

Jen Brown: Okay. We are on.

David Blanke: We are recording.

JB: Do you two give your permission to record?

Nick Jimenez: I do.

DB: I do, yes.

JB: Okay. Thanks.

DB: Well, welcome, Nick. Again, this is Friday, June 23rd, 2017. I am David Blanke, who teaches at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. With me is my colleague, Jen Brown, who also teaches here. Today, we are meeting with Nick Jimenez, who has been gracious enough to grant us the time to be able to talk about his life and story and connections to Corpus Christi. So, Nick, thank you for that. I would like to just start...

NJ: Very flattered.

DB: I would just like to start at the beginning. If you could tell us a little bit of your early history, where you were born, some of your parents' background, and growing up in San Antonio.

NJ: I was born in San Antonio, as you said. My parents, Nick, and Dolores Jimenez – but they always called her Lola. Her entire life, they called her Lola. Her name was Dolores, but they called her – it's just a nickname. He was a butcher, and my mother worked in a children's clothing factory and had worked in clothing factories almost all her life. She had worked at the Pecan Shelling Plant in San Antonio, which has a history in labor relations, you remember. Tacayuma – I forgot the lady's name who sort of led this historic union effort. But she had left before then. But most of her life had been spent at the clothing factory. My father was a butcher. I went to a vocational high school. Most of its courses were in auto mechanics – big, big, big FFA farm. You kind of wonder why, in the south side of San Antonio, there would be a big farmer's community. But it still had remnants of the old truck farms in the area. Because of the old truck farms, it was a very integrated community. The old truck farms had been Czech, mostly Czech, and we still had some Czech families that were in the area and went to Luther Burbank High School. We had an old Italian family. We had a Schmidt that was on our football team, a guy named Maserana. I think his last name was Maserana. We had no African-Americans. There was kind of a line drawn. They went to Brackenridge, which is barely not even a mile and a half away, but none came to Burbank. I was taking architectural drafting. I think I told you this last time. I was taking architectural drafting mostly because my father's cousin was the only white-collar guy we knew. He worked out of his house. He was an architectural draftsman. Obviously, he developed his career enough so that he actually took work orders and then just worked out of his house. So, I wanted to be an architectural draftsman.

DB: You mentioned your father's vocation as a butcher. Now, did he own his own shop, operate

his own shop?

NJ: No, he worked at several – at least what I remember, he worked at a chain, the old Piggly Wiggly, if you go back that far. He worked at a Piggly Wiggly on the north side of San Antonio. The reason I mention the north side of San Antonio, just about all his clientele were Anglos up there, up there on North St. Mary's, which is not what North St. Mary's is now, but it was then. He worked for the Piggly Wiggly. Later on, he worked for some independent stores. When he retired, he worked for an independently owned grocery store. He took me to the store once in a while, but just kind of helped him out on Saturdays, maybe on Sundays, but not much. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I was going to take this architectural drafting course, to get back to that story. When I was going into my senior year, I had to get permission from the teacher at that time, Mr. Peepers – he really was named Mr. Peepers. [laughter] Peepers, who was very good, had had contacts all over the architectural community in San Antonio. He would find jobs for his students. People would call him up, asking if he had a prospect, would he have had prospects. At least two architects that I know of came out of the classes that I was in. There was about twenty students. We had these big architectural desks. You can't get that many students in the classroom. So, I asked him, "I need to take the senior class." One of the signature moments of my life, he said to me, "Now, Nick, if you work really, really hard, the best you can be is mediocre." It was really crushing.

DB: Solid career advice.

NJ: I mean, I'm squirreling – I've put two years into this thing. Of course, you spent half the day in architectural drafting, which really didn't leave you much of the day left for the other academic subjects. I guess he wanted to make me feel better or trying to actually maybe guide me in some way. He said, "However," he says, "you might consider a career in some kind of writing." He had become an officer in a vocational teachers association. I hit one of his jobs to turn out a newsletter. In a way, he was my first editor and assignment editor, because he started having me read behind him. I guess he had talked about English teacher, and I figured, this is the only guy you have in your class who could – so, I started to read. He said, "Read this behind me." I'd read behind him. But if something had stood out, I'd mark it up. Because they had to have little features of this newsletter, he would send me out to different departments in the school. Sent me over to the farm; what's happened at the farm? He'd send me out to the auto shop. What are they doing at the auto shop? I wrote up these little, short, little news stories, and he would put them in the newsletter. So, I didn't take architectural drafting anymore. The only thing I have now is a great respect for architects. [laughter] At one time, all I had was all the T-squares and pencils and little bags of rosin that you pick up. But by not taking architectural drafting, I was able to take academics all day and managed to pick up all those courses that I would need to at least barely qualify for college admission if I wanted to – the four years of English, the extra year of science, all that stuff. I went to San Antonio College. I think my father was surprised. I told him, "Well, I wanted to change." I had to tell him what Peeper had told me. But later on, I came to appreciate what he had told me, because without being mean – in fact, he was very kind about it – he had given me something very valuable that you don't get, the truth.

DB: At the moment that you needed it.

NJ: He could've let me sign up. Like he said, I wouldn't have been able to get a job. But he told me the truth.

DB: Now, those stories, were they about the local community? Could you talk a little bit about growing up in San Antonio? This was the 1940s, right?

NJ: Well, but this time, this is late fifties. But I was telling you earlier, my parents were great newspaper readers. We took the Light at our house, which is the afternoon Hearst paper. I've always said that San Antonio was split up at the time into two camps. You took the Express-News or you took the Light. The Light was a much more conservative – obviously, Hearst paper. I was surprised that other papers didn't have their publishers write front page editorials. I thought they all did. [laughter] William Randolph Hearst would write these editorials that would appear in all the Hearst newspapers. The Express-News was owned locally by a family. I guess you could say it was probably maybe a little more liberal, but not much, to essentially conservative papers. But we took the Light. My parents were very avid newspaper readers. They discussed politics. They talked about politics. Who was in office, who was running, voting, was very important to them.

DB: National issues or local or both?

NJ: Both. I'll tell you, there were three icons in our family – Henry B. González, Lyndon Johnson, and of all things, Dwight Eisenhower. He had been a hero of the war. They really looked up to him because of that. They had looked up for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but he was dead. He had died many years ago. So, Dwight D. Eisenhower. But Henry González was very much – they talked about Henry B. González because his life was a kind of reflection of what their lives were sort of going through. He had been thrown out of Landa Park in New Braunfels. He had been the only one on the San Antonio City Council. He was one of the first Hispanics on the floor of the state legislature. So, he was sort of reflective of what they were going through. So, they talked a lot about politics. They were very, very loyal in voting. They took me with them to the voting booth. I went along with them to see – there was one incident. They weren't necessarily Democrats, although my mother was probably more Democrat than my father. I think my father was more Republican. They often would joke that they tended to cancel each other's vote out. My father, I was with him because we went over to Burbank High School, which where the polling booth was, and a guy comes out. I remember this quite vividly. A guy comes out, comes to my father, comes up to the window as we were driving up, and takes out a ballot card and says, "Look," he tells him in Spanish, "we've marked all the Mexicans on the ballot so you can vote." This really incensed my father on two counts. One, how did he know that he wanted to vote for all the Mexican-Americans? Two, if he wanted to, could he not pick them out? [laughter]

DB: The system worked.

NJ: He really got upset about that.

DB: Did you have extended family that grew up around you and cousins and relations?

NJ: I had a raft of cousins and I had a raft of uncles, mostly on my mother's side, but there was some on my father's side. See, my father was one of eight children who had been left orphaned when they were very young. I never knew my paternal grandfather. He had died when he was – I got this from my oldest aunt that I have who told me later, because we would question her, "What about so-and-so? How do you know these people?" – who had died when he was very young, probably in a heart attack, which I wish I had known at the time. I wish somebody had told me that before I had my triple bypass. [laughter]

DB: Family history certainly helps with those concerns.

NJ: But they mostly lived on one street on the west side of San Antonio, Juarez Street, or maybe – I don't even remember the street, Juarez Lane or something. But it was Juarez. They all lived on the same short, dead-end street. It dead-ended into Alazan Creek. Across the way were the old Aztec courts. So, when I was older, a teenager going to San Antonio College, that's where I would go to pick up football games, because they were out there every Sunday playing pick-up football, and they play on the street. You were safe there because everybody was related to you, both the players and the neighbors on all sides. So, my cousins went out there. Most of my cousins lived there on my father's side. When I was very young, I didn't like going out there. They had a privy. That was their sole sanitation out there. They had a privy. They lived right on the railroad tracks, probably not even a mile and a half from downtown San Antonio. It was quite a problem before they had a sewer system that went out to them. On my mother's side, who we were actually probably closer to, my mother and one of my aunts, Esther, they were extremely close. I did not know this. Nobody tells you this. Until you're much older, you don't realize this. My grandmother had been abandoned by her first husband, and my mother and my aunt were his children. They had had children together. The people that came later, other aunts, another aunt that I knew and another uncle that I knew, were actually their half-brother and half-sister. I did not realize. I was already in my thirties before somebody told me that this was going on. My mother would get these visitors from Houston, and I knew they were related, but no one ever told me why. Who are these people? All these stories that are behind your family, no one ever lays them out. They were the kids that my grandmother had raised from her second husband. The man I thought was my grandfather was not my grandfather. He was actually my step-grandfather. But he died when I was fairly young. He had had children before they got married and they were the ones that came to see her. My grandmother, she was something I remember a lot. Because my mother always worked, my father always worked, she's the one that actually kept us most of the time. She did not speak English. I did not speak very much Spanish because my father – my parents, really, both of them, had made a decision when I was very young that they would speak to me in nothing but English. A little harder for my mother, but she did. She spoke to me in English. My father, who, as I told you last time, was a high school graduate. He had graduated from high school. He was not your typical eighteen-year-old high school graduate. He must have been at least twenty, twenty-one. That would have made him graduate in 1932 or [19]33. If you think about it, a Mexican-American in San Antonio in the early [19]30s that graduated from high school, it was a lot. Later, I kept thinking, a high school graduate, and he was a butcher later. I think of all the avenues that might have opened up for someone else, but not for him.

DB: Did he ever mention why they made that decision in terms of being English only at home? Was it made explicit of "We are preparing –"

NJ: They made it explicit, yes, because they wanted me to succeed in school. They figured that the English would give me a leg up, and it did, when I was in elementary school, because most of the kids that showed up did not. They spoke English, but it was very, very little. So, I remember my mother told me, when I was in the first grade, I would serve as a little bit of a translator for the teacher. [laughter]

DB: Already reporting.

NJ: Yes, already reporting, right. But it made it kind of hard for us to have any long conversations, for instance, with my grandmother, who did not speak English. But she had her life. She took care of us. But at the end of the day, she got on the bus, and she had things to do and places to go. "You guys figure it out." [laughter]

DB: "My time is done here today."

NJ: "My time is done," yes.

DB: So, you obviously attended college. You started at college in San Antonio. Was the assumption always that you were, after high school, going on to college, or were there other options that you pursued?

NJ: It was smudged. [laughter]

DB: How so?

NJ: I graduated from high school, and a cousin of mine – we were very close. But the older ones were about the same age. Others were older, others were younger. He was about the same age as I was. So, we went out to look for jobs. He was actually looking for a permanent job. I was looking for more of a summer job, but if somebody wanted to give me a permanent job, I guess I would have taken it. We wandered around like this. I had already applied to several schools, had taken the SAT, put schools down that I might want to go to, not knowing how any of this was going to be paid for. I guess if I had gotten a job of some pay, I think I would have stayed. I did want to go to some sort of further education. One of the things I did that summer was start to write.

DB: In what years?

NJ: I graduated in [19]61.

DB: Sixty-one, okay.

NJ: Yes, I started to write. We would go out in the morning and visit likely places. Then in the afternoon, we'd already sort of exhausted ourselves. We could only grovel for so long. I would

go home, and I had a typewriter and I would start to write. I had been a big reader, always a big reader. I think that the two best gifts my parents ever gave me and my mother ever gave me was she took me to Sunday school, she got me a library card. We used to go to the story times every Saturday. Not just me, me and my cousin, my girl cousin on mother side, Elisa, we would go to the story time. We would visit the library on our own. It's amazing. Elisa and I sometimes talk about it. It was amazing that as young as we were, they would let us go on the bus and go downtown. Gee, we couldn't have been older than nine years old. Nine, ten years old, we were wandering around. How did we do it? Now, people don't let their kids out in the sidewalk without hovering over them as if something calamitous is going to happen to them. We went all over the place. One time, we ran out of bus fare. We spent it or – I don't know what we did. We ate hot dogs. We didn't have any money left. We walked all the way home from downtown San Antonio. I knew the way the bus went. We just went the bus route. [laughter]

DB: You went the bus route.

NJ: I knew that way.

DB: Do you remember, in those years, what you were writing, and did you keep any of the early writing?

NJ: I was writing a lot of fiction. I had read a lot of the Hemingways, the Steinbeck, the Dos Passos. If you think about it, I was out of high school. No one reads Dos Passos now, but I did at the time. So, you do imitative kind of things. I wrote a couple of stories. I actually sent a couple of stories in. When you're eighteen, they might take it. [laughter] Got a couple of rejection slips back, it felt like I'm vetted. [laughter] I got a thing from The New Yorker. "Sorry, we cannot use your material at this time." Hey, if you're going to send something in, send it to the big stuff. But I kept some of the manuscript around later on.

DB: Was it that same realist style you mentioned? You sort of followed their fashion?

NJ: Yes, I was sort of following their fashion to a certain extent. I kept it around in my senior year at Baylor. I still had that manuscript or one of the stories around. I submitted it for their literary magazine. I submitted it in the fall. By the spring, I had been drafted, was going off to Fort Polk. I happened to visit my old roommates there at Coconut Hall, and they said, "Hey, you won something in the magazine." I said, "I won something where?" "In that literary thing." They didn't know what literary thing. So, they went, "I don't know. I saw your name and it was in that literary thing." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes." So, I went over to the English building, went to one of the professors that I knew just to say hello. He says, "Oh, did you get a copy of the magazine? Your story's in there. It had won the fiction prize." I always keep that.

DB: Oh, sure, yes. What brought you from San Antonio? You were studying in San Antonio and then sort of transitioned to Baylor.

NJ: Right. It's like going from – [laughter]

DB: You can see what the question is.

NJ: Sort of like going from the monastery to I don't know what. [laughter]

DB: Yes, or at least something more familiar, local.

NJ: It was something more familiar. I was going to St. Mary's. There was no public four-year college at the time in San Antonio. There were a number of colleges that I could have transferred to. Baylor was one of them. Remember that I grew up in a Protestant household; one of the few sort of lonely Protestants in the area at that time. My grandmother grew up Protestant. So, it wasn't like we suddenly found Jesus one day. My mother was a Protestant.

DB: Because of your maternal grandmother.

NJ: By that time, I was already third generation. My grandmother's mother, I think, was the original one. I think she's the one. She came from Mexico. So does my grandmother, but she was a small girl when she came across. So, grew up in a Protestant household.

DB: You did not feel like there was ever any tension over that? Your father never expressed...

NJ: My father was Catholic, but he was not a practicing Catholic in any way. In fact, he probably spent more time at our church than any Catholic church. There was some questioning from my father's family, especially some of my cousins who wondered, "Why aren't you Catholic?" We would have this little discussion. Some of my friends would always say, "Really?" Yes. [laughter] However, because you grew up in this culture, even though you were a Protestant, you really grew up in a Catholic culture. The quinceañeras, the First Communion, all the model posts that people go through, well, you wind up attending them. Yes, I'm Protestant, but I sort of grew up in this sort of multilingual, cultural, religion thing. One or two of the people that we knew at San Antonio College were Jewish. So, we went over to their wedding, to the temple with them. So, it was pretty fluid. The idea of going to a private church-based school wasn't a big leap for me. I really didn't want to go to the University of Texas. It was too big, twenty-thousand. [laughter]

DB: It is a different world.

NJ: Yes, different world. Then there was other two things. One, Baylor had a different requirement for math. My big bugaboo all through high school – I told people I hold a seasoned record for failing Algebra 2 – was math. So, their math requirement was a little different. You didn't have to have two years of algebra. You could have a year of algebra and a year of something else for a graduation requirement. I wanted to go to football school. I loved college football. That's something we did on Saturday. I would listen to Kern Tips on the old Southwest Conference radio and listen to football. So, basically, it was, yes, there were other schools in the area, but gee, if you're going to go, let's go somewhere – there was this, too. I felt I needed – I guess because I am Mexican-American, or was a Mexican-American kid, I needed an entry card, and it would be good if I had a degree from a school that people would recognize. Yes, a lot of my friends went to what was then Texas A&I. I had no idea what Kingsville was. They went, they liked it. I wasn't going to go south. I knew any place that was worth it had to be north. So,

I went to Baylor. I would tell people, when I was at St. Mary's, and they used to hold a Young Democrats meeting, they held it in the auditorium. [laughter]

When the Young Democrats met at Baylor, they met in a phone booth. [laughter]

DB: Easy access to positions of authority now. But you consciously remember that sense of saying, "I want to go to a school that is going to position me in a certain way."

NJ: Why do people go to Harvard? When you die, they'll say, "Harvard-educated so-and-so." But I felt I needed an entry card. Yes. It wasn't going to be that there's a meaning. I didn't realize it at the time. There aren't going to be very many Mexican-American college graduates anyway, but at least let it be from that school because, "Oh, you went to Baylor." When I was starting out, that was always a drawing card. "Oh, you went to Baylor." I said, "Yes." It was something a little different.

DB: Was your major journalism, English, or...

NJ: No, my major was English. It was English.

DB: You saw yourself as a writer or a journalist or...

NJ: I saw myself as a writing something, never teaching. My aunt used to ask me – she was very down to earth. She would say, "What are you going to do with that?" Probably what a lot of parents from here are asking that. [laughter] "What are you going to do with that? Hey, what are you going to do with that?" I said, "I don't know." They always said, "Well, you can be a teacher." I was thinking, "I don't want to be a teacher." I really didn't know. I enjoyed being an English major. I was always a creature of the open stacks – go back in the open stacks and read stuff. In fact, it always took me so long to do research papers, because I would always get sidetracked by something else on the next stack that I started reading. I was a news major. I was a journalism minor. When I was at Baylor – this did not happen anymore – everybody has department of communications. It really was department of journalism. It was department of newspaper journalism. The guy that ran the department, Dave Chevens, had been Washington Bureau Chief of the Associated Press. He brought in people who had worked for newspapers. The sort of research type communications – I guess it didn't exist yet. Everybody there had worked for a newspaper in some capacity before, so they were very ground-oriented. Here's what you need to know. Here's what happens in the newsroom. Here's what you need to edit and copy. I didn't work in the school newspaper that much, the Lariat, because I wasn't a major. I was a minor. But I did have to spend some lab time up at the Lariat. I did take assignments on occasion that called me up to do stories for the Lariat. But most of my study was over in the English department. I used to love to go over to the Armstrong Browning building, which is kind of their old premier library for their Browning stuff. Very nice place to study, especially on Saturday morning when football is there. It was one of the few places that was open. There were no people waving pom-poms in my face. [laughter]

DB: Did you attend the football games given that you...



NJ: Oh, no, I did. I loved going to football games. But I went to the Armstrong Browning Library first. I spent about two hours there, and then you went to the craziness. You went to the football games.

DB: So, how did you feel your career started to turn towards journalism? I know your first position ended up in Edinburg, but you also had to draft and all kinds of...

NJ: The only two jobs I had before with the city of San Antonio, I worked at the public library system, and I had been a lifeguard. So, one of the professors, David McHam, who I still keep in contact with over the years – I hear from him once in a while. A lot of people went to Baylor that, at that time, were in journalism, still, they talk to on the phone, They get letters from him, emails. He talks to them back – asked me what I was doing that summer. I said, "Well, I guess I'll go back to lifeguarding back in San Antonio." He said, "Well, a friend of mine – the name was Jim (Mathis?) – has just bought a newspaper down in the valley," he and his wife. No newspaper man can buy a newspaper. He had married into the Brown family out of Houston, the old Brown construction firm. They built the air base. They did a number of things. So, because of that, he came into – or his wife had quite a bit of money. They bought this newspaper down in the valley. So, I wrote him a letter. He wrote me back, said he was looking for somebody who could speak Spanish. I was trying to tell him, "Maybe not, but I'm going to take it anyway." I go down there. When I was growing up, we went to Laredo. My aunt and uncle and parents loved to go to Laredo. I had never been to the valley. I'd tell people, "When I got below Falfurrias, I felt like I was driving off the end of the earth." [laughter] I had spent all my time in San Antonio, in Waco, Austin. I had been in Dallas a little bit, just a good old city boy. Going to a rural place was totally new to me, and a little town. But everybody says, "You got to do this. You'll have a chance." So, I went down and had a great adventure. I was down there for three months. Now, I would call it internship. Then, it was just a summer job, doing all kinds of things. Jim decided that it cost too much to have – it was a six-day paper. It did not publish on Saturday, but they published a Sunday edition. Jim thought that he was spending too much on cartoons, so he cut the cartoons out. But he wanted to have something different. It's Sunday. So, he enlists me to these crazy projects. He says, "Here's what we're going to do." The first one he gave me was, "You're going to swim the Rio Grande with a photographer." I said, "The point of this, Jim?" Because he found that I had been a lifeguard. He says, "Yes, a wrong-way wetback, that's what you're going to be. We'll photograph you, and we're swimming." Now, I think about it, the attorneys at the Caller-Times would have gone bananas. [laughter]

DB: Did the story run?

NJ: We swam across. We land on the other side. I can't think of the photographer's name. But later on, he actually ran a little paper down in Hebbronville or some little town down in South Texas. Obviously, he couldn't swim. He had to have his cameras along. But he got in the inner tube and followed me along. We soon discovered you cannot go from here to here, because you're not going to wind up here. You're going to wind up down there.

DB: Hundred yards down the river.

NJ: Right, yes. Once I got out there, I realized, "Hey, this current is actually kind of strong out

here." He photographed me and came back, and he photographs us back on the other side. We did this at a little state park. I was surprised nobody stopped us. It was on a weekday. Nobody was down there. Yes, it ran. It ran. The next thing he did was, "I'll tell you what, you're going to go –" I was like, "Wait a minute, Jim. There's a bit of a typecasting here." "You're going to go cotton picking and tell the readers about cotton picking." It didn't occur to me at the time. All these readers have been cotton pickers their whole lives. So, why am I going cotton picking? But I guess an urban kid because he asked me, "Have you ever been picking cotton?" I said, "I grew up on Brazos Street in the south side of San Antonio. Where am I going to go pick cotton?" So, he lined me up with a work agent. He told me, he says, "You have to go down to this place before dawn." I'm not a before-dawn guy; not then, not now. So, I went down there. We got in the truck. He took us out to the fields. It was early in the cotton-picking season. Cotton-picking season starts in the valley, and then you go north. So, a lot of the people that were there were just starting the year. They would later on go up to the Panhandle. They would follow the harvest north. There were a lot of kids with us. Some of them were families. They were seven, eight, nine years old. They might have been something a little older, like junior high. I literally got sick. I mean, at the end of the day, I went home. I did not go to work the next day. I called Jim up, "I can't come in. I mean, I got fever. I mean, I got almost close to a sunstroke out there." But the other kids were helping me because I was not doing anything. They would put cotton in mine.

DB: Do you think his efforts at these stories were – obviously, he was selling newspapers.

NJ: He was selling newspapers.

DB: He was trying to get his way into this marketplace. I think he was trying to appeal to the Hispanic population down there. Were these stories just not being...

NJ: No, He told me that they did real well and that people liked them. I'm glad. I did one more thing. Oh, he had me buy liquor on this side of the border, duty-free. Because somebody had told me that people bought duty-free, go across the border, and then just bring it back. Well, they may, but not with me, because they stopped me right away. They told me, "You can't bring this stuff." I'm like, "Okay." But when it all came to an end was when Jim says, "Look, we're going to have you skydive." "No." [laughter]

"I love you, man, but I'm not jumping out of no one's plane."

DB: That is when it went from being a summer job to just an intern.

NJ: Right, yes. No, I'm not doing that. After I graduated, I actually went back to the Edinburg Daily Review. For my experience, actually, Jim paid me – for the size of the paper, he actually paid me sort of fairly well. I asked for a job at the Light, and they were going to pay me less, actually. So, I went back to the Edinburg Daily Review, and stayed there for about three months, until I got my draft notice. So, then after that, I went into the Army.

DB: When was that?

NJ: That was in [19]66. I graduated in that January of [19]66. I got my diploma in January [19]66. I got drafted in April. I actually reported to duty in May.

DB: Obviously, fascinating times, the [19]60s. Do you remember what your recollections were of those times and the civil rights movement and the activism and the rise of somewhat of a pushback against the consensus culture that existed in the [19]50s in...

NJ: Not when I was in the valley. The valley sort of became a hotbed for labor movements and all this. But after I left – at the time, it was not. There were no student movements out of what was then Pan American University. There was a little bit going on in San Antonio, but I was not aware of it. I was down in the valley. A lot of it happened when I was overseas, and I would read about it. Oh, I have one to tell you. One of the guys I came to know when I was at Baylor, strange enough, was Ramsey Muniz. I mean, there was only – what, it couldn't have been not even sixty, seventy Hispanics on the Baylor campus at the time. Frankly, when you see somebody, "Hey, how are you doing?" [laughter] One of them was Ramsey. Ramsey was a defensive end, back then when football players were human-sized. Ramsey was a defensive end. Arturo Delgado, comes from Miller, worked for the school district, he was there. Couple of other people that I knew – I didn't meet them, but I knew they were there. A young man named Lerma, out of a very well-known Lerma family out of deep South Texas. I think they're from Hebronville, the string of football players. Lerma was there, and a couple of other people that were there.

DB: All South Texans, or at least sounds like it.

NJ: South Texans. Strange enough, some of the people I came to know here are Mexican-American had gone to Baylor – Tony Bonilla. Like I say, Ramsey – couple of the attorneys that were Hispanic attorneys had gone to Baylor. I've always attributed it to this idea of a church school sort of a little bit more maybe open-door kind of thing. Yes, that sort of affiliation, the Baptist sort of missionary work. They're in a different church. They're not in the main church, but they do have this church for them. They'll be Segunda Iglesia Bautista, not over at Second Baptist, but they have Segunda Iglesia Bautista. Kind of interesting. So, I got to know those people.

DB: So, drafted in [19]66 and then deployed to Vietnam?

NJ: Yes, I went and trained at a place called Fort Benjamin Harrison outside of Indianapolis, what was then called Judge Advocate – no, that was not Judge Advocate. It was basically a giant clerical school where I discovered that everybody in the company was either a college graduate or a near college graduate. All the other people in my basic training outfit had gone off to Fort Sill for artillery training. I was one of the few that wasn't sent off to Fort Benjamin Harrison. All of them up at Fort Benjamin Harrison had the same experience. I told my kids that my impression of the Army began on my first day arrival at the Welcome Center. "I love the Army," I said. [laughter]

DB: Yes. You cannot leave, but welcome anyway.

NJ: But welcome anyways. We were all at attention on the big asphalt parking lot out there. Three hundred people, maybe? I thought all of the Army was eighteen years old. I was twenty-two. They said, "Everybody who has a college degree, please come forward." Three of us. Three of us went forward. We were separated out, and we went to see the captain, because they were trying to get you to sign up for OCS, officer candidate school. But all through basic training, every once in a while, I'd get a call, "Go see the captain." When I was at Fort Benjamin Harrison, that was the last attempt. They said, "You could get better pay." I said, "I don't think so. I got called. I came. I don't want to do it more than two years," because it was four-year commitment if you wanted to be an officer, at least. When I was in Vietnam, I was with the Judge Advocate General's School office, which was essentially a big DAs office, attorneys and such, which was part of the headquarters staff, United States Army headquarters in Vietnam.

DB: This is in Saigon?

NJ: This is in Saigon. Every afternoon, Westmoreland would come out to his car, drive off, 5:00, right on the dot. I'm thinking, "Really, does the war end at 5:00 every day?" [laughter]

I was blessed in that nobody shot at me, and I didn't have to shoot at anybody. But I came away with a great many impressions about the war, about the nation being at war, about what happens to nations when a huge – what is essentially a huge, occupied Army arrives and takes over everything.

DB: Do you remember those impressions? Do you feel like those were formed when you arrived there or...

NJ: It was over time. When I first arrived there, all I could think of was, "Jesus, I am here. It's really strange out here." But over time – because we lived in Saigon for more than six months, and what had been – even I could tell – was a very stately and beautiful city, even when I was there, sort of disappeared. There was a little town outside of Fort Polk called Leesville. Leesville was where you didn't want to go, because it was just one big pinball machine and a row of bars, and that's what much of Saigon was becoming even the few months that I was there. Whatever vestiges that had been of a city there on the banks, it was disappearing. We had discussions. This is really interesting, because we would have discussions, and later on, we went out to a place called Long Binh, which was an Army base camp. We lived in the barracks out there. We had discussions as to whether or not this would be – just amongst us, soldier rumor – whether this was a war of nationalism or a war to keep back the communists. Most of them said it was a war to keep back the communists, and a couple of other guys say, "No, it's a war of nationalism." [laughter]

Oh, man, I'm glad nobody had weapons that night.

DB: Unpopular opinion that time.

NJ: Yes. In fact, one of the strange little things about our camp there when I was in Saigon was it was part of a French Army base. It had been a French Army base. A lot of the old watchtowers were still up. When we were there, we lived in a house, on the first floor of a house

that had been an old French house. But there were a couple of these there. On the second floor of one of the houses was the post library. It had a library. Because it's a military library, it has a lot of war books, historical books – a couple of them on the French experience in Vietnam. This is where I had read about Điện Biên Phủ, the *Street Without Joy*. So, I was sort of learning about the history of where I was at. I was there during the Tet Offensive. All I remember about the Tet Offensive was I did not realize that you could burrow into concrete, but you can. [laughter]

DB: But they did, yes.

NJ: You could burrow because that's what we did.

DB: Right into the embassy, yes.

NJ: Yes, we learned to get in there really close to that concrete. About two weeks after the Tet Offensive, I left. My term was up. I literally left it smoking. There was a mortar attack on the air base just the hour that I was going to leave. I thought, "Oh, gee, I'm not going to be able to get out of here." The plane came in. We ran like hell, sprinted up the step, got it – and yet, you live in this surreal world where you're having your base mortared, and the next thing, you're sitting in the seat of this chartered airline with what were then called stewardesses bringing you refreshments an hour after you leave. It's like your mind cannot adjust. Your mind cannot adjust.

DB: When you flew back, you flew back into San Antonio?

NJ: We flew back into San Francisco. I was discharged at the Oakland Army Base, many fond memories of Oakland, and went home.

DB: Which was San Antonio?

NJ: Which was San Antonio, yes.

DB: Then how did you end up – there was not a direct line to Corpus Christi...

NJ: No, there was no direct line to Corpus Christi. When I was a kid, we came often to Corpus Christi. This was our vacation spot. We had the luxuries – if you think about it now, how does this happen? We would have the luxury of coming down for almost all week, staying days out here at North Beach, just loll around in the surf, going to the movies. When I was working later, taking three days off was just enormous. My father and my mother would take the whole week off. We would come down here, me and my sister. So, I had fond memories of Corpus Christi. The editor of the Caller-Times had visitors down in the valley one time, spoken to the Rotary Club. I had known Hoyt Hager, who was the bureau chief of the Corpus Christi Caller-Times down the valley. The Corpus Christi Caller-Times had home delivery all over the valley at that time, also Laredo, Victoria. It was the regional paper. So, when I got drafted and was leaving, Hoyt told me, he says, "When you get out, you might want to call Jackson up. He liked you. He's seen some of your stuff. When you come back, you might want to call him up." So, when my GI money finally ran out in San Antonio, [laughter] I wrote Jackson a letter. I'd write letters

then. He wrote me back, told me he'd be happy that I would come down and interview him. So, I went down, came to Corpus Christi, spent a couple of hours – I think about an hour, an hour and a half with him. He introduced me to some of the people in the newsroom. I was impressed. It was the largest newsroom that I had ever seen. There were a lot of people there at the time. He introduced me to the managing editor, (John Anderson?). I think he introduced me to Norm White. I'm not too sure. Norm White was the night editor. Then he says, "I got to make a few calls, but I'll let you know." I think about a day or two days later, he called me up, makes me an offer, would I like to come – the only offer I had on my table, I'll take it. So, I came to Corpus Christi, stayed ever since.

DB: This was in [19]68, [19]69?

NJ: This was in [19]68, summer of [19]68. My mother had great confidence in me. I got hired the week before July the 4th. So, when July the 4th came along about a week later, John Anderson says, "Well, why don't you just take the day off?" I must've been there a week. If I had actually been there for a little while, he might have put me to work on a holiday, but what was I going to do? So, I went home, and I walked in the door on the morning of July the 4th. My mother turns around and she says, "Did they fire you already?" [laughter]

Thanks, mom.

DB: Again, these are obviously interesting times. [19]68, [19]69, civil rights movement has changed. The response to the war has changed. Could you just recall what it was like coming to – what the tone and the sense of Corpus was and the Caller-Times was at that point?

NJ: The Caller-Times was trying to adjust. There were obviously a lot of voices now trying to be heard. There were people – what you might call the city hall crowd status quo that was still – and the Caller-Times was very much a status quo paper. It was in line with the chamber, the big banks, city hall, and the refineries. The refineries were kind of shadowy at that time. They aren't quite the present that they are now, but there were people, the Storms, who were a very prominent – but there were voices that were trying to be heard more prominently. There was Héctor García. The Longoria Affair had already happened. He was campaigning on other issues mostly out of town, so you didn't see them much in the Caller-Times. But people knew that he was campaigning in the valley, carrying on to campaign for something, whether it was migrants or whatever. He was there. He was pretty prominent even at the time.

DB: Do you think the success of the GI Forum and LULAC, et cetera, really lent credibility to these voices?

NJ: Right, and because the city had a unique history. Both GI Forum and LULAC had been born here, so that gave it a unique history. So, there was an attempt to keep up a relation with the people with LULAC, with the doctor. I mean Jackson, Ed Harte, they saw themselves as progressive figures. They wanted to have those voices in the paper. They wanted to have the African-American community – because there was a more visible integration kind of activity. They had supported that. Editorially, they had supported that. So, they were trying to keep this line of communications open, but the town sees itself in a certain way and can't quite get out of

that.

DB: You were sort of hearing more – I do not want to say radical, but certainly more impatient voices who were concerned about...

NJ: Impatient voices. We don't have radical in Corpus Christi. No, we don't have radical in Corpus Christi.

DB: But it was right on the heels. I mean, the...

NJ: As Fred Cervantes used to say, what we think of as radical is kind of considered almost a middle of the road in California. [laughter]

DB: So, I am just curious as to how when MALDEF or the Cisneros case or a variety of these other voices started to interject into the more traditional LULAC and AGIF, et cetera, if there was a sense of tension that came out of that relationship that you could see at the reporting.

NJ: The activities of the Raza Unida, it really put a division between sort of the old school. That's an amazing thing. All of a sudden, they were the old school. Dr. Hector, the (Bodillas?), Raza Unida, the Garzas, and the LULAC, suddenly, they were the old school compared to Raza Unida. Guadalupe Youngblood in Robstown, Carlos Gaza in Kingsville. Ramsey, although he was something of a moderate – politically, I thought he was something of a moderate figure – an attorney, Baylor graduate. I mean, he didn't speak the rhetoric of some of the other ones. I don't know why anybody considered Raza Unida as threatening, because if you eliminate the rhetoric, the "We're going to take over," eliminate the rhetoric – what were they actually doing? They were registering voters. They were taking voters to the polls. They were doing the sort of ground game that all political parties tried to do then. Now, they would be into data-driven kind of things. But what they were doing was not all that radical. The rhetoric was threatening. How we're going to have Hispanics, the Quinto Sol, the myth of the link with the Aztec past and our takeover of the old lands, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, we're going to overturn that. That was threatening. What they were actually doing was not very threatening. You can say that trying to get people to vote for a party based on its ethnicity is flawed, but you can't say it was totally radical. What did the political machines in New York try to do? What did the political machines in Chicago try to do? Maybe there's was an ethnicity, but it was pretty close to it. They didn't say you got to vote for all the polls on the ballot, but who were the ones in the machine, the Poles, the Czechs. [laughter]

DB: We had mentioned this last time. Once the busing issue came in, then it changes the narrative.

NJ: It changes the narrative. I've always thought that Cisneros reinserted Dr. Hector back again into the forefront. We never had the stuff you would have out in California during this time, the Brown Berets. That was never very prominent here. But when they filed the suit and then they hold the city and downtown at the headquarters, that sort of reinserted Hector again locally. Now, he becomes a much more upfront figure, and maybe in a way that even Hector found a little different. He would probably a little bit more confrontational at that point than he had been

before. That, I thought, put a lot of people here to the test, because many Hispanics in town are now moving south. So, when the busing comes, we're talking about sending not a great many, but still some Hispanic kids from south side schools west. I tell you, Norman White, who was my night editor, who was a wonderful mentor of mine, after the busing orders come through, where they're talking late at night, and they're in the newsroom, and he tells me, he says, "This is going to be very, very difficult," he says, "for a lot of parents in town." I said, "Yes, it is going to be." He says, "You don't understand. For somebody on the south side to put their little daughter on the bus to go to a west side school where they've never been before, to a school they've never been, to a neighborhood that maybe have never gone before –" I said, "Norman, there's somebody on the West Side doing the same thing. They're putting their little daughter on the bus. They're going to a place they're not – they're going to a culture that maybe they're not all that familiar with. I mean, it's going to be wrenching for a lot of people." I didn't know if that was the answer, but we're coming to grips with something here. We're coming to grips. I thought Hector exposed conditions that we at the Caller-Times should have known about. We should have exposed that. Hector exposed that and took it to court. We could have done that. But he put it right in front of your face and says, "Here is this. Here's all these terrible bathrooms, the water leaking, the toilets running. Here's all these awful educational conditions. You wouldn't have your own kids go to school under this. Why do you expect these other kids to do this?" So, yes, he forced the issue.

DB: You started out with the city desk. Is that right?

NJ: Yes, I was the general assignment reporter working next to Norman. I worked the night. I've always been terrible with schedules. At the time, when I came, everybody had to work the police beat, we had to come in at 4:30 in the afternoon and work until 1:00 in the morning. So, you got the late-night duty once a week, which – I never keep my days straight. Was the day my late-night city or not? The regular time for showing up for the morning paper would be 1:00. So, I'm showing up at 1:00, and they'd say, "Not yet, man. You're not due to start until 4:30. I'm going to have to go kill about three hours somewhere until it's time for me to come back." One time, I showed up at 4:30. "Where were you? You were supposed to be here since 1:00." [laughter]

I finally go to tell them, I said, "Norman, look. Let me make you an offer. I will take all the 4:30. I will be the permanent cop reporter from here on in. Therefore, nobody has to come late at night, except who was ever working on the weekend, the two days that I'm off. That's it. I will take the rest of them." It was a gift to Norman because this was a huge headache to him. People hated to be on that late night duty. They were all married. So, I did this. I thought they were going to carry me around on their shoulders. [laughter]

DB: The problem is solved, yes.

NJ: Yes. So, I became the late night – it was wonderful because the middleman was reduced to one guy, Norman White. There was no manager, editor, there was no big editor, there was no one else to play the game. It was just me and Norman. So, it was great. Because I was the cop writer, I would also cover any other kind of nighttime activities, nighttime meetings. So, I went to a lot of planning commission meetings, city council meetings, sometimes school board



meetings, whatever a regular beat writer didn't want to handle or didn't feel it was – they didn't want to pay him for the extra time, so I would go.

DB: Well, I raised that partially because you played such an important role in Alan Lessoff's book, *Where Texas Meets the Sea*, which is the recent history of the city of Corpus Christi. He points to that period of time, basically the late [19]60s, early [19]70s, where you do see this significant transition in terms of who runs Corpus Christi. Previously, it had been local concerns, local businesses, local landowners. Increasingly, now, it is port facilities. It is the refineries.

NJ: Port facilities, right.

DB: Petrochemicals.

NJ: At the time, remember, I'm going out to – anything that has to do with the industries at that point, I'm going out. There's an explosion of tank cars, I'm going out. There's a big flareup out at the industries, I'm going out. It was almost useless because they did not speak to you. They would tell me, they would say, "Oh, look. Call this number." I call the local plant. "Oh, look, call this number." Well, it's New York. So, I'm calling New York. Of course, they're not answering. A train of tank cars blows up here in Calallen. I see a bunch of guys in suits standing out there. I go up to them. "Hi, I'm Nick Jimenez, Caller-Times. Y'all are with the company," or whatever it was. They just look at me and they say, "Here, call this number." [laughter] Everything's out of somewhere else – New York, Chicago, wherever, Indiana – but you don't get any answers locally. Did your superiors respond to that at all?

NJ: They were so used to it now, they hardly gave it a blink. I described what I saw. I got the police to give me some descriptions, the fire department, whatever they could get. They were kind of restrained. They had a much more intimate relationship with those, but they felt sort of constrained not to be talking about somebody else's business. The next day, we might get a statement from the, from the company, but it would be quite delayed.

DB: We spoke a little bit about this last time when we were mentioning the sort of environmental consciousness of the Gulf and the region and the role that a lot of these port-related activities, their reaction. In the [19]70s, there was not much environmental consciousness, but...

NJ: There wasn't much. There was really no concern about what the people were putting up the smokestacks. I mean, people were just happy to have the jobs. People were ready to have the investment. There was no sense that even though they were stinking up the place, that this might be a detriment in the long run. Here in Corpus Christi, it's a balancing act probably more than other places. We are a tourist town. That's why I came, because we were a tourist town. This is how I came. But how do you balance that off against having industry? You can't ignore it. So, you've got to balance this off in some way. Even now, ExxonMobil coming across the bay – so, ExxonMobil comes in. We have a discussion or a talk with the board. It's not about whether or not we're for ExxonMobil coming in. We are for ExxonMobil coming in. It's a big outfit. You have ExxonMobil coming in, it means one of the largest corporations in the world – maybe the

largest corporation in the world – is coming to your area, going to invest money, which means they're going to be invested in you in many, many ways. But where is the line where you just say, "I just can't take all of it?" A really sophisticated company like ExxonMobil now begins to understand it, because they've gone with the other community. So, they've got to keep this environmental consciousness there, whether they actually practice this out on a day-to-day basis, we won't know until it actually happens. But there was no environmental consciousness about it.

DB: You mentioned Dr. Garcia, who spoke for aspects of civil rights, civil liberties, et cetera. Were there voices that were starting to come forward for things like defining the environmental consciousness of the region or the cultural consciousness of the region? I mean, we are ahead of the Selena Memorial, like those types of things, of saying, "This is how we see the region. This is how we see South Texas. It is not defined by multinational intolerance."

NJ: What's the little nature park out here?

DB: The summit or...

JB: Suter Park?

DB: Suter.

NJ: Suter. Hans Suter.

DB: The Suters, yes.

NJ: I don't know if it was Ed Harte or Jackson or someone else – recruited Hans Suter to start writing this column. Now, Hans had been a chemist for one of the industrial companies, but he was very environmentally aware. He was really a pioneer to start thinking about this. He started writing these columns about how we had to be aware and begin protecting our environment and how this could be done, even though we were in an industrial area, that we had to put mechanisms in place to start protecting the environment. This is also when Padre Island National Seashore was established. Now, we're suddenly aware that this island out here, which you thought pretty much is just a big spit of sand, does have its own environment, has a very delicate environment. I link a lot of that back to Hans Suter. I also link it back to the whooping cranes, and now, more recently – maybe not that much recently, the Ridley turtles. It's amazing to me that we have hundreds, and maybe over time, thousands of people going to see little turtles being released into the surf. All the people that are out there are all families. They're all little kids. They're looking at the little turtles. There's a story how the little turtles have to make their way onto the ocean. They have all these obstacles in front of them – the birds, crabs, pollution, oil spills. They have to make their way back there so that at some point, they can come back and lay more eggs of more little turtles. We are creating thousands of little environmentalists out there – [laughter]

DB: Yes, who understand that cycle and that link.

NJ: – who have a sort of a sense of this cycle that goes on. As a good late friend of mine used to

say – and he lived in [inaudible ] – there was discussion at the time about releases in Choke Canyon of freshwater down into the bay. There's still people who argue about the freshwater releases. He would say, "People don't come down from Dallas to look at our lawns." [laughter]

DB: Well, yes. How about your own kind of career trajectory? Obviously, you go from reporting then to editorial work to the editorial staff. Could you just kind of take us through that?

NJ: I had come on in [19]68 – and I forget the year now. I'll have to look at my own bio. I transferred over to the city desk. A wonderful man by the name of Al was on the city desk, and we all thought he was doing a terrible job. It wasn't really Al's forte. He had been a copy editor. There's nothing that encouraged you to take a job other than somebody doing a really bad one and you think you can do it better. [laughter] If somebody really great had been there, you'd say, "Gee, I'll never be able to do that." But Al was really nice to me. I'd say, "Al what do you do up here?" He didn't feel threatened. I mean, Al was the kind of guy who didn't feel threatened. He says, "Why don't you come sit in with me? I'm going to go to lunch. So, every lunchtime you get here, you come –" I was at work at the courthouse this time. "Come here. You can sit in for me." I said, "Okay." So, I'd sit in here while he went up to lunch, which means every once in a while, you had to make a decision. Somebody comes to you and says, "Look, something's happening. Should I go out there?" I'd say, "Yes, you should go out there." I got to make some decisions. Then I guess about a couple months of that, I became assistant city editor. A new city editor came in, and I was assistant city editor for a couple of years. Then I became city editor of the afternoon, what was in the afternoon maker on the Times. I was in my thirties at the time. I think I had just gotten my masters here – real concrete evidence of progression from getting the advanced degree.

DB: Still, that is young.

NJ: Huh?

DB: That is young as an editor.

NJ: Yes, right. Remember, the Caller-Times used to say, "The personal director of the Caller-Times is death." [laughter] People only die here. They don't go on from here somewhere else. So, many of the people that I had more or less "grown up with" were still on the staff. For them, being city editor was like the highest thing that they could hope to progress to. But even then, I could tell that they were happy for me, but there was also a little bit of regret. At thirty years old, I was either going to be in the post for a long time – they were not going to become city editor, and I could sort of sense that some of them had wanted to be. They had applied for it when it became open. The fact that I was Mexican-American probably – yes, they liked me. They probably didn't think of me anymore as being like the Mexican-American. But still, I'm sure there was a little bit of that too. Ever since then, I have always been the first Mexican-American in whatever post I ran into at the Caller. I was the first assistant city editor, the first city editor, the first associate editor, the first editorial page editor. Finally, it's just, "Don't even mention it anymore, please." [laughter]

DB: As the job progressed – I mean, we do not need to do the recount of the history of Corpus Christi. But could you talk a little bit about some of the issues that sort of were raised, that came across your desk, that, in your mind, at least either defined the role of the paper in the city or the city at that time? Things that kind of stand out – I know we had talked before about the ways in which a lot of times the letters to the editor began to start showing you a shift in a city in a way that you may otherwise not see.

NJ: Well, I think the candidates for the city council I think was one in one sense. Do you remember that Fred was very instrumental – Fred Cervantes, who was a professor, he was very instrumental – the lead chief witness, I think, in the suit that made the Trent city council from at-large to mixed single-member – start bringing forth sort of a different kind of candidate, especially from the districts that were heavily Hispanic. So, we started seeing faces on the editorial board, for instance – or they started seeing, because I wasn't in the editorial board at the time – that they had probably never seen before. They were familiar with the usual cast of political characters. They weren't familiar with a lot of new people that were coming up. Mr. Berlanga, Hugo's uncle, who came up, he had been a supervisor on the City of Corpus Christi staff working with street division, I think. He came up. Some of the other people that came up – this was a different face of Corpus Christi that the editorial board and probably a lot of people in town were not familiar with. They had been spokesmen, leaders in their community, but maybe not well known to the general public at large.

DB: Which places the Caller-Times right in the middle of that joint decision, right?

NJ: Yes. The Caller-Times has really invested in trying to keep the city, let's say, progressive in many ways, keep it's roads, communications open with the outside world, trying to make it less provincial in many ways. The old guard is trying to still hold on to the mayor's post and other things. This isn't really only about ethnicity. One of the people who came up was Mary Rhodes. Mary Rhodes, the first time I met her, she was – I used to belong to a neighborhood group, Del Mar Neighborhood Association. Mary Rhodes came to speak to us. Former nurse, very straightforward, strong woman; made her mark mostly by opposing some initiatives that the chamber or the paper were championing. One of the great wake-ups, there was a bond issue that was going to set up an aircraft maintenance facility. What I think was then Continental had been – think of it as the Destination Bayfront of its day. It failed. Steve Sullivan used to say I was one of the nineteen percenters, because that was the percentage of the vote for. Mary campaigned against it because this was a big boondoggle right out of the airport. Her side won. Oh, Steve was mad. The chamber was mad. Then Mary decides to run for mayor. Thank God I was not in the editorial board then. The chamber, the editorial board, all the big guys down at a town club, they get together, and they're going to back Retired Admiral – think of the guy's name. I can't think of his name. Anyway, a retired admiral. He came, and he disappeared as soon as he got lost. That poor guy never had a chance. His biggest attribute was to stand there in his old Navy uniform. He was not a campaigner Mary was out there. She knew everybody. She campaigned in the neighborhoods. She was speaking for people on your street, and she won going away. She had very few financial contributions from any of the old guard downtown. They were all locked up by the admiral. She won. The city manager at the time, Garza, Juan – I think his name is Juan – told me one time – this is after Mary had died. I said, "So, what was the difference?" He says, "Well, I'll tell you. One time, we were in there in the council back room."

This is not long after Mary had been elected. It was some of the big boys. A little delegation of the big boys came in, he says, and gives Mary this sheet of paper. On that sheet is a list of sort of priorities of what they would like. Mary looks at it, puts it in a trash can. [laughter]

DB: Welcome to the new order. You were actually right about the way in which defining Corpus Christi shifted to include race and ethnicity, but not exclusively. You had all kinds of different kind of cultural factors swirling around with, again, the Caller-Times right at the juncture between the public's reaction to these plans and when you kind of...

NJ: What is the model for a good government candidate or elected official? We had had a certain model that we had been following for decades – the professional, the bank guy, the person with the industry, the man who ran – they were mostly all men, there were very few women – who ran their own business, who was successful in business. The idea of a guy who had been a supervisor for the street city department was not it. So, what was the model that we were following, and how do we sort through it? Because if you were to ask Mr. David Berlanga what were his priorities, getting the garbage picked up on time, be sure that the cops were around, having better streets, having a good sidewalk, so that when the kids go to school – those probably would – in fact, I know they weren't the priorities of what you would call them downtown crowd – attracting more industry, having more tourist facilities. How do we judge that?

DB: As an editorial board, how did you guys do that? I mean, you have all these candidates from...

NJ: I think we couldn't look at it in the way that perhaps past editorial boards have done with it. Past editorial boards, they were invested in this idea of a greater and better Corpus Christi, chasing, if we could only be more like Dallas. If we could look like Dallas, if we could be more like Houston – the people that came from the neighborhoods, the single-member districts, they wanted a Corpus Christi that was better for their families. It might be because more jobs came to town, but not necessarily. They wanted a better life now, not when somebody was going to come to town.

DB: So, Chicago politics, right? It is the ward.

NJ: It's the ward.

DB: I mean, you want to make sure that your constituents are...

NJ: In editorial writing, it would come up from time to time that the single-member district candidates had to keep their eye on the larger picture. Now, you might wonder – even I wonder when we wrote that – but I live in my neighborhood. [laughter]

DB: Somebody else worry about the larger picture.

NJ: I don't live in the greater picture. I live in my neighborhood. [laughter]

DB: Well, obviously, Corpus infamously went through that, or is going through that.

NJ: Yes, is going through that even now.

DB: Destination Bayfront, the Columbus ships. In a sense, Dusty Morell's efforts of trying to develop the miradores and the ways in which – honoring Selena's legacy. Again, your staff and your paper were in the middle of those very public debates.

NJ: We knew about Selena. I always told people, "We knew about Selena." We just never understood Selena, what she meant. We covered Selena. I remember a couple of stories about her visiting local schools.

DB: This was after she started recording?

NJ: After she started recording. She never did a big local concert. We didn't have a venue for that. Her big concerts were up in Houston. They were down in Mexico. I think she appeared in Los Angeles. We didn't have a large enough venue. At the time, we didn't even have the arena. So, she didn't appear at a big local concert. She had done a lot of appearances when she was a kid back at barbecues, quinceañeras. So, she had been brought up in that milieu. But we understood about Selena. We knew about Selena. There was a lot of coverage sometimes of her local appearances, her appearances in school. She has started to speak about continuing education. She had not gone to high school. She had been, in effect, home-schooled, or schooled by mail, I think. Her death was like a shock, a shock in the sense that here was somebody so young and got killed her in this really weird event, and the reaction. The real story was not her murder. The real story was their reaction. People go into tears. They go into a mass mourning. All these places where she'd appeared in, the large, large venues, probably understood it better than we did. If you go on YouTube and you find Selena's appearance at the – what was it, the rodeo where she appeared – up in Houston, you get a better hang of it. This is not just watching somebody perform and applauding. No, this is devotion. The age group, a lot of them very young. The most passionate about her are young women, who now are all middle-aged women, devoted to her, devoted to the music, devoted to her lifestyle, because she is the reflection of what they're going to do, in another sense, but she's a reflection of what she's going to do. We are overwhelmed by this – I'm talking about the paper – of that part of the city, which has not understood Selena. We're talking about mostly the Anglo part of the city, the sort of downtown crowd. (Jorges Angel?) comes up. This is when they moved her viewing of her body down to the – the convention center had been open just a short time. The city manager offers the convention center as the place to view, and the family takes them up on it. Lines that stretch down shoreline come to view her body. Jorges Angel, when this was going on, happened to come in my office or something else. Former candidate for congress, our attorney, former judge – comes up there and he says, "You don't know how many politicians wish they could be down there and have some sort of involvement, because this is the crowd that they would love to have. They would love to be associated with this very young, very passionate, from all the right precincts." [laughter]

DB: That is right. A well balanced and...

NJ: Yes, right. They love it. At the paper, because the coverage of Selena is going on for weeks – now years – because I was in charge of the letters as the editor – we keep getting these letters. What is the big deal about this? So, she died and like that. We're sorry that it happened, such a young woman. But day after day, why are we having this in our paper day after day after day? You don't understand. Think of Elvis. [laughter] This is like on an Elvis scale, except I'm sure Memphis understood Elvis better than we...

DB: Elvis was on the radio, whereas Selena was on a different radio channel.

NJ: Elvis was on the radio, right. Two days after her death, I think, I was talking to somebody from the Washington Post. They said, "Oh, listen, I just want to tell you that I'm sorry about Selena." I said, "Really, you know what's that about?" "Oh, yes." He says, "We carried a big spread up here. People in the Latin-American neighborhoods, they had huge displays." This was fascinating. To me, it was just fascinating.

DB: I think, as you mentioned in Alan's book, is that her memorial downtown has become a major marker in the city of Corpus Christi.

NJ: Go down there, anybody who goes past Selena's memorial, I don't care what time of day it is, there's somebody down there. It was just about the right time for us to have the Selena Festival. I don't know who thought of it, whether Pauline, it was her idea or somebody's idea to have the festival, because it was perfect timing. Any earlier, and we would have seemed to be profiting from the thing. Any later, maybe it would just fade out, because you don't have the right generation in there. I think, mostly because of the Quintanilla family – Abe is very protective of the legacy. They got the Quintanilla family to agree to it. That was a big step. So, they've had the Selena Festival. So, now, we have two big festivals in Corpus – well, three big festivals – Buccaneer Days, which is really kind of like the old-style spring, starting the vacation period, kick off the vacation period; and we have the Selena Festival, which it may bring more out-of-town visitors than anything we have. Buc Day is a lot of fun, but it's mostly for us. Selena Festival brings people from not only out of Corpus Christi, out of the state, in some cases, out of the country. It really makes a mark. My God, I mean, you go outside of Corpus Christi, we're usually known for that one thing. Maybe somebody mentions the whoopers that are in the area. Somebody might mention the turtles. But always, somebody will mention Selena. Why didn't we have this before? So, now we have Selena. The erection of the Selena statue, as you know, Alan's book talks about how this came about. Dusty, he has this idea that he wants to put – he's put the miradores out there, but you're neither Spanish nor Mexican. [laughter] It's some sort of Disney-like kind of architecture.

DB: Gazebo.

NJ: I don't know exactly what they are, but they're nice. [laughter]

What purpose they have, I have no idea. But they look good in pictures. I've seen a lot of paintings with them that goes out there. He's put the miradores out there. He has been the – what's the word? Not the sponsor. He's been the patron of different kinds of art. He gets it into his head. He's going to have a Selena statue. Here's this old redneck, former beer distributor,

and he has this money because his daughter died in a DWI accident. He had a suit, and the family got the money. They want it dedicated to public charitable things. He has this thing, that he wants to put a Selena Festival. How Dusty came to have this idea, why was it him, who knows? But he wanted to have it. He was never really in line with the regular chamber crowd. He was always just a little outside of it. So, he wants to have the Selena statue. How it came to be didn't follow any of the regular rules. All art, it was supposed to be vetted by the city arts commission. He never went through it. He never even came close to come to the arts commission. He had the proposal. I already knows this because Jorges told me about it. They were going to do a search for a sculpture like they did the other ones. You'll put in a proposal. Dusty already had his own sculpture. He paid for it. All he needed to do was the permission from the city council to put it on there, to put it where it was. So, he takes probably the most prominent position on the Bayfront. He's not going to put the statue way down near Emerald Beach or bury it down near the convention center where it's going to be dwarfed by those buildings. He puts it right in front and center onto Peoples Street T-Head's entrance. He has it done in some sort of classic Grecian pose, but Selena leaning up against – [laughter]

DB: When compared to the other sort of hackneyed attempts to create some sense of, well, we are the home of the reconstructed Columbus ships, or we are going to recover this county courthouse that for some reason – as a historian, you would love to see historic preservation. Yet, you would also like to see a sense of ownership by the community to say, "This is us. This is who we are." Selena does that.

NJ: Some people would say that it's tacky. I've heard it described as, "Isn't that kind of tacky?" Isn't it kind of tacky? People do tacky things. When they get down there, they write on it. Not only do they have the statue, now you got to write on it. City tries to put up that little barrier. Well, good luck with that. [laughter]

DB: Well, I know I have been asking a lot of questions, but I am just curious if you have any – one of the things that Alan talks about is the way in which the city has changed significantly over the decades. If there are elements that come from your perspective, from the Caller-Times – or just as a citizen of the city, if there are things that you have seen over the last few decades that really stand out.

NJ: Power is diffuse. When I came there were certain defined centers of power – Hayden Head, Dr. Hector, the chamber, because it reflected the big businesses and banks in town, and to some extent, the ports, but they were voices that were out of town. They were not here, but they were certain defined centers of power. Now, power is all over the place, but the power comes with the situation. Yes, there are still major voices that speak, but I find that they tend to be temporary voices. The admiral at the base, because he commands where the pilots are going to be trained, people listen to him. They want him to be happy. The number of people who work at the Naval Air Command office, there's probably like twenty people down there. The most important officer is in town. Don't let that guy leave. The port continues to be important. That's why the port commission is such a fought-over appointment. They are more local than they used to be in the sense that they have very visible spokesmen here. Their big decisions are still made out of town, but they have made an effort in a way they never made before to keep contact with local people. You could call somebody at Valero, and somebody from Valero will call you back.



They will send representatives over. I got to write editorial about pollution because they'll send over a whole phalanx of people. But power is more diffuse. As I told you, I think a lot of people realize it – it's not about ethnicity anymore today, I don't think. Yes, ethnicity still sort of hangs over everything. Our appointments, our nominees, the people being nominated for the one post of the city council, it's like the old World War II platoon where you have a guy from New Jersey, that Western cowboy. You have to have all these people. We have the Indian businessman. We have the trion of an African-American family. We have John Martinez, attorney. We have Debbie Lindsey-Opel, a white businesswoman. It was like it's the old World War II war movie. So, we still have this attempt to have ethnic balancing. I used to try to suggest to Flavius, "Look at the people in your office. If you took a photograph of those people, what's the story that it would tell us?" So, we still have that, but it's class. I think it's class now. We used to have majority and minority schools. They're all minority schools. Everything in the CCISD is a minority school. Some are more minorities than others. That's all we have. That's the only difference. The banks, I think, are kind of still run that way, but many of them are run out of town. When they are run from the town, usually from sort of somebody who grew up around here. That edge of being of a totally different culture, it sort of smudged a bit.

DB: How is the paper? I mean, you think of a newspaper, it is inherently trying to pull together all of these various cultural factors. Here we are, living in a world of social media, electronics, and instant gratification, not evening newspapers. I am just curious as to how the newspaper and the folks you work with...

NJ: I cry every morning when I get my Caller-Times.

DB: It is a different paper.

NJ: It's a different paper. It's a much smaller paper. The economics of newspaper – we have yet to find out what is the future economic model of the newspaper that will make it survive. It's going to survive. There will be a newspaper. I don't know what form it will be. It's trying to get there now. That's true for everybody. I mean, it's happened to The Wall Street Journal. It's happened to The New York Times, huge layoffs. Every time I pick up The New York Times, there's another hundred being laid off. I mean, even The New York Times, eventually, a couple hundred here and a couple hundred there, you would just about cut the heart out of it. So, the internet, obviously – reading, I think, has diminished. Engagement with the news at large – the general newspaper is one of the few modes – and maybe the other one is national broadcast news – that attempts to engage the audience with many subjects instead of just one. We have an audience that's so segmented. People read about their gardening. People read about Fox. But they're all segmented. Everybody reads about what they're interested in. It's not bad, but you live in your little world. You live in your little neighborhood. You read the same news as the people that you know around you are reading. You support the same candidates. There's very little integration in that sense. The newspaper is probably one of the last general information vehicles left where you'll read about, yes, politics, but you'll read about some little pet story somewhere. You have the comics. You have recipes. You have deeper articles about public policy.

DB: In some sense of an attempt to be objective, right?

NJ: Some sense of an attempt to be objective. I think we also realize that we have too many inner biases to ever truly be objective, but by God, at least we're aware of it. We're trying to keep it there. So, it's having a hard time when the world is so partitioned off – and not just because of the internet. Although, it is largely because of the internet, because the economic model is just going to hell.

DB: Well, I have no more questions, but I want to appreciate your time very much and your thoughtful responses.

NJ: You didn't ask any questions?

JB: Every time I thought of something, David jumped in, and I am just like, "That is why I did not ask."

DB: Historians, we all just basically think alike. [laughter]

JB: Well, is there anything that we miss that you wanted to add or talk about?

NJ: I often talk to people who want to be journalists. I used to run an intern program for the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors Association. We would place interns – mostly the smaller papers. I was sort of recreating my experience with Edinburg Daily Review. The big guys, they can get their interns anytime they want. The little guys, the Victorias, the Brownwoods, the Seguin Gazettes, they hardly ever have an intern. Nobody ever shows up unless it's from the local college. So, I would try to place them there, because I knew that if they went there, they would get a full gamut.

DB: You do it all.

NJ: You cannot hide in a small newspaper. You will be found out. It was minorities. It was strictly for minorities. So, the Brownwood – what is it? I forget what their mascot is – got their first African-American journalist, because the program sent them there. The Plainview Herald – ever been to Plainview?

DB: No.

NJ: You don't want to go. [laughter] Good people come from Plainview. It's between Amarillo and Lubbock. They got a young Mexican-American woman who was reluctant to leave after when her internship was over. She was reluctant to leave.

DB: Good for Plainview.

NJ: She wanted to go back. Yes. They wanted her to stay. Even though when she got there, she told me – I guess she felt like me. "I thought I'd gone to the end of the earth." She was from San Antonio. [laughter] They want to be journalists, and I tell them, "It's a different world than when I grew up." So, you have to be good at many, many different kinds of things. But it's

essentially still reporting. You may be reporting in a different way. You may be shooting with a telephone. You may be writing on an iPad for a web somewhere. But it's still reporting. So, you must study. You must read. You must become interested in things you never knew existed like county road policy. You've got to know something about it at least. But I just wonder where those people are going to come from because we have a lot of information on the web, but a lot of it is opinion. Heck, opinion is easy. Heck, I do opinion. I mean, that's easy. A fact, a real true fact that you can depend on is harder. If you can find enough true facts, now you've got something. But somebody has to get it. We just all can't be opining. Somebody has to get a fact.

JB: What skills do you tell these young interns and young journalists? What do they need to make it?

NJ: They need to ask questions. When somebody gives you an answer, think of the next question and the one after that and the one after that and the one after that. One of the guys that taught me how to cover a courthouse said, "Go by the county judge's office every day." I said, "And?" He says, "Ask him a question. Just think of a question, of something that's happening. You go ask him a question." He was right. Sometimes, nothing was there. Other times, just by having a conversation and starting to question, I would discover things that were going to happen pretty soon that he was working on, or that the county, government, in some way, was starting to work on. But it would have never occurred to him to tell me that until we got into a conversation. The other thing I would tell reporters that came here to South Texas – because the paper was pretty well known for being a good training ground, so we got graduates from all over the place. Over the years, we got several Ivy League school people that come. They would call up some sheriff up in George West and ask him a question. They'd say, "We're not going to tell you that," and then comes me, "I can't believe it. They didn't tell me that. Have they ever heard of the right of the press?" I said, "Look, look, look. Tomorrow, I want you to take a drive up to George West. Go to the sheriff's office, just sit down. Just sit down with them. Talk with them. Ask how things are going on. Have a cup of coffee. Yes, he's supposed to answer your question, but it works a whole lot better if he sort of knows you a little bit." In South Texas, it's all about personal relationships. Do you know that person? Do that person know you? Where are you from? Where are your parents from? Where did you grow up? What high school did you go to? In South Texas, so much is about relationships. In a larger city, it's not about relationships. There's too many people. The contacts are too fast. So, it's like, "What do you do? What can I do for you? What do you want?" Here, I think you still sort of got to lay the groundwork a little bit. "How are your kids? Your wife was sick. Did she get better?" You got to know something about the person. I mean, it's kind of old-fashioned, to tell you the truth, but it is sort of nice. I still go up to Loyd Neal and say, "How are you feeling these days? You feeling better?" He told me one time, he says, "Nick, I always appreciate you asking people about my health," because he had that bowel surgery. I'd would always ask him. We were at – I forget we were at, something like a country club. The place was packed. Loyd Neal shows up, and with his wife. I've known Loyd Neal for decades. I've never met his wife. They can't find a place to sit. Was it LULAC or the LULAC women or something?

DB: Last weekend?

NJ: No, this is some years ago. It's a different crowd than Loyd would normally show up at, but he was making an effort. A regular country club crowd, they would have parted the seas to have Loyd and his wife sit down, but this crowd didn't recognize him, didn't know who he was. So, I told my wife, I said, "Can we give up these two chairs here?" She says, "Yes." I think someone was going to come. I said, "No, we'll take them." Went over, invited Loyd and his wife to sit down with us. Loyd told me later, he really, really appreciated that, because he's a county judge, and he can't find a seat for his wife. [laughter] But it's a personal relationship. You have to lay that ground down first. That's the culture anyway, I think.

JB: So, who has been the most memorable person or what has been the most memorable event that you have covered here in South Texas?

NJ: Oh, gee. There were a lot of national events that impacted us. 9/11, I think, it was kind of like Pearl Harbor or John Kennedy being shot. It's something that affected all of us. I think probably a couple of elections. We had quite a discussion when Obama came up. We still endorsed in presidential elections. Although, I would argue that the presidential endorsement is probably the least effective of any of the endorsements. It's so much in the news. There's so much to discuss. People have already made up their own minds. So, the endorsement, I've always said, is not about the candidate, it's about us. It says something about us. It doesn't say anything about the candidate. People are just going to read it and say, "Oh, really?" The endorsement from a paper our size actually makes more sense and is more informative when you're doing it about a school board candidate or the 13th court of appeals, because these are obscure offices, many times with obscure people running. You're actually aiding the voter, I think. But we had a long discussion about Obama. This is when he was running against McCain, first time out. I was the editorial page editor. We would have a discussion. I had to bring the publisher along. The publisher has to sign on to it. At that time, we were very much a much more publisher-oriented editorial board. I don't think it's quite that way now. The publisher was reluctant. He wouldn't say no, but he'd say, "Well, we'll talk about it some more." This went along. We're getting other endorsements out. We're coming to the end. We've just about gotten out of the mount now, and we've got about a week to go. I told him, "Patrick, tell me what your thoughts are, because everybody, all the rest of us, I think we're Obama." Patrick didn't want to relent. So, finally, I forced the issue, "Okay, Patrick. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to write you an Obama endorsement, and I'm going to write you a McCain endorsement." I can do a McCain endorsement, good man, war hero. But the difference was, if I put it in the editorial, if we endorse McCain, we're on the wrong side of history here. There is some argument that says McCain is fine as a senator. But as a president, he has great flaws. As you remember, he had called for the stop in the campaigning because of the economic crisis. Yet, when they all met at the White House, McCain had just sat there. People had said it was like Obama was the president. It was like McCain wasn't there. Bush was wondering, "Why are we holding this meeting?" [laughter] I wrote the editorial, and I wrote the McCain editorial. I told the other guy, I said, "Here's what I did. I sent them both in." They looked at me. They said, "I don't understand why we don't go with Obama." I said, "Because it's a big leap for him and the people that he pals around with. Republican Party is very strong here, getting stronger every year. It's got to be tough for Patrick. About, I guess, an hour later, Patrick calls me on the phone. He says, "Go with the McCain one." I said, "Patrick, you realize that all three of us are Obama." "Go with the McCain one." "Okay." About a year later, I retired – not then. I guess

some people have said I quit at that point. I'm too much of an institutional guy. After about a year of Obama – and I was reaching sixty-six at that point. I said, "Patrick, I think I'm going to retire here this summer." I didn't link it to the editorial, and I really couldn't say that was part of it. But obviously, I always thought, "Gee, if I can't even endorse my own presidential candidate, what's the point of even being here? That's part of the fun."

DB: Being editorial, yes.

NJ: Yes. So, it wasn't a huge news event, but it was a big event in terms of me functioning as an opinion leader.

JB: Well, I think that is all I have.

DB: Thank you again. Again, we appreciate the time. Hopefully, we can do it again, talk about the other ones one more time.

NJ: Okay.

DB: All right. We appreciate it.

JB: Thanks.

[end of transcript]