let me just tell you.

Alma Spray was our legal secretary. She had grown up in this community, born and raised. She was phenomenal. Shirley Parraguirre, who later was one of our *electeds*, was also a legal secretary. That's how I know Shirley. She was the one that all the legal secretaries would

crowd into her office. She would make the call and get the results and word would come out who passed and who didn't. You literally would find out from your legal secretary. Yes, very nerve-wracking. Thank goodness I passed.

I was there for a year. I was dating my colleague at the time from law school, and he was from New York and we were going to go to D.C. I went to interview out there. But prior to going out there, Judge Carl Christensen, who was in the courtroom next to us—behind the courtroom all of the offices are really close together, so you get to know your judges and clerks, and everybody talks. Judge Christensen, who is phenomenal, we were getting ready to go out one time in our respective courtrooms, and he said to me, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to go to Washington, D.C." He said, "Why would you do that?" And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "You've got great opportunities here. This is your home. You know so many people. You could do anything that you wanted to do here and get a great experience. Why would you want to start all over in Washington?" I said, "I've been thinking about it. This is what I'm going to get involved in." I didn't tell him I was dating somebody at the time and we wanted to be out there together and blah, blah, blah.

I go out to Washington, D.C. I apply at EPA. I go to see Dick Bryan and I go to see Harry Reid as our senators, saying, "I'm here and looking for something." As I'm out there it just didn't feel right. Sometimes you know. You just have this feeling. So I came back home. Literally my mother was with me because they were looking for places to live, and it just didn't feel right. I did not find anything right away as a job and I couldn't afford to be out there anymore. So we came back home and I was kind of figuring out what to do.

It just so happened some of our cousins from Kansas City were visiting us, Mary Teresa and Walter Kersaw, and their daughter, who is a Catherine—she's Cathy Mary or Cathy—



happened to be in Italy for the summer. She was dating a young man from Italy. He's from to Torino. They were in Italy, in Palermo, and she was going to just tour Italy. I said, "I'm in between times here." I made a spur of the moment decision, *I'm going to join her*. I flew out to Italy and landed in Palermo and spent about three weeks, a month, traveling, backpacking with her all through Italy.

After I was done, I came back and said, "I think it's right. I'm to stay here. I'm going to stay here and practice." And I did. We can get into this later. I went to work for a small law firm and there's a connection there. But when I first went into Judge Christensen's court, he saw me and he went like this to me to come up to the bench. I walked up there. He said, "It's nice to see you, Ms. Cortez. What happened? I'm so glad you decided..." I told him the story. "You were right. This is the place to be." He said, "Well, welcome home." That's pretty incredible.

**This is a wonderful way to start a career in your own hometown. Working for a small law firm, you're now working for some of the people that you've gotten to know.**

Right. This is the best part about clerking.

My niece is actually getting ready to finish her third year in law school and I told her, "You have to clerk." You have to clerk and here's why: One, you really get to know the lay of the land in the court and the people in the court. It's about also getting to know how the system works, getting to network, and getting to know everybody as you work in that system. I got to see behind the scenes, not only all the judges and their secretaries, but the court clerk's office and everybody who works there and how it all works because that's important as you're working within the system.

The other thing that's good about it is, as you are a clerk, you go out for each of the cases with the judges and you get to see all of the attorneys coming before you and you get to learn

who are the good attorneys, who are the bad attorneys, which firms you might want to work for and which firms you may not want to work for. It was the best experience all around. You're drafting opinions. You're working on issues and working with a judge. It's a great experience.

I realized as I sat there that I did not want to work for a large law firm. Because I was already in the courtroom, already made all of those working opportunities with others and knew a lot of the motion practice and what was happening. If I went with a large law firm, normally what happens is, as a new associate, they put you in a basement somewhere and you're just drafting all day. You're never in court. You're just drafting and working and researching. I said, "I don't want to do that."

I was looking for a small law firm, and there was a small law firm that was interested in me. They approached me while I was still a law clerk. The person who approached me is Tim McGarry. Tim McGarry was an attorney and still is an attorney in town, but he's not actively practicing right now. He has a wonderful family. Actually, his daughter is clerking for me now. She's an intern in Washington, D.C. At that time he was with the law firm of Netzorg, Raleigh, Hunt and McGarry.

I remember this: I was in my office as a clerk. He came in and talked to me. He said, "You're going to be leaving here. I would like you to consider coming to work for our law firm." I said, "Okay." We talked a little bit and I liked the fact it was small and I liked him. I liked the attorneys. I had seen John Netzorg coming before us and all the others and Chris Raleigh. I said, "Okay, I might consider it."

Now, with that said, I had clerked as an attorney. In between your years in law school, you go to work for law firms. I had also gone to work for at the time it was Waldman, Gordon and Silver. It was Herb Waldman, Jeff Silver and [Gerald] Gordon. I had worked for a year with

them, and they had offered me a job as well. They were a great firm, great firm. Learned a lot. I still know a lot of the attorneys there. They're fantastic. I was debating, *do I want to go back to them or look at something else?* And I had other opportunities. I thought, *I like this law firm. It's small.* I was the only associate. *I'd get right in court and I'd be able to get going right away.*

**What kind of cases?**

And I liked it, general civil litigation. They did everything from domestic law to corporate law to personal injury to insurance defense to you name it. It was a great opportunity to learn from all of them and have this wide array of experience, and rightfully so.

So I walk in. I can remember that first week. One of the attorneys, John Hunt, who is a great friend of mine, still is, who does the domestic law—it was either he or Tim McGarry—he said, "We've got a minor's compromise we need you to do." I said, "Okay."

Now, unbeknownst to them, as a clerk for a judge that's all you did; you did minor's compromise; you did all this work. I knew it.

They gave it to me. I grabbed a file I went to court, I did the minor's compromise and came back. They came back in and said, "Okay, we want to sit down and talk to you about how to do it." They looked at me, and I said, "Well, it's done." They said, "You already took care of it?" I said, "Yes. This is what I've been doing." That was it. I got an opportunity to get in court and do my first civil trial and do my first trial in federal court. I got to go to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to argue an appeal. It was a great experience. It was one of the best experiences I've had.

Now, unbeknownst to me—and if I had known this, I probably would have had second thoughts about it—there was a connection between Tim McGarry and my father. Tim McGarry's dad—I only know him as The Bear—was actively involved in Democratic politics in this town.

If I remember correctly, he owned a bar or an establishment that everybody went to. But because he was actively involved and he was gregarious and open and passionate about his community as well, he and my father knew one another really well. They hit it off. Everyone called him The Bear. My dad's nickname for Timmy was The Cub. But unfortunately, The Bear passed away. Timmy is now in the community and he's an incredible human being and an important part of what we have done in this community as well. He was always actively engaged and had a really good relationship with my father. To this day Timmy and I are really close, like brother and sister, because we worked together and have those connections. I don't know if it's fate or you just figure out, *oh, this is interesting*, how your life path takes off.

Then I went to work there and was probably with them for almost four or five years. Then I decided, *I need to look around. I need something different. This isn't something I think I want to do the rest of my life. I want to find something else.* I started putting my resumes out there. Believe it or not, I put a resume into the AG's Office and actually got accepted. But I also put a resume into the governor's office. They had an opening and I was interested. *You know what? I'm going to go see what this side is. I know a lot of politics. I've been involved for a period of time. I'm curious what this would be.*

I went and interviewed with Governor [Bob] Miller and he hired me in 1995. I was with him his last term in office and got to do so many things. I started off running the Las Vegas office, being part of his lobbying team and working with his legal counsel on legal issues and working with the state agencies that I was responsible for working with those cabinet level members to becoming his chief of staff. It was four years of incredible experience. For me it was the eye-opener that I love public policy—this is where I want to be. This is it. I love it. I love finding solutions to problems in the community and tearing down barriers and looking at

legislation and policy. This is it and I've never looked back.

**Wonderful. We're not going to go into that part. Tell me about Judge [John] Mendoza.**

Ah, Judge Mendoza, yes. Judge Mendoza, a very well-respected judge.

I was intimidated. As a new attorney you've got to go before these judges, and you're intimidated. A great, great man. I know he and my father had a relationship. I don't know all of their interactions. I only know mine with him and his respect for my father and my father's respect for him.

Obviously at that time in the community there weren't a lot of Latinos and there were only a few that were leaders like they were, and so they worked together. I had so much respect for him. At the time as a young attorney, he was a tough judge, but he was a good judge. He wanted you to know the right way. I got to know him over the course of the years and his wife, Eva Garcia, who is just phenomenal. She's fantastic. Again, both of them were an integral part of this community because it wasn't just about coming in, succeeding. It was, okay, others helped us get here, so how do we continue to help the community? Both of them. To this day I still talk with her. I call her and talk about cases and stuff she's dealing with. Their commitment and their contributions to this community are incredible.

It was a small community at the time, but everybody came together to figure out, how do we help others? How do we work together? I think that was key. There's still some of that today. It's gotten so large. There's two million people here now, and so you don't see people as much.

**It is larger, yes.**

But then everybody was working together.

**Good. I'm going to end with you going back to your father. He had a lot of influence with the LVCVA [Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority]. Talk about that kind of**

**influence and what he did there and who he worked with.**

Remember, as a county commissioner, the county shares certain agencies. Besides the Water Authority and different agencies that are out there, one of the things he worked on as a board chair and on the board was the Convention and Visitors Authority, so he knew it well. He knew what was going on.

When he decided to leave and not run again as a county commissioner, he wasn't sure what he was going to do. My mother can give you more of the back story. But he was looking to figure out, what's next? He was approached. Then the president and CEO was stepping down. Because of his knowledge of it, because of his work there, they asked him to consider it, and he took the job. He then went on to be the president and CEO of the Convention and Visitors Authority for thirteen years and during that time oversaw one of the largest expansions and was involved in promoting Las Vegas and supporting all of the properties around here. He used to tell me, "I've got the best job in the world. All I have to do out there is go out and promote Las Vegas and say how much you love it. How hard is that?" He was a big proponent of the brand. "This is a brand; this is who we are."

I remember this: There was a time when some of the properties said, "Well, we want to be family friendly and bring kids." He would say, "No, this isn't a family friendly town. This isn't who we are. That's not our brand and that's not our success." Not that he would fight with them and tell them you can't do that, because some of them did, but they soon learned that, no, it really doesn't work.

He was instrumental in really opening doors to promoting Las Vegas, not just in the United States, but around the world. He sat on national boards. He was actively involved in traveling. They had opened offices in other parts of the world to open those gateways to bring

more tourism and conventions here. It wasn't just the tourists coming here, it was the convention space. He saw that there is an opportunity and a benefit to bringing these large conventions here because it's like the rising tide lifts all those notches. He was a big proponent of that. The NFR, that's one of the reasons why the NFR [National Finals Rodeo] is here. The bull riders, that's another reason why the bull riders is here. He went around and made relationships with people and said, "Come here. This is where you want to be. We'll work with you." He work with the properties. He worked with everybody to figure out how we provide not only the opportunities at the right price, but the best service. To this day—and I'm spoiled—I think Las Vegas has the best service anywhere I've ever been in the world, anywhere I've ever been. The best service is here.

**I agree. Putting yourself in his shoes, what would he think today about the expansion of the convention center and it's coming all the way to the Strip? What would he say?**

Oh, I think he'd be a part of it. I think he'd be supportive of it because he knows that the only way for us to continue to compete nationally and around the world is we have to be cutting edge, innovative. We have to have the footprint and the technology and be able to make use of that technology in our convention space if we're going to be leading. If we're going to be in the top ten or the top five, we have to be able to do that.

He worked hard. I still talk to people today and I was just talking with somebody in Northern Nevada about this. He worked hard when they expanded the convention space. He had to negotiate with the private property owners across DI and other places where they expanded to, to get that property, so that was part of the work that he did. He loved it.

Again, as I'm even campaigning, not just attorney general, but U.S. Senate, people come up to me. There is a group of older women that he would hire. They would be volunteers and come in and be in the front of the convention space greeting people or information desk, helping

people. To this day I still see them. They come forward, "We love your father. We're the group that worked with your father at the convention center. Can we take a picture of you? We supported you. We volunteered with you." I hear that all the time.

**That's great. This project that we are starting with this interview is about the Latinx community here in Clark County. We want to interview people from all Latin American countries that are represented here in this county. We're using students; we're having the students conduct interviews. Barbara and I will be training those students and they will be going in the community. Tell me what you see as the future of the Latinx community in our area.**

Oh, I think it's exciting. I think it's incredible. Growing up here, what you see happening particularly in our communities and where they're predominately in North Las Vegas, that was not like that at all.

People don't understand, and this is why I say it, I'm not fluent in Spanish and there's a reason why. My generation is not fluent in Spanish. Because when my grandparents and my father, when they got here, it was about assimilation; it was about speaking English.

Then my father was fluent, and my grandparents were fluent. I can understand it, but we did not speak Spanish at home. My grandmother did not speak Spanish to us growing up and my father didn't. It was about being a part of the community, assimilating. I tell people that you've got to understand, at that time when we are talking about where my grandmother and my grandfather came from, it was a tough time for Mexican Americans, especially in the Southwest.

As I look back on it—and I wish I had my father and my grandmother to still talk about with this—as I'm studying and looking become at the immigration patterns—and we seem to repeat things over and over again. You see these old signs that are up in the Southwest that say,



"No dogs, Negroes or Mexicans allowed." That was the environment they grew up in. Yes, now I understand why my grandmother was, *it's about assimilating, it's about being part of the community and giving back*. Growing up, there was nothing in Spanish. There were no *mercados*; there were no shops. There were no businesses that promoted it.

Now—which is so exciting to me—now we're free to embrace our culture and who we are and what it's about and what it means and bring and carry that with us and still be good Americans and good community members. I think that's what this country is about is that diversity. I don't think anybody should have to really suppress who they are or their culture. I think there's great opportunity.

For me, what I see, after growing up and working here, as we're moving not beyond just first generation, we're getting to second generation and third generation—that's who I am and that's what this American dream is all about—that's what we want to see happening; that's what I want to see happening with this community.

When I first worked as Attorney General, I was trying to get a lot of bilingual hires in my office because of the community. I'm a big proponent. Listen, our government should be just as diverse as the communities we represent.

I was trying to pull people in that reflect our community, but it was hard because that first generation was very young, hadn't graduated from college yet, hadn't been to law school yet. But now you see that happening. Now it's easier for me to look out and say, "Okay, we're hiring you; we're bringing you in. You go out here and you'll see in my front office.

### **International.**

That's right. The interns that I pull in, there's more of them that I'm able to pull in and get them involved, and I think it's fabulous. I think it's fabulous. They'll be the corporate leaders, the

political leaders. We see it in our legislature now. We see it in our businesses. We see that growth and I think it's fantastic.

**And the students we are hiring for this project, they all speak Spanish.**

See?

**They're going back to the culture and the language.**

Yes, yes. It's fascinating. My grandmother lived—Saint Francis is right up the street from where she lived most of her life, on Minnesota, and she went to church every single Sunday. If she stopped driving, she walked. After a period of time in that community a lot of Latinos started moving in and they started doing mass in Spanish. She came home one time and she was mad. She said, "Why aren't they doing it in English?" Not like she couldn't understand it. But, "Why aren't they doing it in English?" I said, "Grandma, that's the neighborhood. That's how it's grown."

But it was a different time for her. She fought her entire life to be part of the community. So I could kind of understand her...But I would laugh and say, "No, it's okay now. It's okay. Everybody can be who they are."

**BARBARA: *But she had accepted mass being said in English.***

Right.

***Because that was a big change.***

Exactly. That's right.

**This is amazing. If we have the opportunity to get together again, we, of course, want you to do a couple of things. We're going to have this media event at some point in September when we are going to introduce the students who will be the face of the project. They will actually be the face. We would love to have you at that event if at all possible.**

Oh, absolutely, please. Now, make it easier on me if we're not during the middle of the week or in session because I will be stuck there. If we can do it on a weekend or a recess that's great.

**We're going to work with your staff to do that. We want to finish this interview at some point. We haven't talked about you. We haven't talked about your senate career, and I know that there's some of the things in some of the committees that you're on that I really want to talk about.**

I'm happy to.

**We'll do that in the future.**

If it helps, I can get all the notebooks that my mother has with all of his career and information that's in there.

**At some point we want that collection in Special Collections at UNLV, not at Reno.**

Well, no, it would have to be at UNLV because that's his alma mater. He didn't graduate, but that was his school.

**I'm talking about all the papers. Thank you so much.**

Thank you.

**[End of recorded interview]**