AN INTERVIEW WITH YVANNA CANCELA

An Oral History Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

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

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PREFACE

Yvanna Cancela (b. 1987) arrived in Las Vegas the summer of 2009. Fresh off a summer internship with Sen. Harry Reid in Washington, D.C., she was hired to work on Reid's reelection campaign. Yvanna's political talents were blossoming as was her affection for southern Nevada.

Born in Phoenix, Arizona, and raised in Miami, Florida, Yvanna's parents immigrated from Cuban. She received her Bachelor of Arts in communications in 2010 from Northwestern University.

Her move to Las Vegas ignited a passion for local politician and she made her move to Nevada more permanent. Then in 2016, she became to this first Latina to serve in the Nevada Senate when she was appointed to succeed Ruben Kihuen. Kihuen had been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

At the time of this interview, Yvanna was studying at the Boyd School of Law. Also, she is active with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southern Nevada, Culinary Workers Union Local 226, AFL-CIO, Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada and Las Vegas Urban Debate League.

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February 27, 2020
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

LATINX VOICES
OF SOUTHERN NEVADA
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Today is February 27th, 2020. We are in the Oral History Research Center. My name is Monserrath Hernandez, and with me today is…

Barbara Tabach.

And you are Yvanna Cancela. Can you please spell your name for us?

Sure. It's Y-V-A-N-N-A, Yvanna, and then Cancela is C-A-N-C-E-L-A.

I know that when you came in we talked a little bit about the term *Latinx* and the Latino community. Can you tell me how you identify? Let's start with that.

I'm in a culture and identity class right now and we were asked what are most prominent identity is. The first thing that came to my mind was a Latina. I feel very strongly about what that means to me both in how I dress, how I carry myself, how I represent my community, my background, my family, and I try my hardest to be authentic with myself about what it means to me to be a Latina.

That's beautiful.

What does it mean to be a Latina?

In some ways it means being unafraid to represent where I come from. To me sometimes it's playing Cuban music with the windows down. It's speaking Spanish when I'm at the grocery store with my grandmother. It's being unafraid when someone I'm interacting with clearly speaks Spanish and speaking Spanish back. It means embodying some of the Latina stereotypes; I wear hoop earrings every day; I wear red lipstick, and I do so both because I like it, but also because it makes me proud of who I am and where I come from. It also means recognizing that I have a responsibility to be a representative of my community and on the microscale my family, but on the macroscale how society views Latinas, and do my best to share my story and how I carry myself as a way to uplift people like me.

Is that how you got into politics?

No. I got into politics totally accidentally. It's not at all what I dreamed about as a little girl. It's not what I want to do forever and always. It was a direct response to Donald Trump becoming president and feeling as a result of that change in Washington that states were going to have both a responsibility and an opportunity to experiment with policies that maybe they otherwise wouldn't have and wanting to be a part of that to fight for the issues I cared about and continue to care about.

Let's go back to your childhood. What in your childhood might have prepared you for this pathway that you've taken? How did your personality develop? Tell us about your home and family.

All my family is Cuban. I'm the first person in my family born in the U.S. I get challenged on this by my mom's brother, my uncle, who says, "Well, you have a great-grandmother who was American." And that's true. In my nuclear family I was the first person born in the U.S. Both my parents were born in Cuba.

I had a lovely childhood. I grew up in Miami. I was born in Phoenix, then lived in San Antonio for a year, and landed in Miami after that. I don't claim Phoenix in any way, but it is, as a matter of fact, where I was born.

What were your parents doing in Phoenix?

My dad got a job at the Univision station out there. He started at the Miami Univision station and then got promoted to go run the Phoenix station, so my family moved west and that's where I was born. Then they ended up back in Miami after a short stint in San Antonio.

I grew up in a beautiful home. I have wonderful memories of Christmases where we'd have the whole family and then some over at the house. We used to go to a park called Merry

Christmas Park and run around. My brother and I shared a bathroom. One of the most vivid memories of my childhood is my mom waking us up in the morning, and depending on who she woke up first, you'd call "shotgun second," which meant you got shotgun in the car and you were second to use the bathroom so you got an additional maybe five minutes of sleep at best. It was a good way to start the day when you were the first one to call that.

I had this lovely childhood. I went to the same school from pre-K to eighth grade. My best friend in the whole world is someone I met in Gymboree, which was at two years old, before starting pre-K. I did ballet growing up and that was a big part of my childhood. When you think about what prepared me for what I'm doing today, being on a ballet stage at four years old, super nervous, was the first experience I had of overcoming fear of being in front of an audience. I didn't realize how formative that was until much later in life.

Probably the single most formative and the most impactful experience I undertook as a child, a teenager was doing high school debate. It was an incredibly powerful activity. It was the first time it was cool to be smart. I was not athletic. I was not particularly good at ballet. But I was smart and I got to be smart in a competitive setting. It was all research based and fact based and you had to have evidence for your claims. You couldn't just say things.

What kind of debate did you do?

I did policy debate…The warrant claim frame of thinking where you can't just say *today is a good day*, you have to give evidence for why, has changed the way I think about everything in my life. You can't just tell someone *you're great*. You should tell them why and try to be really deliberate in how you frame your thoughts.

It exposed me to college campuses. I got to travel all over the country for tournaments. It was just an incredible experience. To this day it is probably the thing I attribute the most to shaping who I am as a person.

Going back a little bit to your parents, what year did they come to the U.S.?

I don't know the year. My mom came when she was eleven, and my dad came when he was four. Both of my grandfathers were political prisoners. One was in prison for seven years. One was in prison for a little more than eight years, but took a long time to get to the U.S. after that. He had to go through Spain. Both my grandmothers came to the U.S. with some connections to the States, knew some people, but had to figure out how to raise kids in a totally new country and not knowing when they were going to see their husbands again. They are these incredibly strong women who figured out how to build a life for themselves while raising kids, while learning a language, while growing into a new community. They're my heroes. They're incredible women.

They sound like it.

All my grandparents are still alive except for my dad's dad who passed away in 2010.

Did they settle in Miami?

Yes. I don't know why my mom's mom ended up in Atlanta for a little bit, but there was a stint where they were in Atlanta. My family history gets kind of blurry there. But everyone is in Miami.

You mentioned that one of them had to go through Spain and then come to the U.S., right?

Yes.

How did that process go?

I've had my grandmother explain it to me a couple of times, and it kind of makes sense, but not completely. Essentially he was jailed in Cuba for about eight years, and then to come to the U.S.

he first moved to Spain and then from Spain came to Miami. I think there was a stop in Puerto Rico in between. I don't know exactly how that came together or why that made sense at the time, but that was his journey to the States.

Growing up, what are some traditions or celebrations that your family would do?

We had very Cuban Christmases, very, very Cuban Christmases.

Explain what that means.

There is a lot of pork, a lot of pork.

Lechón?

Yes. One of the most vivid memories for me as a kid was the day before Christmas Eve a dead pig would appear in our house, and the whole thing, the whole thing would sit on our counter. Obviously, it had been cleaned out and stuffed. It was prepared to go into what's called a *caja china*. It is similar to the tactics used in Hawaii to roast a pig in that it is slow-cooked over charcoal. But instead of going in the ground, it sits in a box, this big metal box that has no real science to it. My grandfather and my dad would roast this pork in the backyard. All of the food was Cuban food. There was black beans and rice and flan. It was Cuban music, and people would stay in the house dancing until late. It was a lot of fun. To this day the parties have now gotten smaller and now my parents are divorced, so we have two Christmases and two Thanksgivings, but every family gathering has a Cuban component to it, especially on the food.

Growing up, did you hear a lot of stories about Cuba and everything that happened?

Not really. I didn't understand it as a child, but now I look back and I try to put myself in my grandparents' shoes. They lost their country. They lost the life that they were leading and through no fault of their own. There was this political change. When they started a new life in America, they really started a new life. Neither one of my grandfathers ever talked to me about

what it was like to be political prisoners. I've heard stories. My grandfather is missing part of a finger as a result of that experience. My parents have told me stories of my grandfathers getting blanks shot at them and just really awful experiences that they went through. I've heard stories of what my grandmother's life was like as a little girl. My mom will tell stories of what her life was like as a little girl. But there is really a divorcing of the Cuba that they knew and the Cuba that exists today.

The reality.

Yes. I should probably ask more questions of them.

Have you ever visited Cuba now that Americans are allowed in?

Yes. I went in 2014 or 2015, I don't remember, as part of a work trip. When I was working for the union, we took a trip to understand whether or not there were opportunities to work with employers that we had relationships with as they tried to potentially enter the Cuban market. It was a very premature exploration, but we thought maybe there is opportunity there. It was fascinating because the Cuba that we were shown was so different than the Cuba that I imagined. There was a clear disconnect between the places and the people that we were introduced to and the places and the people that were normal life on the island.

I had one opportunity…There was very little unscheduled time. There was one afternoon where it was unscheduled, so I just kind of got lost. I met a woman and she is yelling, "*Alado, alado*." Ice cream. I very politely asked her in Spanish, "How do you make ice cream? How do you have ice cream to sell?" It was not a little shop. It was outside of her house. She is like, "You're Cuban?" I'm like, "I'm kind of Cuban." She goes, "Come here." She invites me into her house. Inside her house is a washing machine probably from the 1960s or '70s, not a modern

machine. She explains to me how it doesn't wash her clothes anymore; it can't do that, but she uses it to churn ice cream.

In the morning I would run along the Malecón, and there were men fishing who didn't have fishing rods, but had fishing line and they would tie it to metal cans. When a fish got on the line, the can would rattle and then they would know to go check that line. I felt such pride—I get emotional about this—coming from a people who…It's the genius of poverty. It's the resourcefulness of having very little, but still figuring out how to make a life. Knowing that that strength, that ingenuity runs through my veins; that that's where my family comes from made me really proud.

What did your parents think about you going to Cuba?

My parents were okay with it. I haven't talked about it with any of my grandparents.

Why is that?

Because I'm nervous about how they'll react. It's been an unspoken rule in our family that we're not going to Cuba. Recently my grandmother has been open to the idea of going back. I would really like to take a trip with her and my mom and see where they grew up, but I don't know if it will happen.

What part of Cuba did you visit?

Just in Havana. I was just there for a few days.

Where is your family from?

On my mom's side, they're from the other side of the island from a place called Vicotria de Las Tunas, which is in what's called the Oriente. From my dad's side, they're from right outside of Havana.

Tell me a little bit more of growing up in Miami. What was that like?

It was fun. It was vibrant. I was in the same school from pre-K to eighth grade. As we got older, on the last day of school my mom would take my group of friends—we were called the Ballet Girls because we all took ballet together—to the beach as a day to celebrate, and it was awesome. I would go fishing on weekends with my dad and my brother. I don't know. I go to Miami now and I drive around and I have such fond memories of where I grew up.

Did you speak Spanish growing up?

I spoke Spanish before I spoke English. At the time I could have run away from home from how angry it would make me because my parents did this thing where we could only speak English at school. Once we got home we could only speak Spanish. I knew they spoke English. I had heard them speak English. I had spoken English to them. But when they got home, anytime that I tried to speak to them in English, they would tell me in Spanish, "I don't understand you." I would get so angry, like red in the face angry, yelling at them, saying, "Yes, you do." But as a result of that I today am not a great Spanish writer, but I am fully fluent in both languages and it's such a gift that they gave me.

They did you a favor.

Yes.

Looking back at it how do you feel?

Super grateful, supremely grateful. We'll probably do the same thing with my kids. But at the time it was like I could have burned-down-the-house kind of thing.

Tell me a little bit about your dad's work. You said he worked for Univision. What exactly did he do?

My dad has spent his whole life in Spanish media. He started at Univision in sales, ended up getting promoted through the company, ran a number of stations, eventually was in senior leadership at the company. He left there and went to Telemundo and did the same thing. He started a Spanish language a.m. radio chain and traveled the country taking the company public. Then after 9/11 the company struggled, and he left there and ran for mayor of Miami-Dade County. That was my first political experience. He didn't win. He started his own company, Spanish language consulting company on the Latino market. He wrote a book. Today he runs the Telemundo station in Puerto Rico.

Wow. He moved to Puerto Rico?

Kind of. He commutes. He's in Puerto Rico most of the week and then weekends in Miami. Some weekends my stepmom goes to see him in Puerto Rico. But, yes.

Interesting.

Wow, he's with Telemundo in Puerto Rico, my goodness. He's gone through all these historic traumas that have happened there.

Oh yes.

With protest and everything going on.

Oh yes. He lives in old San Juan and he just moved because he was close to the governor's mansion and there were so many protests that for him to get home any day, it was taking an absurd amount of time because there were just tons of people on his street, so he moved. Yes, he's seen the island go through…the last few years.

How did you stay in touch with him during the storms and all of that?

I talk to my parents five or six times a day. As long as he had cell service, we would just text or call.

You knew immediately and constantly that he was okay.

Yes. I worried the other month, weeks, whenever the recent earthquakes were. That made me nervous because there's no warning.

But he's all good.

Yes.

How does he like living in Puerto Rico?

He hasn't said this, but I know him well enough. It is as close to living in Cuba as he will ever get in his lifetime. I think that makes him really proud. We also have some family in Puerto Rico, so being connected to them. He spent some time there when he was growing up, so it's like a homecoming of sorts. He loves the work he is doing. Puerto Rico's station is different than most of the other stations because they do original programming. He gets to…

Pick and choose.

Yes. He is so happy doing the work he's doing. I don't think he minds it. I think he minds the commute back and forth and the personal cost that comes with that, but he's really happy with his work.

That's awesome. Walk me through college. Where did you attend college?

I went to Northwestern. I liked high school debate very much. I got good at high school debate. My junior year in April, Northwestern held a round robin for the top juniors in the country, and I was the top speaker at that tournament. The prize was a free summer at debate camp at Northwestern, which was a big deal, not only because it was a free debate camp, which was great, but because Northwestern has the most successful college debate program in the history of

the National Championship of College Debate. I was pumped. Evanston/Chicago in the summertime is amazing. It is beautiful. Evanston is a suburb where Northwestern actually is, about thirty minutes outside of Chicago. It's on the lake. There is so much greenery and happiness. What I know now having lived there is that people are thrilled to be able to be outside because they've endured a Chicago winter. I didn't know that at the time.

When I finished the summer, the coach, Larry Scott Deatherage, who everyone affectionately called The Duck, essentially sat me down and said, "You should come debate here." I was like, "Sure. That sounds great. That sounds terrific."

I applied early. I got in early. It changed the whole trajectory of my life. It was the only college—I applied to one other school, but that was it. That was the only place I applied to. I was freezing by the time October came around, but I loved it.

It's a fabulous school to go to, too.

Yes, it was terrific.

What was that like coming from Miami where it's sunny all year round to Chicago?

I bought all the gear. I did all the things. I was ready for when snow would come. Around mid-October, maybe end of October we get the first snow of the season. It was an anomaly. It wasn't actually a snow day. I didn't know this because it was cold and I thought, *all right, game on*. I put on my thermal underwear in the morning and I put on my big coat. By noon I'm this idiot in class just sweating profusely because it wasn't actually wintertime yet. That coupled with the four p.m. black days when everything is wet because there is actual snow on the ground was really challenging; the weather adaptation was challenging. I joke with folks that I've been in Vegas so long because I'm still thawing out from four Chicago winters.

But I got exposed to so much being in close proximity to Chicago, being on campus. It was an incredible experience to get to leave home and go somewhere that was a total culture shock for me.

What did you major in?

Communication studies.

What was that like?

It was a really great mix of all sorts of different classes that taught me more than anything what critical thinking means. It was everything from political speech writing to gender identity classes. I mentored a couple of young women as they were trying to figure out what their degrees should be or what to major in. I always plug communication studies because it's a catchall degree in that it teaches you a little bit of everything and you can make it whatever you want it to be. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up in college, so it was the right degree for me as I was figuring that out.

What did your family say when you left home to go to college?

Oh, from the time I understood what college was, my mom especially, but my dad was onboard, too, were very clear that I was not staying in Miami for college. It was, "You are getting the boot at eighteen. You will go to the best school you get into, period. That's what's going to happen. And it will not be in Miami. Do not even apply to Miami schools."

Really?

Yes.

Did your parents go to school here?

Neither one of my parents went to college.

They were just adamant.

They just knew that the opportunities that existed having both been in the professional world and traveled and met all sorts of different people and fundamentally wanting the best for me, they understood that if I could do more than stay in Miami, I should, and at the very least I should try to go to the best school that I get into.

How did you end up in Vegas?

Ugh, yes. I had never been to Vegas before. I had never been attracted to Vegas as a place to come party. I grew up in Miami. If I wanted to go have a wild night out, I could do it at home. I didn't need to travel across the country.

But the summer before my senior year of college, I was really trying to figure out, what am I going to do when I grow up? My boyfriend at the time, my college boyfriend, had an opportunity working in D.C.—or maybe I got the job. I don't know. Somehow D.C. came on the radar. I applied to work in then majority leader Harry Reid's Hispanic press office. They were looking for an intern that was bilingual. I'm like, that sounds great; I can do that. I didn't know then just what an amazing experience it was going to be. I thought I would be answering phones.

Because Senator Reid was majority leader at the time, he had a number of offices throughout the Capitol. One of them was in the dome of the Capitol; it used to be Daniel Webster's wine cellar at one point. It was an office tucked in with senator hideaways; there are all these offices that senators have based on seniority that are hideaways where they can get away from the traffic of the Capitol.

It was the summer that Justice Sotomayor was being confirmed. I got to see that whole process through the majority leader's office. I would work in the Capitol from six a.m. to three p.m., and then I bartended/waitressed from four p.m. to ten p.m. every day. Seeing that all

firsthand, getting to be in the gallery when the vote for Justice Sotomayor's confirmation happened was extremely formative. It was awesome.

I didn't know anything, really, about Nevada before that. Still didn't all that much. I mean, I read the press clips, but that was really it.

Then fast forward, I'm getting ready to graduate at the end of my senior year, and I don't know what I'm going to do. I thought, *well, I'm going to do the Peace Corps; that sounds great. It will give me two years, buys me some time*. Okay. I say this to my mom, and she's like, "Okay, sure, fine." I get through the application process. I collect all the records. I get accepted and I get a placement. I am set to be in Tanzania in September of 2010. I was graduating in June and this is around February. I explain this all to my mom, and we had been tracking this. She is like, "Okay."

What was the length commitment?

Two years. My mom begins what I now recognize as an incredible organizing campaign. It starts with an email. "Mimi…" That's what she calls me. "We're going to miss you so much this Christmas. Tanzania is so far from Miami and I'm not sure you'll be able to afford a plane ticket home on a Peace Corps salary. So sad. Love you so much, Mom." Okay, that's a bummer. That sucks.

Then a couple of weeks later, "Watch this immediately" with lots of exclamation points is the title of an email. In the text is a YouTube link and the link goes to a Discovery Channel episode of an episode called *Killer Ants* where two of the three of the world's species ants that can eat you from the outside in are in rural Tanzania, and that was pretty terrifying.

Then I went home for Easter and my mom said, "It would be really sad if anything happened to your grandparents or to any of us while you were in Tanzania because you might not get the news and you might not be able to come home." I'm like, okay.

I pulled the plug and I said, "I am not doing the Peace Corps." It just so happened that at the same time Senator Reid was hiring for his campaign, which was coming up, very competitive, and so I applied and got a job working in Las Vegas as a field organizer on the campaign. I had never been to Vegas before and moved out here July of 2010 thinking I'd be here for three months and it's now been almost ten years. That September my grandfather got pancreatic cancer and I was able to go home, say bye to him, because I was in Las Vegas and not Tanzania. It felt like God had put me exactly where I was supposed to be, and I've never looked back. That's how I ended up here.

How long did you work with Senator Reid?

It was a summer as an intern and from July to November on the campaign.

Why did you decide to stay?

Well, because I had an opportunity…Through the campaign I met the second transformative figure in my life; his name is D Taylor. He at the time was running the Culinary Union. I didn't know any union laws. I have no connection to a union. No connection to organized labor. I did not understand at all what I was walking into. But I got to the union hall and spent about an hour, hour and a half talking to D about the civil rights movement, about organizing, about the Democratic Party. At the end of the conversation, I don't remember exactly how he said it, but he kind of looked at me and was like, "If you have this whole change-the-world idea, you should learn how to organize because that's how you really make change." I didn't know what that

meant at the time. I just heard "job after the election." I stayed and thought, *this could be great. I want to learn how to organize; that seems important.*

My first day working as an organizer at the union was mid-November, so after the campaign, a week or two after Election Day in November of 2010, and there happened to be a committee meeting of station workers at the union hall. These are workers that don't have a union that are fighting for a union. They came together to have a meeting to talk about updates on the campaign, talk about strategy. I was in the back of the room and I was so overwhelmed that I started crying because it was tremendously powerful to see a room of ordinary people—housekeepers, cooks, kitchen workers, porters, people who I worked with in restaurants—being able to come together and talk about taking on management and talk about changing their lives. It was profoundly powerful. It was the first time that I didn't do what I had been taught to do in debate and rationalize, how does the other side feel? How is this wrong? What doesn't make sense about this? I just felt in my gut that I was being introduced to something so righteous, so powerful, and I couldn't say no.

At your time with the union, what kind of organizing did you do? How long were you with the union?

I started working in organizing nonunion workers into the union as a part of the Stations' campaign, and I did that for a few months. Then the 2011 legislative session was starting and I got asked if I would be interested in representing the union in Carson City. I didn't know what that meant, but it was a new opportunity and I said, "Sure." I transitioned then from organizing into the political work for the union and worked as the union's political director until the end of 2016. I got to do everything from run campaigns to lobby to run a class on how new members can run for office and really work as the face of the union in the political community. But, more

importantly, I got to introduce the political community to who are members were, what they cared about, who their families are, and empowering housekeepers to talk about why the Affordable Care Act's Cadillac Tax would hurt them and their families. It's an example of the kind of work I got to do that felt really powerful.

Talk more about D Taylor because he was a very important person in especially our unionized community.

Yes. He's one of the best people I've ever met. He, too, thought he was coming to Nevada for a short-term assignment and he started organizing in Reno and has never left Nevada, really. He worked as an organizer at the Culinary. He eventually became the Secretary-Treasurer. Today he is the leader of Unite Here, which is the Culinary's parent union. He's this brilliant strategic thinker who taught me the value of loyalty and the importance of being true not only to the people that you're in the trenches with, but to the things you believe in. He taught me what it means to really care about family because one of the things I observed about D and that I really love about him is no matter what meeting you're in, if his wife or one of his daughters calls, he's picking up the phone, no matter who he is sitting with. It's not to pick up and say, I'll call you back. It's to have a conversation, to hear them out, because the number one thing in his life is his family. As a result, he's a leader who thinks about people and their families. You can't run a campaign for a hundred and twenty days, however long, and expect people to be operating at a hundred percent the full time if you're not thinking about them being away from their kids, them being away from their families. He taught me what it means to be a leader who thinks about the whole person, not just about the work that they do. He is still one of my biggest mentors.

That's great.

In 2016, you actually were appointed to the spot of Ruben Kihuen, right, when he ran for Congress and became a congressman. Who appointed you? How was that process?

So, it's not what I thought I was going to be doing at the end of 2016. I made a decision to leave Las Vegas, to leave the union, because I wanted to go to school and in between I thought I would take a break and go to an olive farm in Tuscany that I wanted to work at. I thought Hillary Clinton was going to win the election. I thought I would go to Italy and then go to law school and maybe I'd enter politics one day or maybe I would get back into the labor movement. I didn't know what came after that, but I knew I wanted to get a law degree.

And then that didn't happen. The things that I had fought so hard for—workers' rights; immigrants' rights; affordable, high quality healthcare—were all very clearly going to be on the front of a Trump administration chopping block. My state senator, Ruben Kihuen, became a congressperson and there was a vacancy.

The third major influential force in my life is a man named Tick Segerblom who today is a commissioner, but at the time was a state senator. At the beginning of 2016, or whenever Ruben announced he was running, Tick started telling people, "Yvanna lives in Ruben's district, so we've got to get ready. She's going to be a senator."

I would get so irate. *"Are you crazy? I'm going to law school and Italy and I have a plan."* He would be like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, okay, okay." It was like he saw a path for me that I could never even have imagined for myself and was not thinking about at all.

Sure enough, when Ruben becomes a congressman and there's a vacancy and Trump is in the White House, he was one of the first people to say, "Okay, you've got to put your name in the ring. We need you in the state senate." I'm like, "Okay, you're right, fair enough."

I applied through the County Commission and they voted unanimously to appoint me to serve in the state senate. I thought one of two things would happen. Either I would really love it in which case I was in a very safe Democratic district and could put forward progressive policy and things that I believed in, or I would really hate it in which case I should put forward progressive policy and fight for things that I believe in and go down in a blaze of glory because…why not? I've landed somewhere in the middle.

Talk about your district. What are the demographics? Where is it?

I have the most Vegas-y of Vegas districts in terms of landmarks.

This is it, right?

Yes.

This is the map, okay.

We have the Strip, the university, the convention center, the airport, and then the heart of the east side. I also have one of the poorest districts where more than 70 percent of the people I represent live below the poverty line. I have, in a way, the microcosm of the challenges we have in Nevada, which is we have a lot of wealth, but the disparity of where that wealth is amassed and how that wealth is felt by our most vulnerable Nevadans is very disconnected.

When you were appointed for how long were you appointed before you had to go up for reelection?

Just for one term. I was appointed at the end of 2016 and I had to run in the 2018 election cycle.

What was that process like?

It was fascinating. I had run so many campaigns that it was weird to then be the person on the leaflets. It was wonderful in that I got to know my community in a totally different way. There's nothing like having a conversation with someone at their door when you've shown up

unannounced and ask them to tell you the things they care about. I also got to see what it meant to be a candidate and how to do that authentically, and how could I be true to myself and tell my story while also trying to win a campaign?

This is silly, but one of the things I went through is I had to photos for my campaign materials. I had someone come and do my hair and makeup. I did not look myself when he was done. I looked like I was going to a beauty pageant. I don't wear a lot of makeup. In my photos I felt like I looked like a drag queen. This is just not who I am, right? It was a small thing, but it was such a good lesson in how important it is if you're putting yourself in a public-facing position to feel like it's true to who you are.

I liked running for office. I liked knocking on doors. I liked hearing from people directly about the problems they're facing, or about the things that are going right, and building those relationships in my community.

You're part of the first female state senate majority. Can you talk about that? I know you guys have been featured in The Washington Post and nationally you've been featured in the news because this is historic. It's the first state in the U.S. to have a majority female legislature. What is that like?

For the rest of my life I will be proud of having been a part of that and I will tell people when I'm really old about what it was like to be a part of something that changed our country's history, not just Nevada's history. Having been in the legislature for four sessions—this was my fifth session—and seeing so many women walking through the hallways and seeing the impact that has on the way people think about politics that the ripple effects of what that means for our community and for our country aren't totally quantifiable. We had one little girl at the beginning of the session, she's in fifth grade, she won the Nevada Color a Picture contest, one of these

contests that gets done, and she said she believed that she could be in politics because there were so many girls up in the Nevada Legislature. How awesome that little girls across the country and here in Nevada can think about what it means to be in office and know that they don't have to be the only girl; that they don't have to be the only girl that looks like them. The thing we don't talk about enough is how diverse our women in the legislature are. There are women like me who are young Latinas. There are women from rural Nevada. It's just this incredibly diverse group that represents all of our state and I'm really proud of that.

You were also the first state Latina senator, right?

Yes.

Did you know that going in?

No, it wasn't a motivating factor. But when it became a part of my story, when it became something that was talked about as a part of my service in the senate, two things became very apparent to me. One, it's embarrassing that it took us until 2017 to have a Latina in the state senate. That's not something we should be proud of. I'm happy to be the first, but it should not be a point of pride that that's when it happened. But the second is that a door was open to me that I now have a responsibility to pry off its hinges and make sure that it never closes for future generations. I shouldn't be the only Latina state senator.

I've taken it upon myself to mentor as many young Latinas as possible, in light ways. Sometimes it's just checking a résumé. Sometimes it's getting coffee every other week. But making sure that I open as many doors as I can and that I do everything I can to mentor the next generation and the current generation of Latina leaders because there are a lot of women who are supremely capable of serving in the legislature, of serving on private boards, of doing all of the work that happens in our community where today we don't have any Latina representation.

That's great. That's awesome. Thank you for your work in the legislature.

You're going up in session next year, right? Can you talk a little bit about the process? I know that we have every two-year state legislature. Everything has to be done in that legislative session. Is it complicated? Does it really put you guys in a bind where you have to prioritize? How does that work?

We have a hundred twenty days to do everything from set our state's budget for the next year and a half to then deal with issues that range from taxes to animal trapping. In the course of those hundred twenty days, more than a thousand pieces of legislation will be put out. Not all of them will be heard, but more than a thousand pieces of legislation will become part of the legislative process. In my opinion this was a system that worked when Nevada was a smaller state, when Nevada's issues were easier to quantify.

Today, not only do we meet every other year for only a hundred twenty days, we are also a legislature that has term limits, which means there is a constant change in leadership, in experience, which I believe made sense before I served as a legislator. Today as a legislator I see how term limits can be devastating to the legislative branch and empowering to the executive branch and the lobbying corps because there are more lobbyists in the building who know the history of an issue than there are legislators at a certain point, and that's problematic.

The third is we're a citizen legislature. Legislators get paid for the time that they're in session, but nothing else, so you have to have another job to ensure that you're able to live. Those three things compounded make it so you have to have the right conditions in your life to be able to even consider running for the legislature, which is problematic.

Not everyone can do it. Not everyone can afford to do it.

Right. Theoretically anyone could do it. But if you start thinking about—and this is an individual, but just as an example—if you're a single mom who works a job in an office, you have to have a boss that will allow you to take time off not only for the six months where you will be in session every other year, but for all of the interim work that's required in between. You have to be willing to move your child from Southern Nevada to Northern Nevada for the time that you're in session, and you have to figure out how to make ends meet in the event that you're being paid less as a legislator than you are in your job.

It is a lot of things to consider, which makes it not necessarily representative body of where we're at as a state. That's not to say that it has come a long way. It definitely has and there are way more people of color. There are obviously way more women. There is a good representation of our state in the legislature. But long term we should be thoughtful about perhaps changing the way that it's structured in order to ensure that it meets the needs of a Nevada that is changing and growing. Does that make sense?

Yes, it makes perfect sense.

Talk about some pieces of legislation that you've helped pass or write up or anything that you're the most proud of.

When I was appointed I had about three weeks between the time I was appointed and the deadline to have bill draft requests submitted so that they can count towards the next session, which is not a lot of time. Three weeks is not a lot of time to put forward legislation. But I had worked closely with the Culinary Health Fund while I was at the union, and there was one presentation on diabetes' drugs and the effect they had on our health plan because the costs were so high. Probably my biggest ally in my legislative career has been a woman named Bobbette Bond who works at the Culinary Health Fund. I said, "What do we do? Do you remember this

diabetes presentation?" We had a whole conversation. We put out a bill that said let's figure out how to lower the price the diabetes patients pay. We weren't sure what it was going to look like, but we put in that bill draft request.

Fast forward. We figured out how to write the country's first diabetes drug transparency bill. It is today the law of Nevada that diabetes drug manufacturers, including insulin manufacturers, have to report all sorts of data to explain why the prices patients pay are so high. What makes me so proud is not that it became law in a bipartisan fashion; it's that we had diabetes patients come up to Carson City and tell their stories and be the face of the issue in a way that was powerful and so brave to have people get on an airplane from Las Vegas up to Reno and drive to Carson to say, "Yes, I can't afford my insulin and I have to decide whether or not I take my insulin or I keep the lights on." One woman even said, "I'm afraid my son is going to come into bedroom and find my body cold because I'm rationing my insulin." Those stories were so painful. I'm proud of that bill. I'm proud it's a law. I have a hashtag *Insulin for All* magnet on the back of my car because it's now a fight that I will be in until we fix the high prices that people pay for insulin.

Last session I got a bill passed that tackled a totally separate industry; it looks at housing in Nevada. We have a real housing crisis. We have way too many people who can't afford to keep the places they're in today and can't afford to move and are one catastrophic event from being homeless. It's wrong. In Nevada late fees are treated the same as rent. Failure to pay a late fee can enter you in the eviction process even if you've paid your rent. And, up until last session, late fees were determined by reasonableness. A landlord could choose whatever they felt was reasonable for a late fee and put that in a contract, which means you could be paying a thousand dollars a month of rent and your landlord says you pay a hundred dollars a day every day that

you're late; that's reasonable. Then you're behind on rent because you didn't get paid on time, maybe you're an independent contractor, you're a couple of days behind, and you now owe fourteen hundred dollars because you're four days late. You couldn't get to the thousand. How do you get to that extra four hundred? It's unfair and it led to skyrocketing eviction numbers. It's not to say that there aren't bad actors on both sides; there certainly are and there are people who take advantage of the system, not to discredit that. For the most part, it's good, well-intentioned people who were just struggling.

We passed legislation last session that says a landlord cannot charge more than five percent of the rent as a late fee. As a result of that provision coupled with changes to the eviction procedures that say you have to be served by an official, you can't just be served by your landlord, it has to go through a constable or a servicing process, you have to now have an additional two business days before you have to vacate the property and language that says, "If you do get evicted, you get to go back and get your essential items." If you're a senior who has been evicted and needs to go back and get their medication, you can.

What we saw was an immediate drop in the number of evictions in court, so much so that we had the first continuous decrease in evictions over the last ten years. I'm really proud of that work. I'm nervous about the way the pendulum may swing the other way and how landlords are reacting, but it's been really meaningful to see change so quickly as a result of legislation.

How many terms are you allowed in the Nevada Legislature?

Three four-year terms in the senate, six two-year terms in the assembly; it's twelve years.

How many years are you?

I'm in my first term, so I would run for office in 2022.

What are your next steps? What do you want to accomplish? What are your hopes?

I'm really excited about finishing law school and taking the bar this July and that's about as far as I can see in terms of what my hopes are. I hope to pass the bar on my first try. I want next session to be incredibly successful in that we get redistricting done. I'm leading a committee to study the high prices of prescription drugs that will have five bill draft requests, and I'm going to work really hard on those. I want to continue the work I've done on foster care reform, on renters' rights, on good legislation that helps the people who rely on government the most. But I'm not sure what my life looks like beyond that. It's hard to imagine right now.

Talk a little bit about law school and how you're balancing law school and legislature and how they intertwine.

I'm going to be a much better legislator as a result of having a legally trained mind and I'm grateful for that. I felt really strongly about going to law school because it's tied to my values of how important education is. Once I have those two letters next to my name, JD, no one will ever be able to take that knowledge away from me and I'm really proud of the work I've done to get through law school. That said, I have not been an excellent student. I have accepted that to balance that and my legislative work and my job has meant sometimes accepting that good is good enough and it's okay to not be the best at everything. That check on how I see myself, on my ego, has probably been the most transformative part of the last three years of being in law school.

Where do you currently work besides the legislature?

I run a small nonprofit called The Citizenship Project. We help people apply for citizenship at no cost.

How does that work?

You come in. One of the things that makes Las Vegas different from most other places that have similar numbers of immigrant families is that gaming is our primary industry, so to work in any of our casinos you have to have legal work status and a mostly clean record because you have to go through Gaming Control Board screening, and that's true whether you're working as a housekeeper or you're working as senior management. We have this population of immigrant families that have one, if not a couple of folks, in the household who are eligible for citizenship based on the fact that they have a green card and have more than likely past the time needed to where you can apply for citizenship. We have a high population of people eligible for citizenship in Las Vegas, is the short of it. But we also have a lot of people who can't afford to pay a lawyer to help with the application, who may not need a lawyer's assistance, but do need help filling out the paperwork.

It's a long process.

It is an incredibly long process. You have to get lots of paperwork together. You have to make sure that you're not leaving anything out. What we do is—we are not lawyers, but we help people fill out the application that don't need legal assistance. If you have a criminal record or if you have a complicated case, we're not the agency for you. But if you fit the profile of many of our Las Vegans where you've been here working for twenty years in a casino and are renewing your green card and you're eligible for citizenship and you don't have any complications, we can assist you. We help with the application. We offer free English and civics classes to help people prepare for the exam. We help about a thousand people a year go through the process.

Wow. You also provide funding?

We don't provide funding. You have to cover the application costs, but you don't have to pay any fees to us as an organization.

On average what are your class sizes?

It varies because it's not a structured class. It's a practice class. Every session we do something different that's tied to the exam. If you wanted to come once and come in and get your materials—your flashcards and your USCIS study packets—and review it once, you could, or you could come every night Monday through Thursday for as long as you felt you needed to. It allows people the flexibility to determine how much assistance they may or may not need.

Where are you located?

We're housed at Nevada Partners, so we're at 710 West Lake Mead Boulevard.

If I'm not mistaken, you also have a Nevada license plate?

We do, yes.

Talk about that. How does that work?

The organization predates me by a lot. We're almost at year twenty-five. When the organization was started in the early 2000s, we were looking at different funding sources and one of the approaches that the organization took was to create a license plate. An assemblywoman who had worked for the Culinary Union and a state senator who had also been a Culinary members—both of them were Culinary members, assemblywoman and a state senator—Maggie Carlton, who today is an assemblywoman, and Peggy Pierce, who passed away a few years ago, they carried the legislation to create a license plate The Citizenship Project. Today it is one of our steadiest funding sources and is also a great way to highlight the work we do in our community.

Can you describe it? It's really cool. Can you describe what it looks like?

It is really beautiful. It has a white background and then it has—I don't know if it's modeled off an Aztec symbol or a Mayan symbol, but it is a beautiful, colorful sun that honors Central

American, for lack of a better description, traditions and highlights The Citizenship Project on the bottom.

On average how many people get that license plate?

We have a little more than three thousand people in Nevada who have the license plate.

That's a lot.

Yes. It's not enough. We have to keep getting more people to get it.

How does someone get that?

When you're at the DMV figuring out your registration, you can choose our license plate.

Nice. Is there a fee, an extra fee?

Yes. I think it's a twenty-five-dollar additional fee. I don't remember exactly what it is. It gets tacked on and that's where the revenue comes from.

The next car…

Yes, yes.

That is awesome. You're the executive director.

Yes.

What do you do?

I am there part-time. My job is grant writing and keeping up with our current grants, making sure that we're fulfilling our requirements, and making sure that we're thinking long term about our funding sources.

That's awesome. What year are you in at Boyd School of Law?

I'm in my third year. I'm done in May. I graduate May fifteenth.

Congratulations.

Thank you.

What has law school been like?

It has been awesome. I have learned so much in class, but I've also been exposed to some of the most brilliant people, not only my classmates and the faculty at Boyd. You get to sit and have these robust intellectual discussions about issues that are affecting people every day and know that you're a part of a team of folks who are going to go out into our legal community and transform it. Whether folks go into private or public practice, I know that the people that I've sat next to in class are some of the most talented minds I've ever gotten to work with.

Then I've gotten to work with faculty on legislation. I had a professor who talked about an idea in class, and fast forward to last session, we put forward a bill and today her idea, the issue she said we needed to fix, is now the law of the land.

That's incredible.

Yes. Having access to the brain trust of the law school has been phenomenal for me, not only as a legislator, but as an individual. I've grown so much being there.

Have you been part of any clinic?

No. I was supposed to do a clinic this last semester, but I took a job on a presidential campaign for a few months and I could not do both.

You're stretching yourself too thin.

Right.

Knowing to have your limits.

Yes, which is not an easy thing.

It's not. I feel not just as Latino women, but also as women it's really hard for us to say no.

Yes.

Especially when you're as talented as you are.

I don't know about that. I like saying yes a lot. I've drawn boundaries for myself about how I give my time. It has been this radical act of self-love. Being honest with myself about the fact that I cannot wake up at five in the morning to go to the gym and be in meetings until ten p.m. at night and expect to function the next day. It's just not who I am.

Yes, it's really hard. How do you manage self-care and knowing those boundaries?

I schedule time every day for me that is just as set in stone as a conference call or a meeting, and it did not include my gym time. I work out most mornings. That is also like a meeting, but it does not count towards my joy time; that's what I call it. Every day I schedule time for something that brings me joy, and sometimes it's as small as watching YouTube videos of this kids' choir out of a public school in New York that I love. It makes me so happy. Sometimes it's getting a manicure. Sometimes it's a conference call with friends who are in different cities. Sometimes it's scheduling time to go take my dog for a walk in the middle of the day. It's being mindful of the fact that if I'm giving my time to organizations, to people, and not investing in myself that I will eventually be of no service to any of the people or issues I care about.

Going back a little bit to your family, does anyone in your family live here?

No.

You're by yourself?

Just me. My dog. My dog lives here. He's perfect.

How often do you visit Miami?

I try to get out there at least once a quarter and then spend a bunch of time there over the holidays, but I don't go back enough.

Do your parents know what you do? Do they understand the magnitude of the impact you're having here in this state?

I think so. I try to send them articles and keep them updated. I know they're proud of me. I know they love me. I think there is always going to be a piece of them that wishes I was an hour away instead of an airplane ride away.

You're so engrained in Nevada's history now. Do you plan to stay in Nevada?

Yes. The short answer is yes. There will always be a piece of my heart that's in Miami and I can't deny that. I've been knocked for saying that I *go back home to Miami.* It's where my family is. It's where my history is. It is forever going to have a piece of my heart. But my home is really in Las Vegas. I love this city. I love that I get to represent it. I love that I'm a part of this community. I have no idea what my life looks like five years from now, but I don't see myself leaving.

What makes Las Vegas home to you—well, second home? Or, Nevada is home?

I get to travel a lot. I've traveled my whole life. There is something that happens when you land in a city that's new to you. Most cities you fly in and fly out of. I don't know exactly when it happened, but a switch flipped at some point in my Vegas life where I was landing into the McCarran Airport and it felt like home, like I was coming home. I had only ever experienced that flying into Miami before. It was this profound change—it was a new orientation to the city. I love that there is local culture all over the valley. I love that I represent a district that is incredibly diverse. I love that I get to be on campus and meet people from all over who are doing incredible work. I love that I can take my dog for a walk and that I know my neighbors. When people ask me about Las Vegas, I have recommendations that are the size of a laundry list. I love that I can sit at my favorite restaurant and that I know the chef and that it's locally owned. There is so much happening in Las Vegas that is not the Strip; that is not what people traditionally think of. Being able to find my community to experience normal life in a city that is so not

normal is special. It's indescribable. In a lot of ways it's indescribable. I don't know. I love saying I'm from Las Vegas. I love saying I live here. I love getting to talk about this city. It's just home.

Does your family visit often, or do you go to them?

Both. My brother is in L.A. We don't see each other as much as we should considering we're West Coast neighbors. But I've had my family come out quite a bit, yes.

That's awesome. Going back to a conversation that we had before we started recording, the term *Latinx*, do you want to go on the record and talk about what you think about it, your conflict with it?

Yes. When I was in debate, one of the arguments we would run in debates was a critique of gendered language, and our critique was when you use gendered language you create norms that say only referring to things in masculine pronouns are appropriate, and so we should change that in order to be more inclusive. It was impactful in that it taught me to think about how words shape our reality. I understand the term *Latinx* as a critique of gendered language, as a critique of normative language that can be problematic, as a way to create a more inclusive structure for people that don't identify as male or feminine. I understand its origins.

My challenge with it is that we are a community of Latinos that come from different places, that eat different foods, that have different norms that is already divided along lines, but are also what makes our culture beautiful. It's the differences between being from Guatemala and Costa Rica that are special and should be celebrated. But as a community those nuances don't often get celebrated. We're all treated as a community; we are Latinos. To me the challenge with the term *Latinx* is that it creates new divisions within our community. To my grandmother, *Latinx* is a misspelled word; it doesn't mean anything to her; it's confusing. I can

explain it to her and rationally she gets there, but it's still just a misspelled word; it means nothing to her. In the same way that the term *Hispanic* was a government-created term to allow for an identification of a different community that didn't come from the community, I struggle with the term *Latinx* because it doesn't feel like it came from the people it now describes, and that may not always be true. We may evolve into a time where *Latinx* is a norm. I go back and forth on whether or not I think it's problematic or productive.

I feel the same way. Going back to your political career, you're co-majority whip, if I'm not mistaken?

Yes.

What does that mean?

It means that when there is a vote being taken, my job is to make sure that all of our caucus members are prepared to vote and that we know where the vote count is on contentious issues. In practice what it means on a day to day is that I get to be part of the leadership team of our caucus and support our majority leader and assistant majority leader in making sure that we as a group are focused on the work we need to be doing for Nevada.

That's on the state level, right?

Yes.

Talking about caucuses, were you part of the recent caucus in any way?

Yes. I was the senior advisor to the Biden campaign for the last two months.

Can you talk about that?

Yes, sure. I love politics from the campaign side. Political campaigns are a fascinating thing. I'm really excited about beating Donald Trump in November of 2020.

We all are.

I'm really excited about that. I will preface all this by saying that I'm going to support whoever the Democratic nominee is. I was prepared to take out my crystals and go door to door for Marianne Williamson if that's where people went. I want to beat Donald Trump. I got phone calls from a number of candidates about, *what do we do in Nevada? How do we win?* Really, really nice. When the vice president called about three weeks before he announced, he said, "I'm considering doing this." I said, "Mr. Vice President, I'm going to interrupt you."

Did he call you personally?

Yes.

Oh wow.

Yes. He's like, "Okay." I said, "Mr. Vice President, I believe in two pillars of great political leaders. First is leadership and the ability to be the kind of person that others will follow, and the second is loyalty. You have demonstrated leadership that is unmatched in the field of candidates and you have done more for the Democratic Party than anybody else who is running. If you're in, I'm in. I'm happy to support you in any way I can." He got really quiet. He said, "This phone call has made my day." I said, "Well, I'm so glad."

When he announced I came out as an endorser on the day that he announced. I'm really proud to be supporting him. I think he's the right candidate for the moment that we're in as a country. I believe we need to heal before we can move forward. I'm especially interested in his experience in the executive branch and his ability to go in and fill vacancies where we've had vacancies for too long to do the work it's going to take to bring the executive branch back up to full function. One of the things we don't talk about enough is that under the Trump administration we've seen agencies decline exponentially.

That said, I got to work on the campaign for the last two months and talk to voters and do the work that campaigns get to do in figuring out everything from what emails are we going to send folks to how many doors do we need to knock on to win? It was a great reminder of how much I love campaigns, and getting to work for a candidate that you believe in is one of the best things when it comes to political campaigning.

Can you talk a little bit about the caucus and how significant Nevada has become in recent elections or at least nominating? Talk about that.

We're the first state in the presidential contest that reflects the country. We have a diverse electorate. We are a growing state. I believe the West is more reflective of where the country is going than either the Midwest or the East Coast. Certainly I have a bias, but I think others would agree with me. As a result, when we vote we send a signal to the rest of the country about where the country may be and that gives us a tremendous amount of power, but it's also an opportunity for communities of color to make their voices heard in the contest early on and that's important. That said, the caucus system is not one that I think should move forward.

We've heard that several times now.

Yes. It's inaccessible. It's a very privileged system because it assumes that you have time on a Saturday to give to a three-hour political process. It is one that is entirely volunteer focused in a state that doesn't have a track record for having a volunteer culture. That's not a knock on Nevada. It's my lens of having worked on a number of political campaigns. I'm hopeful that we move to a primary system. And I'm really hopeful that we end up being the first contest in the presidential selection process because we should be.

How did you notice that early voting had an effect on this caucus in particular?

If you look at the numbers on caucus day and early voting together, we surpassed 2016 levels, but did not quite hit 2008 levels, which means that while the electorate didn't expand significantly, it did grow from 2016. I think there is a direct correlation between that and early voting. Early voting is easier. People in Nevada understand what early voting means. There are still way more Nevadans that don't know what a caucus is than do know what a caucus is. The state party invested a lot in making sure that early voting sites were in communities, that they were accessible, and to me that's why we got the turnout numbers that were higher than 2016.

Now you've been here for about ten years and you're so engrained in Nevada history. How have you observed Nevada change, like any political process, the demographics, our economy? How have you observed Nevada change since you've been here?

I got to be here on the first campaign when Latinos really made an impact on the outcome of a race. Were it not for Latino voters, Senator Reid would not have been reelected. Since then in every election cycle, the Latino vote has become more and more important, and seeing the change in investment in everything from in-language communications to seeing more Latinos running for office, to seeing us elect the country's first Latina U.S. senator has been incredible. I think it's just the beginning of the potential that Latino political power can have. That's been a big change.

I've gotten to see the housing crisis and its effects on our community and to see how we're still struggling to come out of that and haven't totally come up with a solution that meets the needs of people who are still really struggling because while the rest of the country may have completely come out of the recession, in Las Vegas there are still a lot of people who are feeling its effects and have never fully recovered. That's hard. I use Main Street and Commerce as an example of where Las Vegas is, and I'm biased because they're in the district I represent. When I

first moved here, Main Street and Commerce were mostly bail bond shops and empty storefronts and a lot of disinterest in that corridor. Today, if you go down Main Street and Commerce, there's a ton of small restaurants, of small businesses, of almost entirely locally owned shops and restaurants and it's people largely from Nevada saying they want to change their community; they want to do something here in Las Vegas. They opened up a bar. They opened up a restaurant. It's awesome to see so much local culture developing in the heart of our city. It gives me a lot of hope about Las Vegans taking ownership of our own destiny and saying we want to define how we're talked about; we want to define how our city is looked at; we want to show the world that we are more than the incredible glitz and glamour of the Strip; that Las Vegas has a lot to offer for everyone from our beautiful outdoors to our great food to our phenomenal nightlife. Whatever it is you're looking for, Las Vegas has it and it's Las Vegans and Nevadans that are at the forefront of that. I love that. I love seeing Nevada change and grow, especially seeing Las Vegas come into its own.

You mentioned before the work that you do with the high schools in your district. Can you elaborate and describe what kind of work you do with Valley and Chaparral in particular, right?

Yes. Valley and Chaparral are the two largest high schools in the district. I, one, try to be a cheerleader for them. Anytime that Chaparral Tweets about winning a football game, I'll retweet it. If the Valley IB program is celebrating a graduation, I Tweet about how excited I am for the students. If there is something happening on campus that I can participate in, I show up. A lot of the students that go to both schools are students that look like me; they're Latinos. They are students who may not know that there are people who look like them representing them in the

legislature and it's really important for me to just show up and let them know that I'm proud of them.

The second is making sure that I'm fighting for funding at schools like Chaparral and Valley who have benefitted from ZOOM funding, have benefitted from additional funds for the ESL kids, and that are struggling schools when it comes to our graduation rates, and that are dealing with poverty in a really real way in their student body populations, or they're dealing with mental health issues that maybe don't exist in other schools. Being a fighter and an advocate for schools like Valley and Chaparral is really important to me.

The third is figuring out how I can support students. Julianna is the youth legislator at Valley; she's a junior. She is this incredible young woman. Sometimes just checking in with her not just on the legislature's work, but saying, "What can I do to support your hopes and dreams? Do you need a college recommendation letter? How can I help you be successful? Are there other students that I can talk to to help be successful?" Sometimes it's as easy as opening a door or pointing someone in the right direction that can change the whole trajectory of their lives. I love getting to meet students and hear about their hopes and dreams and figuring out if I can be helpful.

Anything else that you're involved in that I haven't mentioned?

I'm a big sister for Big Brothers Big Sisters. I've been with my little…she's a grownup now. She's going to be twenty this year. I met her when she was thirteen. She is probably one of my favorite people in the whole world. Her name is Alexis. She's this incredible now young woman who I met when she was a kid. Through her I got to learn a lot about our foster care system.

Probably the thing that I'm most proud of being a legislator is…She is getting ready to graduate high school, Chaparral, her fourth high school, and we were talking about college and

how she was going to pay for it and what that meant. We went to the Board of Regents and said that they should pass a policy that makes higher education free for any foster youth in the State of Nevada. They unanimously agreed. Today we are the thirty-third state in the country that allows for former foster youth to go on to get a degree at any of our Nevada System of Higher Education institutions at no cost to them and they have ten years to finish their degree. As a result of her work, because she was who spoke before the regents on the policy, today the NSHE office has a full-time employee that looks just at foster care access issues. We have an individual at every higher institution that is dedicated to working with foster youth, and we have received grants of close to a million dollars to support this effort in perpetuity. She's amazing and she's going to do really big things with her life.

What school is she attending?

She just got her—I always say this wrong—aesthetician degree and is now going to go to Nevada State to get her business degree so that she can run a salon of her own one day. That may be what she decides to do today and tomorrow she may wake up with a different dream, but the fact that she has hopes and dreams after going through so much is incredibly inspiring.

Amazing.

Yes. She is awesome.

We do have women legislators in Nevada. The representation in Nevada is something to be proud of.

Yes.

We have two senators, for example, Catherine Cortez Masto and Jacky Rosen. Have you had an opportunity to forge relationships with those powerful women?

I have, yes. I got to meet Senator Cortez Masto. I got really close to her when she was running for the U.S. Senate because I was at the Culinary. It is really difficult to describe how much it meant to have her at the front of the room when the room was full of mostly Latinas because the majority of members at the Culinary are women and of those a majority are Latinas. But to see the connection and the idea that we could have a Latina U.S. senator, there's not a way to quantify that, but it was so powerful. Now that she's in D.C. and doing the work that she's doing for our state, I am so proud of her and I am so proud that she is our representative.

I got to meet Senator Rosen when she was first running for Congress. I've met a lot of politicians. But she is one of the most genuine people I've ever met. Whenever they post photos together of the two of them or they Tweet out photos of them hosting the Welcome to Washington Breakfast, it really fills my heart, not only because I know them both personally and I know that they're phenomenal women just as individuals, but to know that the two of them are our team in the U.S. Senate, it's awesome and it's something every Nevadan should be proud of because they do a phenomenal job. They're also just great people.

Last question. What we're doing here is collecting the oral history of the Latino community here, Las Vegas particularly, Southern Nevada. What are your opinions of the work that we're doing?

Of the project?

Yes, of the project.

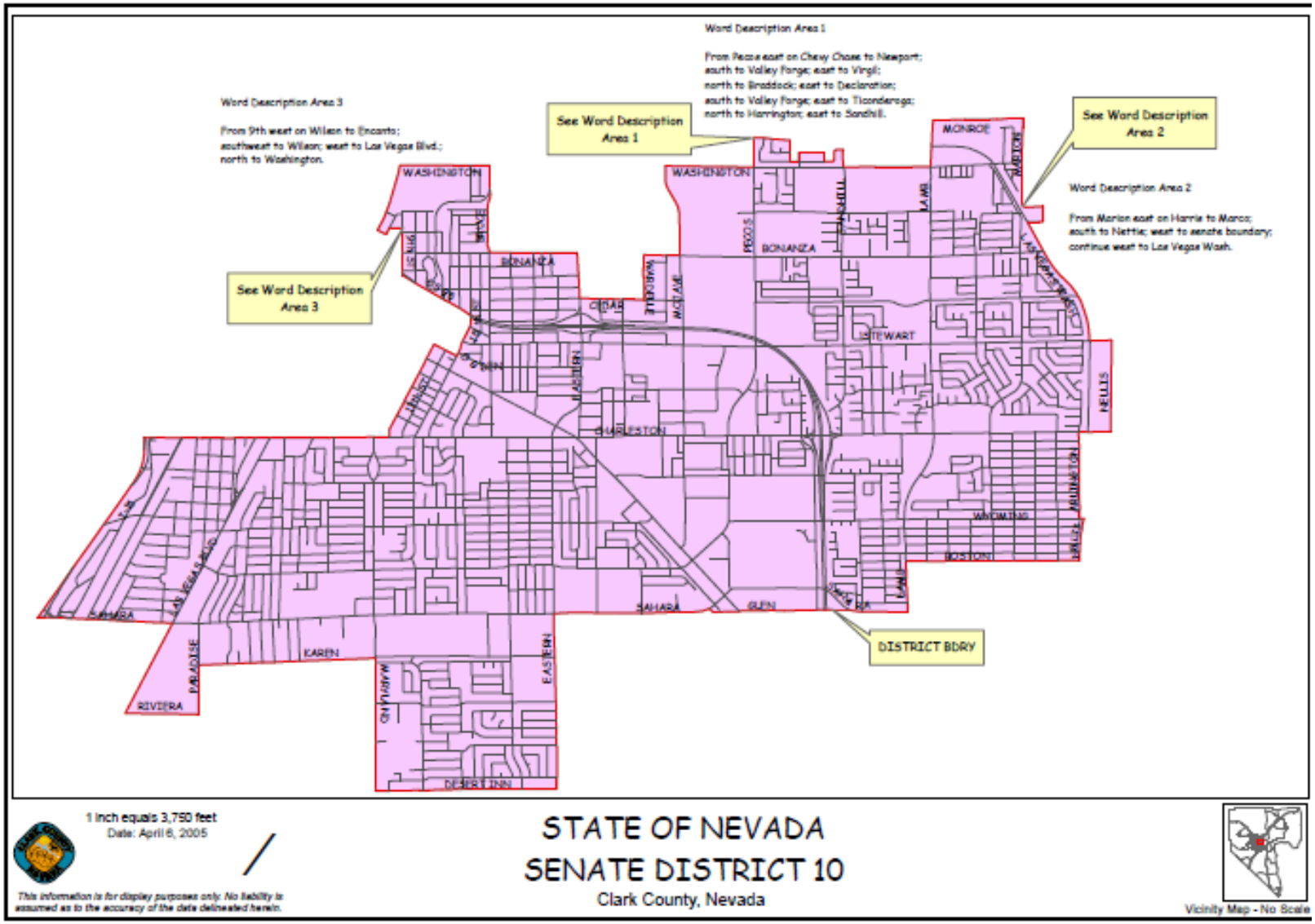
It's tremendously important. Our Latino community will be half of our state's population within the next few decades. We're already a little more than 30 percent of the state's population and after this next census I suspect that number will climb pretty significantly. We are embedded into the fabric of the state's history; we always have been. Today there are so many Latinos in

decision-making places, in positions of power in our community and it's really important. But the more important thing is that there is an entire generation of Nevadans who will come up knowing that Nevadans come from all over the globe; that Nevadans speak different languages; that being a Latino in Nevada is a special and incredible experience and that regardless of where you come from there are paths that have been forged for you by people who were the only Latino in a room, people that were the only Latino in a corporate board room, and today there are now opportunities for those numbers to grow, and it's not because it was given to the next generation folks, but because it was fought for by people who were unafraid to say regardless of my accent, regardless of my migration status, regardless of where I came from, I'm going to fight to have the representation I deserve.

Anything else you'd like to add?

No. I feel like I talked your ears off. I'm sorry.

[End of recorded interview]


Word Description Area 1
From Pecos east on Chevy Chase to Newport; south to Valley Forge; east to Virgil; north to Braddock; east to Declaration; south to Valley Forge; east to Ticonderoga; north to Harrington; east to Sandhill.
Word Description Area 3
From 9th west on Wilson to Encanto; southwest to Wilson; west to Las Vegas Blvd.; north to Washington.
See Word Description Area 1
See Word Description Area 2
See Word Description Area 3
Word Description Area 2
From Marion east on Harrie to Marco; south to Nettie; west to senate boundary; continue west to Las Vegas Wash.
WASHINGTON
MONROE
BONANZA
CEDAR
STEWART
CHARLESTON
SAHARA
KARIN
RIVIERA
DESERT INN
DISTRICT BDRY
1 inch equals 3,750 feet
Date: April 6, 2005
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STATE OF NEVADA
SENATE DISTRICT 10
Clark County, Nevada
Vicinity Map - No Scale