

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH IRENE BUSTAMANTE ADAMS**

An Oral History Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

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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  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
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## PREFACE



Irene Bustamante Adams believes in the reinvention of oneself as the path to the future. And since coming to Nevada in 1990 she has proven that anything is possible.

She was born and raised in rural California where she worked the fields alongside her family members growing up. Her mother is a native of New Mexico, with family that dates back six generations; her father was born in Mexico.

Inspired by her mother's own fortitude and the encouragement of a high school teacher, Irene applied for a scholarship to California State University, Fresno, and earned a Bachelor of Science in business. This success made her the first in her family to do so. Years later, she received an Executive Master Business Administration degree at UNLV.

Making Las Vegas home began in the early 1990s. She worked her way up from clerk to corporate levels with MGM. She would work for MGM for eighteen years. Between the years of 2010 to 2018, Irene would also be a member of the Nevada Assembly from the 42<sup>nd</sup> district. It was an historic era for Latinas elected to the Assembly.

It was not her last "reinvention." At the time of this oral history interview, Irene is the Deputy Director and Chief Strategy Officer of Workforce Connections.

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May 13, 2019

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

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I. Bustamante Adams 5/13/19  
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**Hello. My name is Monserrath Hernandez. Today is May 13<sup>th</sup>. We are sitting in [Irene's] Workforce Connection office. Today with me is...**

*Claytee White.*

**And...**

Irene Bustamante Adams.

**Please spell out your name for us?**

The first name, I-R-E-N-E. The last name, B, like in bravo, U-S-T-A-M-A-N-T-E, space, Adams; A-D-A-M-S.

**First question: How do you identify? If I ask you who are you, what would you say?**

From an ethnic standpoint?

**Yes.**

Oh. Well, interesting question because I always identified myself as a Latina, Hispanic, but recently we just did the DNA testing for my dad and my mom, and, lo and behold, they are both Indian; one is 50 percent, the other one is 50 percent plus, but it's Indian more from North America, so more of Aztec-Mayan. We haven't dug deep down, and so I was very surprised by that. I had never heard that part of the story of my family. That's a really good question because now I feel like I'm not sure. I thought I was always really confident of the history, but now we're going to have dig deeper and figure out what exactly that means, so we'll see.

**Where is your family from?**

My dad is from Chihuahua, Mexico, and my mom was born in New Mexico. My mom is like sixth-generation American. And then my dad and his family, they were here as farmworkers before the Mexican-American War, but then obviously they went back to Mexico, gave up their land, and so we're considered non-American, obviously, because they decided to go back. But

my mom's family has been here like six generations already. We went to go visit the little town in New Mexico, and when I say little, it's probably about the size of this room; it was very small, maybe two streets, but that's where she was born.

**How did that make you feel going back to that little town?**

It was humbling. It was eye-opening. It was eye-opening in the sense that I knew my parents, at least on my mother's side, they were poor and to see the evolution of where they came from was very humbling. I think that's where they developed the characteristics of resiliency, of having faith, of working with your hands. Yes, humbling is the word I would use, to be able to see where she grew up as a little girl.

**And where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Southern California. My family were migrant farmworkers. My parents ended up settling in what's called Kerman, California, so the major city that is closest is Fresno. There is a lot of small farming communities outside of that area. We grew up there. Mostly it was a German town. There is a lot of waters. It was a railroad destination. Since my parents were farmworkers, they just moved around that area depending on where the crop was, and so that's what I grew up; I just thought everybody was a farmer. I didn't realize that people had different occupations. I just thought everybody was [a farmer]. I was born there and then we went to Bakersfield because there was work up there. We traveled up to Bakersfield, California, and most of my elementary, and then we moved back and settled in Kerman.

**Do you have any special memories growing up, in the fields or your family being farmworkers?**

A lot because there's five of us, but at the time it was only my older sister and I. I didn't realize that it was hard work. Now I realize that it was hard work, especially for a child. But I was



always partnered with my dad because I was the stronger of the two; my older sister being very prissy and feminine, she didn't like to get dirty. But you were out in the dirt, so it was kind of hard not to. I was always partnered with my dad and I think that's where I developed my leadership skills because I always had to pull more weight, literally, lifting or dumping out the grapes onto the sheets so they could become raisins. Whatever it was, I always had to do double work because I was the stronger of the two. It was hot, but at the time I think it was just great to hang out with my family because we all had to go; you couldn't stay at home. I enjoyed the times even though it was hard work.

**Did the children get paid, too?**

No, we didn't get paid. We did not get paid because all the money went to my parents to help support us. My first paying job was when we moved from out in the fields into the school district. They had what you call now a Summer Bridge Institute program where they give kids exposure to different occupations, so we got to move to the school district. I don't know how my sister managed; she got the desk job inside the office, and I got the job to scrape gum off of the bottom of the desks. I don't know how she managed that, but she got the inside office job. I was still inside, but it was just in the classroom. It was air-conditioned; that's the thing I remember the most. Then my parents then allowed us to keep the money and then we were now responsible for our own clothes for school and that's what we had to use it for. They transitioned that responsibility when we got indoor jobs, quote-unquote, in air-conditioning facilities.

**How old were you?**

We were young. We must have been, gosh, like thirteen, fourteen, before we transitioned out of the fields. I was like five or six when we started out in the fields, so it was for a long period of time. I did everything from tomatoes; I did grapes, almonds, oranges. The one I hated the most

was chile because I didn't know that you can't pick the chile and touch it and if you touch your face, you get totally irritated. Well, I didn't know that. I realized then the inequity in pay because it took us all day to fill up one bag for a few dollars. I think that's when it hit me that this is what my parents have to do in order to support the rest of us. I remember that specifically because it was such hard work, and I think I realized then that you have to pursue education in order to have more options than what they were given.

But my parents were also very entrepreneurial-type thinking. My dad being a foreman, my mom would make tacos and we would sell soda. We would always supplement our income because they would sell things that people needed. I really appreciated that about them; that they were always thinking how to supplement their income to stretch their dollar.

**Any favorite family traditions growing up?**

Just eating tamales at Christmastime. It was really hard—I was telling my girls this, this weekend—because we came from such a large family from my mom's side, eight brothers and sisters and each one of them had three to five kids. Nobody was treated special. There was no favoritism because there were just so many people, and so you didn't really have individual attention. I remember I vowed that if I ever had a family of my own that I would make sure that each child had individual attention because there were so many and too much that you couldn't focus just on one child. Just constantly getting together at my grandmother's house whether it was Memorial Day or Mother's Day or Christmas, always getting together and celebrating family, and there was a lot of us. Sometimes you didn't even have a birthday cake by yourself because you had to share it with three other people.

**For that month, right?**

Right, it was the month. Your name was maybe spelled out; instead it would be like just 'Happy Birthday,' so it didn't really have your name on it. You just had to accept that. But I just remember I vowed; I was like, huh-uh, for me I will make sure there is individual attention.

***Describe the food for the big celebrations.***

The big celebrations always obviously had rice and beans all the time no matter what, but also macaroni salad, really hot salsa that nobody could eat except for the men, and tortillas and then whatever meat they were cooking whether it be pork or a pot roast or whatever. I just remember there was enough to go around, but you had to eat very strategically. When it was your time to go, you better go. You couldn't be playing outside. You had to be ready. When you went to the table, make sure that you had enough, but you also had to remember that there was people behind, and so take your portion, but also remember that you had to stretch the food. But there was always plenty no matter how many people there actually were. That was the one time we could actually drink soda, which was really special. Yes, we could have soda that day as well, which was nice.

**What were your parents like?**

My dad is a jack of all trades. My dad could be a carpenter, an engineer; he could be an auto mechanic, whatever. He would figure it out; self-taught. A great leader, so he was always a foreman leading other people.

He swept my mom off her feet. They are nearly twenty years apart. My mom was seventeen and my dad was already thirty-two, so right back then a big no-no. She is an old spirit herself, and so she knew that she would marry somebody older.

My mom is also extremely self-sufficient. As a young woman, she knew where her gifts were; her gifts were in cooking, and so she convinced her mom that she would do all the cooking

while the rest of her brothers and sisters went out in the field. She knew what she was good at and she played that up and convinced her parents to let her use her best skill, so she is a great cook.

She was also very instrumental in helping us to see how a woman could transition. She was a young mom, but she also went back to get her GED in her thirties. She demonstrated to us how you could reinvent yourself. I remember her graduating and then she went to work at Mervyns where she stayed until she retired. She evolved to different positions. My mom was great at customer service. She became a working mom in that respect and just was a great example of keeping yourself relevant and also being able to be a mom, be a wife, and then be an individual for herself as well.

**She sounds amazing. What was high school like?**

I didn't realize that I lived in a rural community, but now I realize that's what I lived in, a rural community. I was a very good student. You didn't have to tell me to do my homework. I got good grades. I didn't realize this, either, but somebody asked me when my first exposure was to public service. Well, it was back in high school because I was the student representative to the board of trustees for the school. I also was on student government, which I had forgotten about until I saw a plaque in my mom's house that had my name on it. It was good.

They didn't allow girls back then to participate in things like wrestling, and so instead of doing that I became the scorekeeper so that I could participate in sports, but not in the way that I wanted to. I just had to figure out a different way. Even back then they didn't allow girls to participate on the wrestling teams with the boys; now they do, but back then they didn't. I enjoyed my time.

We were also involved in the Latina clubs for Hispanic groups, and so I learned a lot about serving other people, I think, through high school. That's where I think it was molded the best.

**Then after high school what did you do?**

I got a scholarship. Even my dad was not proficient in reading yet, he himself went back to get his GED like at sixty. But my parents not being proficient in English, they still participated, and so they were part of a migrant farmworkers group and they had scholarships available for kids to go to school. My parents went to an informational meeting, they learned, and that's how I got my scholarships to go to Fresno State, which was the next major city outside of the little, small town.

I got to go to Fresno State and graduated. Into my junior year, my scholarships ran out. It was being in the right place at the right time; the Financial Aid Office sent me over to the Football Office. The coach's wife, the head coach, his wife had just died of an aneurism, so they set up a trust fund. He made me the first recipient of her trust fund. He paid all my tuition for the last two years of school. He gave me a part-time job, so I would go and I would do stats. I'd get to go on the football field and I'd have to write down every play, so I learned about football. I learned how to track the plays and then I'd put it into a computer system and spit out the reports. We won the championships the times that I was there. Being at the right place at the right time was phenomenal.

I did have a car, but I used my bike my parents had got me. One of my fondest memories was that the head coach, he got a car every quarter. I had my driver's license, but I didn't have a vehicle. I'm not sure how I managed that. He would let me go pick up his dry cleaning, and so I would take the long route all the way around before the cars were super nice; they were like Cadillacs, really fancy stuff. I remember I would change the radio station, adjust the seats.

Everything was hydraulic. I would take the long way around to pick up the dry cleaning and then come back. Then I would adjust everything and I would put back the radio station to whatever he had it and I would adjust the seats and the mirror. That was luxury to me.

They were so generous. When I decided to move to Las Vegas, all the coaches and the head coach put enough money together for me so I could move to Las Vegas and I lived off of what they gave me for a year; that's how generous they were.

***Oh, that's wonderful.***

I know. And that was another being in the right place at the right time. It was just such a blessing. I knew that I was going to move to Las Vegas because I wanted to be in hospitality and I wanted to get my master's. I wanted to go to Cornell, but it was too far. They said, "No, Nevada is close enough. You can go get your master's and then come back home." That was the deal. But I never actually went back home.

My parents set me up in a little, small studio apartment. I lived by myself for a year off of the money the coaches gave me.

**That's amazing. What year was this?**

In 1990. I remember when I was going to have to go get a job and I remember applying at the Mirage; it was going to open. I had heard the senior VP of HR speak. I don't even know where I was, but I heard him speak. He said, "Anybody that wants a job, come on down." I went and they didn't hire me and I was stunned because I didn't know anybody. I didn't have anybody to pick up the phone and make a referral. They didn't call me and I just remember being so distraught that they wouldn't hire me. I'm like, do you know who I am? I'm a hard worker. I'm smart. I'm intelligent. They didn't hire me. I remember I was like, you're going to regret that you didn't hire

me one day; I don't know how, but you'll regret. Not in a mean way, but just to say you really missed out on a person.

Lo and behold, MGM picked me up and I helped them open up the MGM Grand in 1994. In 2000, we bought out the Mirage. That same team, I was now part of the transition of helping to narrow down that department, so it actually did happen in 2000 when we consolidated; we ended up buying the Mirage Resorts. I just said, oh, I remember they were going to regret not hiring me because now I even got the better deal because now I had to be part of that transition team. It was good timing for me as well.

***Before you go any farther, what kind of car do you drive now?***

Actually it is a Hyundai Sonata; it's an Unlimited and it has all those fancy buttons. I have all the fancy buttons and the moon roof. My daughter says that I have the best stereo system. I don't know because I don't play it, but that's what she says.

***Tell me about that migrant farmworkers group. Do you know anything more about that group?***

It still exists because the community is still a farming community, and so the migrant farmworkers empower themselves to educate themselves even though English may not be their first language so that they can provide resources and options to their kids. It's still going on. My parents obviously don't participate anymore. I didn't realize how active they had been in empowering themselves with information for their kids. All of us benefitted and all us went up to getting post-secondary degrees, all five of us, because of my parents' activism.

***Is your organization associated with Cesar Chavez in any way?***

No, it wasn't, but it was during that time because I asked my parents, were you guys active?

They just always had to work, but it was during that time of empowering themselves and being a

voice. My parents took a much more subtle approach as far as educating themselves on the resources available and not so much on picketing or marches or things like that.

**When you moved here for grad school, had you been to Las Vegas before?**

No. I don't even know—no. You're going to laugh because the apartment, the little studio my parents got me, because the bed came out of the wall, was in a really bad part of town. I was wondering why people went to work at night. Where do all these women go work at night? I just didn't get it. I was so naïve. I didn't realize that I lived in a really bad neighborhood. It was actually over by the convention center and the apartments aren't there anymore. The landlord really liked me, and so she would look out for me. But I realized then that there was obviously a lot of night activity, a lot of drug issues, but I didn't know any better. I worked and I came home and shut my door. I would say hi to people, but I didn't honestly realize that people had very unique jobs.

**Did your parents come to help you set up?**

Yes, they came. I had everything. My parents were very generous, not necessarily monetarily, but they made sure I had salt and pepper and toilet paper. Thinking back now that was really brave of them to let me move outside of the state because all my other brothers and sisters still live in California close to my parents, and I was the only one...

I remember asking my dad later on, "Why didn't I get the car like my sister? Why didn't I get this?" He gave my brothers this stuff. My dad said, "Because I always knew you could take care of yourself and that you would be successful no matter what you did. I never had to worry about you." He said, "But your brothers and sisters; that's a different thing, on the other hand."

They were brave in letting me move because they knew that I probably was going to want to be adventurous at some point and Nevada was close enough. The deal was for me to come



home. I never moved back, but it was because I got married here and we started to raise our girls here, so this is home for me. I just would never even think about moving back to California.

***Can you explain a little more about when the family moved from one crop to another, how did the housing work? Were you moving long distances? Just explain that a little more.***

We had what I guess would be considered public housing. They lived in a little town called Three Rocks before they found a house in Karmen. It's not called public housing. It's more like farmworker housing. We would pass the housing when we would go to my grandma's house. I remember my dad would point it out, "That's where we used to live." Wherever the farm that he was working for; that's how we would get our housing. When they wanted to provide some stability for us as we were growing up, then they bought their own house and then my dad just moved around. We would get in a vehicle and drive wherever the location was for what we were going to harvest or work on. But it's all agriculture out there, so you can just imagine. Outside of the town, everything is growing, so you wouldn't have to drive that far. It depended what was in season, too.

***You could work almost year-round?***

Yes, we did. Winters got hard, but just for a couple of weeks and then we would go back out. Yes, especially it heightened in the summer because then we were out of school, so then you could really work longer hours.

***When you were in school, how many hours did you work?***

We worked mostly on the weekends to help, so probably just maybe fourteen hours on the weekends. I just think now, how did we finish our homework? I don't even know how we finished our homework, but we were all good students. We all were pretty good students,

whatever our gift was, except my little brother; he was probably the hardest to encourage to finish his task, but even then he did okay. He finished.

**When you arrived in Las Vegas, what was it like?**

I didn't realize this, but that's when it started to boom, the shift started to happen where the Mirage was the first development of its kind that was going to happen; it was going to revolutionize the Strip, and so that's the presentation I heard. I thought, *I really want to be a part of that*, but they didn't hire me, so I was just stunned. Then, lo and behold, I was at the right place at the right time and this recruiter from MGM saw me. She came up to me. I was at a church activity. She said, "You know what? I think you would be good for helping us to open up the MGM Grand in employment." I interviewed and, lo and behold, an ex-football player who played against Fresno State when I was there, he is the one that gave me my first job at MGM. Football has been in my path for a while.

My job... They wanted to try something new. They wanted to go and recruit in areas where they had not recruited before. They wanted to go recruit people that had disabilities; people that were recovering, substance abuse individuals. They wanted to recruit people who were reentering the population from being offenders and had served their time; dislocated workers. They wanted to recruit people that had been homeless. It was such a great opportunity to learn the community and go to places where people had kind of shunned away from and give people hope and help them to get the skillset by setting up the training.

Now, twenty-five-plus years later I am back in that same component and that's what I do now from another side of it, but give people hope by giving them a good job. When I left MGM back in 2010, that was probably one of my proudest moments was to be part of a team that

created a program that was nationally recognized for getting people to transition off of public assistance and giving them really great jobs within the hotel and casino industry.

**What's the name of the program?**

It was called EOP, Equal Opportunity Program; I think that's what we called it.

***It wasn't the EOB, was it?***

No, it wasn't EOB. I think we made up our own name, Equal Opportunity Program. The greatest thing is that after a couple of years the retention rate was still extremely high; close to 70 percent of the people had stayed on. Other people had gone to other places because they found employment in other locations, but 70 percent of the people were still working there. I feel like I had changed the trajectory of people's lives in that moment that I was there.

I stayed with the company and I just kept getting promoted throughout the course of my life. Then in 2010 I did a radical one eighty and ran for public office and won.

***Tell me why you decided to leave MGM and run for office.***

A couple of things. My last job at MGM was CityCenter, so I had gotten an opportunity to work on the construction side. Then again, this was another program they had not done before, but they were interested in diversifying the number of contractors, so they wanted more women-owned businesses; they wanted more ethnic-owned businesses, and so I got to do that part. There again, I think that my gift is taking nothing and creating something. I think that's one of the gifts that I have. I got to do that.

Then just a couple of things happened. The major thing is my little brother unfortunately died in a tragic accident. I just knew that the time had come to make a switch and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But I had been to San Antonio a couple of years before and I realized that a lot of the elected officials were people of color or women and I had never seen that. I was like, I

never knew there could be an elected official, but it stuck in my mind. During that time when I was thinking about what I wanted to do next, I realized that being a public servant is what was in my cards.

My husband had also come home from Afghanistan because we're a military family. He had gotten injured and a lot of the people in his unit were unfortunately committing suicide because that's when the recession started to hit, so they didn't have homes and then they had marital problems and then there were choosing to end their life. I was like, I think I could use my skillset to help serve in that kind of capacity.

I just went in; I was supposed to meet with the senior HR person that week and I decided to cancel the meeting because I knew that I wasn't going to move forward. After about twenty years, I said, "It's time for me to move on." They were like, "You know that there is a recession coming?" I was like, "Yes, I know." They said, "You know we have a lot of positions internally where we could place you." I'm like, "Yes, I know." I said, "But it's time."

I ran for office. Out of the seven candidates that had wanted that position, I ended up winning. Then I went to Carson City for the first time in 2010.

### **What was the makeup of the legislature at that time?**

My gosh, I feel men were so... We were just disruptive in a good way because for the first time they had elected four Hispanic females, ever in the legislature, the first African-American female, my colleague Assemblywoman Dina Neal; she got elected. Now you had all these young intelligent women. We were well-educated. We all had our post-secondary degrees. We were independent in our nature. They were so shocked, I just remember.

It was also the year that everything moved to an electronic laptop, so then us young—I say we were young—we knew how to use it; we knew how to use technology. Some of our

counterparts, especially the men from the rurals, didn't even know how to turn on the computer. Here you have all these young professionals from Las Vegas and it was a clash. You really had to have a lot of emotional intelligence to treat people that were older than you with respect even though they didn't necessarily see you in the same light.

I remember we would get...I don't know what the word is. They would assume we were the help, so they assumed that we were the janitorial crew. I'm like, "No, actually we're the legislators." They thought we were the janitorial crew or they thought we were the administrative assistants, no disrespect. They didn't look at us as the actual elected official, so it took a lot of time for them to get acclimated. We had to have a lot of training, especially for the entire body, on, how do you treat people with respect even though they might be younger than you? They weren't used to seeing a lot of women. They weren't used to seeing people of color. A lot of training that we had to do to educate people that what you say might be offensive even though you think you may not be.

Being in a mostly male-dominated role that I was in in industries—football or gaming—I was kind of used to how to deal with it, but some of my colleagues really struggled. They felt very disrespected by the majority of the men that were there. It was an interesting time. If I hadn't had the exposure that I had, I think that I probably would have had a hard time adjusting, myself, but I was used to it, having to work twice as hard. I was used to it. I was used to dealing with people that were older than me, especially men. The transition wasn't as difficult for myself as it was for some of my other colleagues.

***Was [Bill] Raggio still there?***

Yes. I was so looking forward to learning from him, but that year he decided to retire. I was so disappointed because I thought, *gosh, man, I get to actually be around an individual who has all*

*this experience; I could learn.* Even though he probably would have outsmarted me because you didn't know what you didn't know, but I just wanted to get that exposure and he retired that year, so I did not get to serve with him, which was a disappointment.

***That was really a transitional year. It was probably Joe Neal retiring as well.***

Yes.

***All the old guard.***

Then you have all these young people and especially this large contingency of females who are so intelligent. My colleagues, like Assemblywoman Olivia Diaz, Dina Neal, sharp young women. It was so radical. It was so radical. It was hard for the legislative body to see new blood coming in. That's because term limits had been enacted, so we were the group that came in under that new system.

***Do you ever compare that to what's happening in Congress today with all these young women going in?***

I do because I think that we were—especially in Nevada. Nevada right now has moved to a female majority.

**The first one.**

Right. I think we were the catalyst for that. I know that we participated in a lot of training giving women the knowledge to say, hey, you may not be ready today, but if you want to be part of this training, we're going to help you. I think, myself, personally, that we became part of that movement to help that generation feel like public service is an option for you as an individual. That affected the local level because then those people moved up to the state level and then those people moved up to the federal level. I think that we were part of that spark.

***So thank you. This is really a part-time job in Nevada, being in the assembly. You had just quit the MGM, so what were you doing?***

I know. It's so crazy. If you have to go back and look at it, you would say that it's probably insanity because my husband had gone to Iraq and did a seventeen-month deployment, came home seven months, and then got deployed to Afghanistan. I remember calling him on the phone, and I didn't know when he would call, so I just had to be prepared, and when I said, "Oh, I figured out what I want to do; I want to run for office," he was like, "Okay," and I *click*; I hung up so that he wouldn't sway me out of it, not that he would.

When he came home—unfortunately he had gotten injured—I won my race. Then we switched; I went to Carson City and he stayed home. It was just a radical time. But when I came home from Carson City, we were both out of jobs because he still had not recuperated. I left my six-digit salary job with MGM. Then we both looked at each other and said, "What have we done?" We both felt this need to serve our country, our state, but now we were both unemployed.

I ended up opening up a small business so that I could support myself. In order to be a legislator, it is a full-time job even though you only get paid every two years, but it is a full-time job. I knew that I wanted to give it my all, so I opened up a small business and I took on some clients. Our household went from a very well situated six-figure salary household to like barely making ends meet.

My husband did end up getting a job that hired veterans, so I was grateful for that, but it took him some time to go through rehabilitation so that he could get back on his feet. But it was such a crazy time. Looking back at it now, I honestly don't know how we made it, but we were very good stewards of our finances where we cut corners. We were extremely frugal and we just stretched our dollar as much as we could to make it happen. In hindsight, I would have said, you

are crazy; you're leaving your six-figure job to go serve the public and you're going to come home and you're not going to have a job. We just had to become very creative.

***Wouldn't the MGM have supported you while you served?***

They would have. I just am the kind of person that I don't like to have one foot in and one foot out. I just want to be focused and I was very blessed to be able to be one of the few legislators that was young enough—I wasn't retired—that I could meet with constituents, help solve problems, take on the extra work even though I wasn't get paid because it's very time-consuming and I had the flexibility to do that.

***Tell us about the time that you work as a legislator when there is no session going on. You're still on committees and doing all kinds of things. Explain that to us. We know that you're in session once every two years. Half of us think that that's all you do.***

Yes. What I didn't know either is that the work doesn't stop; it's what they call these interim committees, which is almost as time-consuming. One of my mentors says, "Irene, the goal of the scenario is to get on the paying ones." I'm like, "What?" She said, "Yes, at least you'll get paid for the day. They'll pay for your gas and you'll get paid the per diem. You don't want to get on the committees where they don't pay." I was like, "Oh, okay." At least if you serve you get paid the one day, which now, in hindsight, you get eighty dollars, which is big time when you don't have anything. I remember she said, "The goal is to get on the paying ones because you don't want to get on the ones that don't pay because then you have to take time off of work, your employer is not going to pay you, and you're not going to get paid by the legislature, so then you struck out twice."

What most people don't know is that the work doesn't stop. You have to continue and watch out for what you implemented. If you wanted to build a house, you make sure it stays a



house, and then you have to work out the details of what you want to put in the house. You said it was three bedrooms, two baths, but the details of when the move-in date is or what colors; all that detail is in the interim and I had no idea. But you're making decisions about health; you're making decisions about water; everything that you passed in law, you implement during the interim and that's really where the details come because that's when you know how to become a great policy person. Then once you know that you can navigate the whole entire puzzle. But most people don't ever get to that level because you don't have the time; you go back to your work and you focus on your full-time job, the one that actually pays your bills.

**What committees did you serve on?**

Like I said, being at the right place at the right time and being very blessed, for my first time I got to be the vice chair, which is a leadership role, of Government Affairs. I learned a lot about local government and I served under—I didn't know she was going to be the speaker at that time; she turned out to be the future Speaker of the Assembly—I got to be her right-hand person. It was so radical. She forced me to learn and evolve, all good, but I was scared to death at the time because I didn't know how things worked. I got to serve as her vice chair.

Then I got to sit on other major committees, Commerce and Labor, which was unheard of for a freshman and especially a female. I was one of a few legislators that actually got to serve on four committees, so I got additional committee assignments. It was Government Affairs, Commerce and Labor, Taxation, which is how the revenue comes into the State of Nevada, which was fascinating, and the last one was Natural Resources, which is everything about water, mining. I learned tons about horses, about turtles. We have to make decisions about those things that affect our economy. I really fell in love with the state of Nevada from that committee

because it's all rural stuff, and so I could relate to that culture stuff because of how I was brought up, and that's why I loved it.

I was one of a few freshmen that got four assignments and I was grateful. In addition, I got to serve on the very powerful Commerce and Labor. It was unheard of to put a freshman on there, but because of my business background...And then taxation.

**Were you on it when they were going to implement marijuana legislation?**

Yes.

**What was that like?**

Very interesting because my constituents were for medical marihuana, not so much for the recreational stuff, so it was really hard to...But in taxation it's about policy; you put in the framework, like how much you're going to collect and when you're going to collect it and who is going to report what. Yes, so I got to be on that. Then I took on leadership roles after that. I ended up chairing taxation. At one point I chaired Commerce and Labor. It was just phenomenal experiences for me. I got to be on the money committee, so how we determine where the money goes; that was my sophomore year or my junior year. I just learned a ton of stuff. Because of learning how to be a good student and always working hard, that's why I got a lot of leadership roles to serve. It worked out really well for me.

**Did you serve up to your term limit?**

No. I did another one eighty. I think that I had reached another point after eight years. We had corrected the path of Nevada getting back on track, and so I realized that my gifts are better when there is a crisis in helping move into stability and growth. I'm not so much of a maintenance kind of individual. After eight years our youngest daughter decided to go to college, and so we just couldn't pencil it out, how to pay for her schooling financially. We could do it

with our first one, pay for it; that was our gift to her. But we couldn't financially afford to pay for two of them at the same time.

Then a couple of other things. The more you move up into political office, the harder it gets in the sense of it is more politics than it is policy, and that was not necessarily my goal. I didn't necessarily want to be a politician. I was good at policy. I was good at public service. Politician is a whole other avenue. It was just getting harder to make some of the decisions, and so I decided that while I was at the top I was going to exit out again.

I took a one eighty and decided to leave and I was looking at my options. I actually had some other options, and then my boss here—I knew him from MGM—he called and said, “No, I have a position that I really want you to help me with.” He said, “It's going to be a lot of changes in this area for Southern Nevada.” And he's a great salesperson. Honestly I wasn't even looking in this area and I ended up choosing this position because of stability.

I realized that the eight years that I served that I lost about a million dollars' worth of revenue coming into my household, just my income potential. I needed to make up a lot of ground for not putting into my retirement, for not getting a salary. The best thing is to be able to pay for our girls' education and give that as a gift to them from us so they don't have to worry about coming out with any student debt. I'm grateful for that. I love making money again and having benefits and having holidays, paid holidays.

***Tell me what you do now.***

I started off as a chief strategy officer, so my goal was to set what the legislature had put in place as a framework; my job was to figure out how we were going to execute those plans, so it fit in perfectly to what I was doing. Then after my first year, I got promoted to deputy director, so now I'm the deputy director and also the chief strategy officer for the local Workforce board. Because

unemployment is low, there is still pockets of double-digit unemployment in some areas, so we're having to become creative in figuring out the plans of how to look at generational poverty. We also have a lot of double-digit unemployment with youth, so we needed to redesign how we're getting the youth interested in paid internships because they need to make a living and job shadowing and all the new industries that we attracted through the legislature by giving some tax incentives, now we're trying to get kids exposed to those industries. I get to still work on public service, it's just from a different avenue, so I like it a lot.

**And you oversee the One-Stop Career Centers, right?**

Yes. Southern Nevada gets about twenty million dollars and our goal is to deploy that money into the community and it's through our One-Stop Career Centers. The focus is that if you live in Henderson, you don't have to go all the way to North Las Vegas to get the service; the services are in your area. We partnered with the libraries to say, hey, you guys have free space and people are coming in there looking how to sharpen their résumé or do a résumé or how to dress for success; let us bring our services together. It worked out well because they don't charge us any rent and we serve the same clientele, so it was a great partnership. We have thirteen locations and we just opened our last one at the East Las Vegas Library.

***The new one?***

Yes. It is so beautiful. The demand, I just got a report and—has it been a month? No, it hasn't even been a month. The demand for the services there are off the charts, just people wanting to know how to better themselves. Where can they go to get English Language Learner classes? How do you apply for a job? You name it. The services are just so needed there and it's just been a great partnership with them. That's part of my responsibility.

***I love it. Do you work at all with Nevada Partners?***

Yes.

***Explain that to me and explain to me what's happening to their funding.***

Sure. The way that the federal government works is that they give the money to the state and then the state gives it to the local boards; in Nevada we have two, one in the north and one in the south. Then these boards are supposed to give the money to either nonprofits, community based organizations, for-profit; I think it's about five entities that you can partner with, and so those people become the providers of the services in the communities.

About three years ago, federal changed the law and they said, we want the services to be in the communities, not what they call home offices, so we want you to come out of your house, go provide the services where the One-Stops are located, and so the law required that. The board wrote their new RFPs to say, the services are not to be in your home offices; the services are supposed to be in the One-Stops; write your proposals that way.

If you tell me, Irene, bake a German chocolate cake and I actually present you with apple pie, then you're probably going to say, no, the instructions were to build a German chocolate cake. In that instance, Nevada Partners competed and the instructions were not to what the board asked for, and so they came in last in all three of their proposals. Four other entities...It was competitive. It was increased competition; you delivered a better product than I did even though I had been in the community for some time. The competition, you did a lot better than I did.

It was eye-opening especially for some entities that had been...We've always done apple pie; this is what we want to deliver. And they said, no, the law has changed; you have to evolve into these new regulations that the federal law requires. That's just my personal opinion. I know I can't say anything more than that because there is some litigation going on. That's what I would

say is that it was increased competition and the law asked for certain things to be changed and it wasn't delivered in that format.

***How could they be flexible enough to make those changes when they have all of those structures over there and now they've got to take those services out into the community? Wow.***

Yes. I think also if I were a nonprofit—very eye-opening for me. One of things it would teach me is I cannot be dependent on just one funding source; I need to make sure that I have multiple funding sources. One, being dependent, just like we were as a state dependent on gaming and thought, *who cares about attracting other industries? We can make it.* But, no, that's not the case. If I were a nonprofit, I would say, one, I need to diversify my funding source. Number two, I need to be as lean as possible. Always err on the line of being lean. And, three, constantly being creative and thinking of new ways to deliver to the community. Millennials now are present, and so even if you were serving maybe the community fifty-five and older, you have a different demographics of Southern Nevadans; you can't keep using the same cookie cutter. If I were a nonprofit, I would have to be thinking of, what trends am I seeing? How do I evolve? How do I change? Be thinking on that kind of spectrum if I were in the same boat.

I know I'm applying what I've learned through this process in this one year to hear and bringing things up to the attention of the executive director and saying, hey, here's where I see we're vulnerable. We're dependent on the federal dollars and the government could shut down and we could not get any money. I say, this just isn't healthy. I'm applying what I learned in that first year on how to help this organization evolve as well. But it is a very tough lesson to learn, very tough lesson to learn, yes, not easy.

***I know that Tyrone Thompson was one of the workforce development people here in the state. Tell me about working with Tyrone.***

You know what? He exemplified public service. In dealing with kids, in dealing with adults, just a respectful, God-fearing gentleman. We brought him into the legislature in such a chaotic time because for the first time ever the legislature was going to make a decision on expelling a member of their body. It was such a crazy, hard time for us. He was the light that came out of the darkness. I call it sometimes playing Monopoly. You're playing Monopoly and then all of a sudden you're the one that comes in at the end when everybody has already made their money or lost their money; that's when he came in. It was such turmoil, but he was such a great light. He got appointed and then he successfully ran afterwards and was very successful in winning his seats repeatedly.

But he was always passionate about developing people and that meant also placement in great sustaining jobs. He was very passionate about workforce, about homeless population, but always giving people a hand up and putting things into place to help them through that. I was grateful to be able to serve with him.

But it speaks to when you're in public service, especially in the legislature, honestly you forget to take care of yourself. You get so caught up in making major decisions that you're the last person...I just remember a lot of us were on blood pressure medicine. The EMTs were there to check our blood pressure because it would go sky high because you're under such major stress. You're making decisions for three million people and you know that everybody is not going to be pleased and some people are going to hate you. There is not enough money to go around, so you've got to figure out how to stretch your dollar. We just always forget to take care of ourselves. Now I know why people age so rapidly. You gain about twenty, forty pounds. It's havoc on the individual. I know that Tyrone must have been in that kind of predicament where you forget to take care of yourself, which is unfortunate.

He was a great mentor to my daughters. They even called him Uncle Tyrone because he just had such a passion for youth. He left a great legacy for people that may not have been even able to thank him.

**You mentioned earlier that when you came to Las Vegas, the deal was you were going to study and move back. What happened that you stayed?**

I met a guy. Actually it was my boyfriend that I had in California; he followed me to Las Vegas. We ended up getting married and then we had our girls. This became home and so I never even thought about going back. And I'm the only one out of my siblings that has any kids. Out of a Hispanic family that is really unusual.

**That is huge.**

My parents have always tried to get me to move back, but I was like, no, this is home. I would always have to send our girls back to go and visit. Our girls learned to fly by themselves very early on because that's the only grandkids they have. They learned very early on how to get on a plane and be escorted and wait until your grandparents pick you up, very, very early. But this is home and so that's why I never went back.

**None of your family followed you?**

None. They all live close to my parents. They all do, which is really unusual. Yes, they stayed close to my parents.

**And no kids.**

And no kids, none of them. None of them decided to have kids. I was thinking about that. I was like, *gosh, was our childhood that bad that they don't want any kids?* I just think it goes back to everybody had so many kids that I just think they wanted to, but it just didn't pan out. Yes, it's only me.



**When you got together with your husband, what part of town did you settle in?**

Well, we lived in that little studio and then the big move was when I was expecting our first child; we moved to an apartment, Tropicana and Decatur area. With the second child, I finally bought a house. The lady that helped to take care of the girls when they were small, she bought a house in the southwest area, and so I went to go find out where she lived, and, lo and behold, there just happened to be a house for sale five doors down from where she was, and so that's the house I bought. She continued to help me with the girls. Even just for Mother's Day, they took her over a card and expressed their gratitude. The girls are twenty and twenty-four, and so they still are so appreciative of her because she became like a second mom. I still haven't moved out of the house because we're a military family and my husband kept getting deployed. It just never occurred to leave.

**How has that area changed since you settled?**

There was a lot of people that were older, fifty-five, and they had their parents living with them and they all moved out. Now a lot of younger families. Now we actually have kids in the cul-de-sac, which is kind of interesting. You have to be really careful because there's a lot of kids playing in the street where before everybody went to bed by seven. It has been different because now you have a younger generation of individuals. Then our oldest moved out and our youngest still lives at home and she is finishing college. We haven't had a need to move.

***Is that Spring Valley?***

Yes. A lot of older homes, small. We always thought we would move as we...But the deployments just never presented the situation. It was too much of a transition to go through to have to think about moving. It just was too much. Then every other year I would leave to go to

Carson City, and so my husband would run the household. It was too much to take on at the same time, so that's where we stayed.

***Who was the football player who gave you the job at MGM?***

Tony Gladney. Not only was he my boss, but him and his family and my family, we became personal friends. Also, a spiritual mentor for me. Obviously just through the promotions, he would always give great advice. He would be somebody that I would constantly be seeking guidance from. A great human being. I just was really, really blessed.

When we bought out the Mirage Resorts, my circle then included a woman named Punam Mathur. I was like, *oh my gosh, how could it get any better?* She became that same guidance person and helped me mature and blossom even more than I thought I could. That's also one of the reasons I went into public service, because she helped me to dream in color. Yes, just great people in my path.

***Wonderful. I just want you to know that when we took this project into the community to get support, all kinds of support—people to interview, monies to go along with the grant that we had gotten to run the program—one of our biggest supporters is Tony Gladney and his staff.***

That's what I learned under. I mean, you can't pick two better people to learn under. Tony had stellar reputation. He was a God-fearing man. He had respect for even women leadership.

***And he's handsome.***

Yes. Well, I thought of him as my brother, but, yes. Even when we traveled and there were women that thought he was extremely handsome, he was always very respectful and he always protected the reputation of himself and his family. I am grateful. I learned, seeing that. I would have been disappointed if he had made shortcuts or things like that, but, no, I've never, ever...And I worked there almost twenty years.

*Wonderful. I just appreciate your stories, your memories so very much.*

Thank you.

*Even though I didn't say anything during the whole interview, I really appreciate this.*

*[Laughing]*

Thank you. No, I appreciate you asking.

**This has been fantastic. How do you feel about the term *Latinx* being used to identify what has been known as the Latino community?**

I just think it's an evolution. I think now that I know myself more as a person, I'm having a harder time with people putting me into boxes. I used to be so concerned that I was included. I'm at a point in my journey now in my life where I don't like putting myself into categories, and so I respect those individuals that feel that need. I'm not there in my journey anymore. I think that I've kind of evolved from that, so I'm really comfortable with who I am and probably not as concerned about being called something to identify myself, no disrespect. It's just I'm at a different place in my journey now.

**What led to that transition, do you know?**

I think that reinventing myself three times already has really taught me a lot. I used to think that once I reached a peak that I had arrived, but it takes more strength to take yourself out of that and start at the bottom. I think that transition has really made me look at myself and feel confident in who I am even if I'm starting back at the bottom, which I felt like I did again. I was like, here I am starting at the bottom again. But I just am more comfortable in what gifts I have and I know that I'm smart. Even if I'm in a new location, I can pick something up. Probably turning fifty was really monumental as far as not putting as much pressure on myself to fit in that, quote-

unquote, perfection and redefining that for what it meant for myself. I think all of that kind of helped me to evolve.

The great thing is that a lot of my circle of friends are all older than I am. Like Punam, she hit that twenty years ago. I remember seeing it in her, her go through that transition. I didn't understand it at the time. But having these older, mature women in my life has helped me to accept myself more. They always told me that I would get there; I just didn't understand what they were talking about, but now I do.

I just think reinventing yourself, starting off back at the bottom, just does wonders for your sense of courage and bravery. I really like it. I actually am scared that I crave it now, which is a little scary.

**Are there any last comments that you would like to share towards the Latino community, towards the project, towards the community you serve?**

I really believe in servant leadership, so I think that you can be successful and be the best at your game, but also serve the community; it's not one or the other. I'm teaching my daughters that and they're the next generation and I love that about them that they're so community minded; that it's in their DNA. I would just say you don't have to pick one or the other; you can do both.

I would also say for especially the young women, I would just say volunteer and don't be afraid to try. I just think that. And reinvent yourself, push yourself out of your comfort zone so that you could grow. And I know Punam said—she said the best at my fiftieth birthday party—she said, “Oh my gosh, she's just getting started.” And I do feel like that. I used to think that fifty was it; you reached it. But she said, “Oh my gosh, Irene, you're just getting started.” I am super excited for what's coming next. I have no idea what that means, but I'm much more comfortable

to being vulnerable and not embarrassed to push myself out of my comfort zone. I would just offer that.

**Thank you.**

*Thank you so much.*

You're welcome.

**[End of recorded interview]**