

Jose Lara/Dana Echohawk Transcription

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**DANA:** We're in the home today of Jose Lara and it is January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. And I'd like you to introduce yourself.

**JOSE:** I'm Jose Lara and I'm very glad to be a part of this project.

**CAMERA PERSON:** Could you please spell your name for us?

**JOSE:** Spell my name? J-o-s-e and last name Lara, l-a-r-a.

**DANA:** And Jose, to begin with, would you tell us a little bit about your beginnings. Where are you from? Where did you spend your childhood?

**JOSE:** I was born in Spain in 1938 and in the middle of the civil war in Spain. So my childhood was from one war to another war, like Spanish Civil war, Second World War... And by the time I could think the only thing that was present all around us was Franco. Like Mussolini, Franco; a society that was ruled by a dictator. I attended minor seminary in Spain, which was supposed to be a good place to get an education. And I went through high school in this religious seminary. Eventually, I just went through Philosophy, it was called there. It was the equivalent to college. And when I was twenty-three, 1961, I came to the United States to continue my studies.

**DANA:** And where, in Spain?

**(2:14)**

**JOSE:** I'm from the northern part of Spain. The people will identify us the Basque region of Spain; south of the Pyrenees and about 50-100 miles from the French border. Basque country, a very traditional place, a very, very traditional place. Very religious at the time I was growing up. And at the time, I was ten or eleven or so, probably fifty percent of the boys went to the seminary to become priests. The push was such a religious push in society. Not a single person that I knew or that anybody knew skipped Mass on Sundays. Just to say that person doesn't go to Mass on

Sunday, that was, *oooh*, like some alliance with the devil or something like that. So, a very traditional region.

**DANA:** Did you become, did you enter the priesthood in Spain?

**JOSE:** Yes, high school seminary, I was in the direction toward priesthood, after that, college seminary. By then, I hadn't really made the vows in a religious congregation. Theatines was called something equivalent to Jesuits or any other group or religious groups. And I, it's a very long process to become a priest so the last four years for ordination, I completed here, in Denver. So I came already with a college education, Philosophy, and four more years that probably would be translated into divinity school.

**(4:19)**

**DANA:** And how did you select Colorado?

**JOSE:** I did not do the selection. It was a group of us in Spain. Spain had a surplus of seminarians locations and my congregation had been in Colorado for a number of years, maybe 80 or 90 years. They were imported from Spain because there were no Spanish-speaking priests here. So they were trying to start a seminary here, this religious congregation. And they wanted to have a small group from Spain who were already trained and they had gone through their religious life. And around that nucleus, to get other students so they would just jump-start a seminary here.

**DANA:** Okay. How long after you came to Colorado did you become affiliated with Our Lady of Guadalupe?

**{5:37}**

**JOSE:** Seven years. Seven years. And I was ordained in 1968. 1968 was my beginning and all my time in the priesthood was spent at Our Lady of Guadalupe.

**DANA:** Okay. And Our Lady of Guadalupe was involved in some of the, oh I guess you could say activist activities during the '60s and '70s?

**JOSE:** Yeah. Mostly '70s, until 1968, it was Mission of Saint Cajetan's. Saint Cajetan's was the main church and in North Denver they had this mission. There was no rectory; there was no action there, no offices for the people. So for any religious purposes other than Mass, people would go to Saint Cajetan's. It was just a Mission.

During my time is when it became a Parish of it's own with rectory and all the additions that were done.

**DANA:** And did you oversee the buildings or were the buildings already there?

**(6:55)**

**JOSE:** The time I was assigned there, I was assigned, really, as an assistant pastor to Saint Cajetan's. But my commitment was to go there to say Mass and return to Saint Cajetan's because Saint Cajetan was the mother church. And during my time is when, yes, we built a rectory and we just became independent in North Denver, completely separate from Saint Cajetan's.

**DANA:** Tell me about Carlotta Espinosa.

**(7:36)**

**JOSE:** Carlotta Espinosa.... Came to see me one day and she was very young, I was young too at the time, and said, "I would like to donate a piece of art to the church". And I said, "oh, wonderful, what do you have in mind"? So yeah, and I told her "Carlotta, we have some designs for you that are a little larger than that". So we took her to the church and we told her, "You see the front of the church? That's the painting we want". And well, that was not what she had in mind but she got into it...

**DANA:** So it became a mural.

**JOSE:** And it became a mural of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

**DANA:** What was the painting of?

**JOSE:** Pardon?

**DANA:** What was the painting?

**JOSE:** The painting was The Apparition of Virgin Mary to an Indian Juan Diego in Mexico. A painting that is everywhere in the Southwest, in Mexico, and everywhere. But what I asked of her was to depart from just that thing that was everywhere and to be a little free. But I asked her to paint a beautiful North Denver *Chicana* and she is the Virgin, you know, and the little angels to be neighborhood kids. So she did something that I consider to be wonderful. Everybody in the church could tell, "that sure looks like so-and-so". And Juan Diego, for example, everybody identified Juan Diego as the janitor of the church. He had the same face as the janitor. So she did a

wonderful thing of The Apparition in Mexico not just to be something imprinted in a place and a time but to make it real in North Denver with characters from North Denver. And again, we thought departing from the real meaning of The Apparition, our Lady, Juan Diego, angels, everything was kept, just made it more meaningful to the people around.

**DANA:** How many years did the mural remain?

**JOSE:** How many years did the mural has been in existence... Thirty-two, thirty-three years or so.

**DANA:** And it's still there?

**JOSE:** Still there. And it was a beautiful addition to the church. The church was beautiful. It was a small church, beautifully built. But, since I went there, I just felt that there was something missing. The frontal part, I knew that it needed something like that. And Carlotta just did exactly what we needed. And when she was through, everybody was excited because it was so beautiful. So weddings, baptisms, mariachi Masses and people after Mass trying to take pictures with the baptized kid, they all place themselves in front of this mural. So there are thousands of pictures everywhere with that mural and with something significant in the lives of the people there.

**DANA:** So it became part of the people in the community related to.

**JOSE:** Oh, definitely. Definitely. Yes.

**DANA:** What has happened to the mural since?

**(12:14)**

**JOSE:** It is the first time, as far as I can tell, that that wall has been built in the sanctuary of a church. A wall, a physical wall to block the mural I have just described. And it is, I don't have words to explain why or the need for that. Was that offensive to anybody? After the mural was finished and I left Guadalupe, there were several other pastors and all of them can tell, pretty much, my experiences. That it was a mural that inspired people, a pious mural. It was not Dali or a Picasso theme or complicated. No, it was just a pious mural. And so, no pastor had any reservations about that mural. It was just a beautiful one. So it is hard for me to understand or to explain what brought that wall blocking the mural.

**(13:38)**

**DANA:** There's a movement right now to bring the wall down. Do you think that will happen?

**JOSE:** It will have to happen because this, the defacing objects of devotion is against the church doctrine. We have this, in the Catholic Church; there have been twenty-one Ecumenical Councils, in two thousand years. Only twenty-one. And one of them was especially called to solve the problem because some people thought, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, that the church just be focused on God and no distractions of any kind and there were many conflicts and the church got together and defined that objects of devotion that inspire people should be respected and all those who deface them or block them are against the doctrine of the church. Furthermore, the present pope, last year, he just called people, all these artists in Rome, in the Sistine Chapel and telling them "where are you, artists? In the past you came and you embellished our churches and you inspired us with your...", and the pope surrounded by the frescoes of Michelangelo, talking to these people. And at the same time, at the Lady of Guadalupe, they were building a wall and defacing, blocking the angels and the almighty and top. I mean, it makes no sense with the church doctrine.

**DANA:** What does art mean to the Hispanic people community in Denver?

**(15:57)**

**JOSE:** What art means to Hispanics. You go to any home of any Hispanic or most of the homes; you will see a little altar there with things, paintings, religious. So, they relate to something that inspires them. And they will have a cross and they will have different things. So the way they approach their spirituality is through visible things that inspire them.

**DANA:** What is a *bultos*? The sculptures that...

**JOSE:** Oh *Bultos*. *Bultos* in New Mexico and Southern Colorado, it has been an old tradition by simple people who were away from the big cities and away from famous artists to make their own art. So they would just see a tree or something that would remind them of something religious so they would extract from that tree and add a little bit and that became an object of devotion because that was something that told them about some biblical or some inspiring spiritual thought. And many of them, from the perspective of technical art, might not be very special but you can

see that the people trying to do with what they had the best that they could to get the religion in something that inspired them.

**DANA:** Do you recognize the name Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco? He was with the Escalante Dominguez Expedition?

**JOSE:** I know about the expedition but I don't know about Pacheco.

**DANA:** Okay. Into the '70s, tell us about the United Farm Workers.

**(18:37)**

**JOSE:** United Farm Workers in the '70s. My first contact with the United Farm Workers was some time in the 1969 or so when a group was sent from California by César Chávez. At the time, César Chávez was running into problems. He was doing okay with the strikes in the fields but he was not going very far because still, the products were going to the market and they were selling so he thought that only by going to the markets, by sending people to the big cities that they wanted to help, by staying away from some products that they were boycotting, they could be of help. So this group of people who came to Denver, it was by Chávez to pass the word. And they tried to get into the churches, especially Catholic churches, to ask them to help them by staying away from some products so that these companies, Safeway, King Soopers and others, to stay from those products and that way the pressure would build up on the growers so that they could get more dignified wage in the fields. The wages were pretty much like Grapes of Wrath, terrible conditions, pesticides. And what they wanted was just a nickel an hour more. At the time, when I met them, the first group stayed at my church, in the basement and they were farm workers. They were just family, two kids, three kids, and just trying to tell people their story. So Guadalupe became like the center for them. Eventually they found more suitable places but Guadalupe continued, and myself, I was very involved with it. I admire these people. I admire the *campesinos* who came and around this group of *campesinos*, farm workers, who came, other supporters joined and the city started hearing about boycotting grapes, boycotting lettuce and so on. And my congregation was very supportive. Of course, I was supportive. I spoke about it often times in church. And the tendencies were to go into very high theology without practical approaches. And that was a point I was trying to make. If you're going to say something that doesn't relate to something happening in this society, that's really pretty worthless. So preaching and practice should go together.

**DANA:** How did the archdiocese feel about you becoming involved in the practice and being involved with United Farm Workers?

**(22:26)**

**JOSE:** The United Farm Workers story: they wanted to meet the Archbishop because by meeting the Archbishop it was a way to persuade the head man of all these churches that what they were here for, it was some very basic commandments of the gospel; feeding the hungry just the basic of Christianity. And how the Archbishop denied them an audience, they just wanted to approach him and say, “we are here from California, and this is what we are after. You can help us. You let us go through the churches and after Mass, five minutes so that we can say a few words”. Well, they did not meet the Archbishop. I didn’t take that lightly, myself. And I wrote the Archbishop and I said, “week after week, we receive from your office subject matters for sermons and the practical things that you have in there are very foreign. Like war in Biafra or something out there and nothing that touches the lives of people here”. And that was my first encounter with the Archbishop. And he wrote me a very cold letter saying, “What is this that you are talking about? There is no problem in California. Everything is fine. Where are you coming from about all this?” Completely unaware and so as the time went by, year after year, of course they were making more of a splash in the paper, boycotting here, being arrested there and it was in ’72, in 1972, when the Democratic party was meeting in Florida, Miami I think it was, and the United Farm Workers had infiltrated some of the delegations from different states and they were introducing the candidate was McGovern (George) at the time, and they were saying the delegation from California that supports the United Farm Workers offers all these votes for McGovern. Well, after that, a week or two later, the Archbishop of Denver came in favor of the United Farm Workers. So, as far at the church goes, time after time, the church has not been leading in moral issues. They have not been leading in liberation like civil rights or things like that. It’s been a follower. When everything is already consolidated at the level of society, then they come with, at least the story I hear, confirms that. And that was, for me, an awareness. What church am I on? And instead of leading, you had to really do all this work and finally some event that had nothing to do, but it’s just a political one gets the whole thing going.

**(26:59)**

**DANA:** During the marches and the protest organization of the UFW?

**JOSE:** Oh yes. I was a faithful, always I had the time, I would just go on the marches and picket Safeway, and Gallo wines at Applejack's. My office was always open to them. We provided for the United Farm Workers. Much of what they needed, in the line of leaflets? **(27:00)** and things like that. So we were helpful all along.

**DANA:** And what conflicts do you remember that you may have been involved in?

**(28:02)**

**JOSE:** Conflicts. My conflicts... I was a priest with my duties to the church so I was helping as much as I could on this part, and they could always count on me when they were arrested that I would just go and post bond for them, for anybody that was arrested. I had a little fund there that I used to get them all out of jail. And I was not arrested in any of those events. I was arrested in other situations that had to do with the Union. But the conflicts for me were how to mobilize a powerful church, to be responsive to needs of people right here in this country. And I was able to do some of this in my church. I realized that when people started going to confession, and saying, "bless me father, I broke the picket line and I went to Safeway". I said, well, you know, anyway, I was able to move people in declaring that to be a moral issue. **(29:00)** And many people, conservative people, having some bad thoughts about sex or so, you know, "that's bad" but doing nothing for the downtrodden, it's okay, they're not the same. So, to convert from that traditional morality to a practical morality of helping others.

**(30:00)**

**DANA:** Okay. I read something about Eugene DiManna. Would you tell us about Eugene and yourself?

**JOSE:** Eugene DiManna. This is a political issue. When I went to Guadalupe, 1968, there was no political power whatsoever in the hands of Hispanics. There was no city councilman representing the area. There had never been one in Denver. And the same, pretty much the same at other levels of government. And North Denver was ruled by Italians and DiManna was the city councilman. As I was stimulating people to get involved in politics **(31.30)** and we were going to solve problems, we were going to solve them from different angles and one of them was politics. People definitely complained time after time, they would come to my office because they felt mistreated by the police. Beaten up, many times. And there was little that we could do. And people, many people, had strong opinions about the police department at the time. So I considered that having people register, people voting,



that that would be an avenue to achieve some of the goals of progress in our community. And that conflicted with the status quo. And so, in one meeting that I attended with DiManna, he assaulted (32:41) me. When I stated some of the complaints of the Hispanic community, the insensitivity of the political system that he represented, he was assaulted, he was punched by him. And after a while, of course, he just lost. We had for the first time, city councilman, Salvadore Carpio. Two and both of them were parishioners of Our Lady of Guadalupe who retained the council. And from that time on, I could tell how behavior changed. Very visually in the police department because city council votes for the budget and talks to the chief, and so the police weren't really the problem. It was just the whole system that sends them into the community without the training or just expecting that these people were no good and things like that. So the DiManna issue with me was just a small part of the political awareness of Hispanics. Many of them didn't see much of a use of voting or being registered, for what? That had never accomplished anything. So in my time, I was happy to see how many parishioners actually,... the Representative for the Senate, House, and City were people right there from North Denver.

**DANA:** So, do you think Hispanic people are now very involved in politics in Colorado? To make a difference?

**(34:53)**

**JOSE:** I probably cannot answer that question.

**DANA:** That's fine. Tell me about your Union involvement.

**JOSE:** Unions. Other than the United Farm Workers, I really have not been involved in Unions even though once I was arrested supporting a Union. Interestingly enough, the Union was trying to get into Saint Joseph's hospital, Catholic hospital, to organize the low level people there, the cooks and janitors and all that. And a union called me to see if I could be a part of the picket line and so as a result, I was arrested. And the Union was not the United Farm Workers. My heart was really more than with the Unions, with the people at the bottom who could benefit from being unified so that they could have a voice to state their needs.

**DANA:** When the United Farm Workers went down to the San Luis Valley, did you go with them?

**JOSE:** No, I was not involved in that one.

**DANA:** Okay. What types of jobs were available to Hispanics during the years that you worked with your parishioners in the communities? Were their businesses that employed Hispanics?

**JOSE:** I would try to tackle the question with a little story, if I could.

**DANA:** Yes.

**(37:12)**

**JOSE:** The question is about how Hispanics were hired or not hired by businesses or by the city or by other enterprises. When I came from Spain, from New York to Denver, I took the train with three other seminarians. And two days on the train, we arrived to Union Station **(37:45)** and there was a priest to pick us up with a seminarian from here, from Denver. And two days on the train and we didn't speak English at the time. So the priest was from Spain of course and the seminary was a Hispanic, from here. We started talking to him and he spoke Spanish. And we said, "Oh my God, you speak Spanish in America". And we could not believe, being from Spain, we just thought that here, everybody spoke English. But this young man spoke Spanish. And we used the word... the way you spoke Spanish was with accent, beautiful accent. And we used the word Mexican. Mexican. And the priest took us aside and said, "you don't use the word Mexican". The very first day get here, what is going on here? Mexicans in '61 were not well treated anywhere, job-wise. They were not well treated at any level; in the church, the universities, nowhere. The University of Colorado at that time had about 30,000 or so students and there was less than one percent in the University of Colorado. Actually I think it was a fraction, so many per thousand. And most of them were Cubans. **(39:32)**. *[laughs]* I mean, Hispanics had no power and furthermore, they did not have an awareness in the early '60s. The awareness of themselves as people proud of themselves, it came later. It came in middle '60s or late '60s. And so it was pretty sad to see that inferiority tie projected upon over the years by society. That's the way it was. So the word Mexican could not be used. Many of the people were trying to say, "well, my grandfather came from Spain" and looking for roots so they were not Mexican and it was just, it was a tragedy because Mexican was identified with a D-word?. And that's the way things were at all levels. And the jobs available to them were at the lower level.

**(40:00)**

**DANA:** And what is the difference between the *Latino, Hispanic, Chicano*? Talk about how people identify themselves with those different names.

**JOSE:** Things have changed considerably from those years. Definitely. The awareness that came, especially in the youth in the late '60s, "yeah I'm a Mexican, I'm a Chicano", all that. That is for me, one of the greatest jumps that happened in the Hispanic community. They had political power and some of them were Hispanics. But the identity question was solved very quickly. From '61 when I was here, by the early '70s, there was no dishonor in being Mexican. Now, the difference, Chicano has some political connotation, or *had* more in the past than now. I think that the term that I like best is *Hispanic*. I know that the trend is going into *Latino*. I don't like, they are fine, all of them, but *Latino*, Italians are *Latinos*, and Portuguese are *Latinos*. *Hispanics* are those who have some roots with the *Hispanic*, the Southwest, and Mexico. But it's just a matter of preference. To be a *Chicano* in the early '70s meant something that many Mexicans did not want to be because that word politicized perhaps an aggressive, violent person. So they would rather call themselves, at the time, Spanish. So the terms have been evolving. I think that the most common one that we have now is *Latino*.

**DANA:** Okay. ...United Farm Workers families came from California and spent time in the basement of your church. What did families who came here, Hispanic families in those years, what did they find? What did they experience?

**(43:00)**

**JOSE:** They came from a background of poverty. So, anything that they were receiving here was appreciated by them. The expectations were very low. And just the fact that they were in a cause larger than themselves, because they were representing all those field workers out there in California, gave them a motivation. I found them very motivated, very willing to spend hours and hours in front of stores picketing or going to talk to different other Unions. And so, they were very good troopers. And they eventually only one family stayed here and the rest were mostly volunteers. Volunteers came and went, it was in the early '70s and many hippies joined and stayed for a month or so because they wanted to be helpful with it. But they were good troopers.

**DANA:** We are wrapping up the interview because of time. Is there something that you would like to talk about that we've missed in the questions?

**JOSE:** I cannot think of..., I think you covered it pretty much in the different segments you spoke about.

**DANA:** Yeah we kind of jumped around a bit.

**JOSE:** I could go on and on some of the subjects for a long time. It's hard to compress all these years.

**DANA:** Okay. Well I want to thank you for your time and for the interview and if we have questions I'll give you a phone call. And we can talk more and the camera guys want to do just a little bit more filming without the interview; what they call B-roll. Would that be alright?

**JOSE:** Sure, you want me to stay right here...

Speaking with cameraman.