

Interview of Sal Romero
By Jacqueline Garcia
February 22, 2018 at 1:40 p.m.

JACQUELINE:

Okay, so my name is Jacqueline Garcia. Today is February 22, 2018 and I am here with Sal Romero.

When were you born?

SAL:

April 30th, 1978

JACQUELINE:

And where were you born?

SAL:

I was born in a very small town called El Dormido, which is in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.

JACQUELINE:

And what are the names of your parents?

SAL:

My dad's name is Salvador Romero, same as mine. And my mom's name is Ofelia Romero.

JACQUELINE:

What do they do for a living?

SAL:

So they have been in Harrisonburg for 27 years and they have been working in poultry, in the poultry industry.

JACQUELINE:

So can you describe how your journey to the United States? How old were you?

SAL:

Sure, so I came to the U.S. in 1991 at the age of 13. And that's because my parents had moved to Harrisonburg. Obviously like many immigrants, in search of a better life and they had some friends and a few relatives that had moved to Harrisonburg so that's why we came here.

JACQUELINE:

And how did your relatives know to come to Harrisonburg?

SAL:

So my dad and other of my relatives were using to working in the farms on the west coast and they did seasonal jobs in the orchards, all across the west coast. But then, they would always have to go back to Mexico and come back and migrate regularly. So they wanted to find a more steady job and they had some acquaintances that moved to Harrisonburg to work in the poultry plants and you know, word of mouth travels fast and they found that there were jobs here that were year round and that's why he came here.

JACQUELINE:

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

SAL:

I have 3 sisters and 1 brother.

JACQUELINE:

And are you the oldest? Youngest?

SAL:

I am the oldest.

JACQUELINE:

So where did you grow up?

SAL:

So I grew up, for most of my childhood, from when I was born to about age 9, I was born in a very small town in a very rural area where my parents were born and that was in Mexico in a little town called El Dormido. And everyone knew each other, lots of family members, extended family and one very little school, very small school. And we didn't even have a grocery store. When I was growing up, we were just getting ready to get portable water. We had electricity at that point but it was a very, very small town in the outskirts of a mountain, very pretty.

JACQUELINE:

So in Mexico, what were your parent's jobs there?

SAL:

So my mom stayed at home and cared for us. And she also did some work like the most of the people that lived there, growing corn and beans and some other vegetables and fruits. People basically did that to have a sustainable way to feed themselves. My dad when he was there he didn't work, he just came to visit so in his off time when he wasn't working in the U.S., he would come to us in Mexico.

JACQUELINE:

Do you remember at all your journey to the U.S.? Can you describe that a little bit?

SAL:

Sure, my mom and dad left us behind, that is two of my sisters and myself.

JACQUELINE:

And what year was this?

SAL:

This was in 1991.

JACQUELINE:

Okay.

SAL:

They left two of my sisters and myself with an aunt while they came to the U.S. with my two younger siblings. You know, to maybe test it out a little bit, to kind of see if this was the place they wanted to come to. So six months later, they decided to bring us along. They had already stabilized a little bit here. They were living with another family and they were getting ready to buy a small trailer to live in so my dad had a job and my mom was staying at home, caring for my brother and my sister. So when it was time to come, he asked my granddad, my paternal granddad to bring not only my two sisters and myself, but some other relatives to the border to meet him there.

So I remember I was very excited, my sisters were really excited. The bus trip was probably fourteen hours, I would think, from our hometown to the border in Texas. And, you know, I remember getting to Texas, to, to the border on the Mexican side and just kind of waiting for my dad to meet us but obviously we needed to cross the border so we were asked to go to a hotel and wait for people who my dad had paid some money to get us across and I remember seeing this woman with a younger child, who was probably 5 or 6 and I remember them coming to the door and knocking on the door and identifying themselves and then saying "Are we ready? Are we ready to go?" And so we hopped on another bus that took us to the outside of the city, more of a rural area and then we just started to walk and we probably walked for about 30 minutes, maybe 20 minutes but I would say probably no more than 30 minutes.

JACQUELINE:

Was this in a desert or?

SAL:

It was right outside the city, actually. I remember there were some hills and you know, a country like setting. It was not intimidating in any way or form. You know, things have changed quite a bit. Back in the early 90's, I would assume it was a lot easier to cross without much issues. We crossed, I remember, and then we came into a store, on the U.S. side and we waited there a good while until a taxi came and the taxi put us, multiple taxis I would assume, but I remember getting a taxi and then they drove us to a hotel. And then, once in the hotel, my dad and my

uncle would come along for one of his sons, we all got in the car. It was actually 5 kids, 5 young kids and my dad and my uncle in one car.

JACQUELINE:

So your dad and your uncle came from Harrisonburg to Texas to meet you guys?

SAL:

Yeah, so we drove from Texas to Virginia. I think it took us a few days.

JACQUELINE:

And was that part of the trip hard? Or was it mostly –

SAL:

No it was not hard at all. I remember it was hot. We were kind of crowded in the back of the car but it was all fun because we were coming to America and so we were beginning to enjoy some of the foods and beginning to enjoy the landscape, the differences, the experience was all different so it was, for me, it was particularly exciting because I was going to be with my parents who I had not been with regularly, my dad would always come for a few months and leave, and he would do this every year, so it was fun.

JACQUELINE:

Was it easy for your dad to come back and forth to you guys?

SAL:

So my dad was a legal resident so my dad was able to adjust his legal status, because of the 1986 – 87 amnesty. He was a good worker and he had good references from his bosses, the farmers, and all over the – mostly in Washington State. I guess he was able to meet the requirements, which included some letters of recommendations from people that he had worked with so he was a legal resident and so he was able to travel back and forth, at least by 1981, he was a legal resident. He did not have to cross illegally; he was able to cross without a problem.

JACQUELINE:

What about your mom?

SAL:

So my mom – all we had was a social security card. All of us, my mom, my siblings and myself and my dad was able to do that because as soon as he became a resident, he started the process to kind of get us a status but obviously that didn't happen until many, many years after that the process started to move along. So when we first crossed the border, all we had was a social security card that was not authorized for employment. It was very clear on the card "not authorized for employment".

JACQUELINE:

So only your dad could work?

SAL:

Yes, only my dad could work – legally. So at that point, I remember my parents saying “well you know, once we get into the U.S., even if we don’t have documents and even if we get pulled over because I am a resident, they won’t be able to take you away”. I don’t know if they said that just to comfort us, but I remember that was something I heard multiple times.

JACQUELINE:

What would you say was the hardest challenge coming across?

SAL:

I mean, I think for sure, now that I reflect as an adult, maybe at that time, I did not recognize it, I was leaving a number of friends, leaving a home, actually a home that my parents had bought in a bigger city that we had lived in for a few years, leaving everything there, you know, school, relatives, grandparents, that was the hardest thing I believe, to recognize I don’t know the next time I am going to come back and see them but I think at that point, it seemed that I was more excited to be with my family than really acknowledging what I was leaving behind.

JACQUELINE:

So once you guys arrived in Virginia, what was the process from there?

SAL:

As far as?

JACQUELINE:

As far as adjusting to living situations, the job situation?

SAL:

Yeah so, when we got here, my mom and dad lived with the same uncle who had 3 children, so their family was 5 members and our family was 7 members, which made 12 in a two-bedroom trailer. And so, in the beginning, it was difficult because we didn’t have the space, which we were used to having, a small house, but nevertheless, we had a house. So that was an adjustment, which only lasted about 6 months because my dad, both mom and dad are really hard workers. They soon recognized that we needed to get our own place. In maybe 6 months to a year, we had our trailer, which we were able to live in for a number of years, but just adjusting to that was difficult. Adjusting to the fact that we had to go to school. We didn’t speak the language. My dad spoke English but he didn’t feel as comfortable with it to go to the schools as well. The food was different, I remember going to school and not liking the food.

JACQUELINE:

How did your dad learn English?

SAL:

Just at work. He is just one of those quick learners who was determined to learn it. And he did very well.

JACQUELINE:

Where did you go to school?

SAL:

So I went actually here, in this area, I went to Broadway High School, which is 15 to 20 minutes from here. I went there and graduated in 1996. And my first year, here in the U.S. was in 8th grade. One of the county schools, John C Meyers Middle School which is just a minute away from the old high school that old high school that I graduated from is no longer at high school, it is now a middle school. So that's where I went. We lived in a trailer park right outside of the city limits so at that point in 1991, actually this did not even exist, this right here where we are sitting, was um, for lack of a better word, a dump basically. So you know, the city was smaller obviously, but we didn't live in the county so we couldn't go to the city schools. Even if that would have been the case, there weren't many Latinos in this community at that point but the school was probably 20 minutes away from our house.

JACQUELINE:

And how was the adjustment to school? Did you feel excluded at all because you were different from other kids or?

SAL:

So the first year, one of the people who came along with us when we first moved was my uncle who is only a year older than I am so we grew up like brothers. He's my dad's youngest brother so we grew up and did everything together. So when he went to school with me, we went to school together in 8th grade, he should have been a freshman in high school at that point, but they kind of kept him back to be together. When he was there, when there were two other or three other kids who were there that we knew and lived in the same trailer park, you know we kind of hung together, we did things together, we felt more protected. Even when the kids didn't like us, some of the kids didn't like us. Some of the kids would try to find ways to intimidate us. I felt like we had each other to support each other, right? But he only went to the 8th grade and then he quit. He wanted to work. So I stayed in school. High school was really, really, really difficult. I was small in stature. I didn't speak the language. Obviously, I was brown and a lot of the kids in that school did not have as much experience with other kids that were different from them, so they didn't know any better and so they treated me – not all, but many – in a way that, you know, no one would want their kids to be treated.

JACQUELINE:

So the majority of students at that time were Caucasian would you say?

SAL:

So the school at that point, my assumption is that it was 98 percent Caucasian, maybe, well in 98, there was one African American student and there were just a handful of Latinos, probably like 3 or 4.

JACQUELINE:

Where did your uncle work after he quit school?

SAL:

So he went to work at the orchard. There was an orchard just north of here, probably 30 minutes away. And he worked there, that was his first job. And then, he jumped around until he found something he liked better. He was fifteen at that point. He was ready to take a job, he thought anyway. And then, he did live in our house because my dad was basically, he came here with us, and then eventually he moved to, moved in with another aunt, and lived with them while he was working.

JACQUELINE:

What made you stay in school in comparison to working like your uncle?

SAL:

So I, trust me, there were multiple times I didn't want to go back to school. It was not fun to be in school and I wasn't, I didn't feel like I was making connections with people so I didn't want to go back. So I think maybe when I was 16, in 10th grade I believe, I told my mom and dad, "I don't want to go back to school, I wanna get a job." I said, "listen, look, my brother, I called my uncle, 'brother', he's working, he already has a car, he's got money, he's got a good life. And I don't wanna go back. And then would say well you gotta go back, so they kept telling me I needed to be in school. But one day, my dad said when school lets out, we will get you a job and you know, we will see what you think about it afterwards. So they got me a job in the summer, I guess, of my sophomore year and I went to work at a poultry plant where my mom was working. And my dad, was my dad there, I don't think my dad was there but my mom was there. My mom was there, I do remember that. Oh yes, my dad was there because he actually chose to put me, to have me do some jobs that were not really pleasant. If you are not familiar with poultry work, yeah, it's not pleasant at all, at least many of the jobs. So anyway, I remember hanging chicken, raw chicken, there was poop all over the place. It was filthy, it was stinky, it was not good. And so, as the summer, getting ready to end, my dad said "so what do you think? Do you want to keep the job or do you want to go back to school?" And I said "I think I want to go back to school." I rather get pushed around and bullied than to get poop all over my face when I'm working so that was a good experience I think.

JACQUELINE:

It made you learn. (laughs)

SAL:

Yeah, it was a good learning experience; I think he did it on purpose. That was really the drive behind it, I just didn't see myself doing this for the rest of my life. And sure enough, my dad has had the opportunity to move on and to get promoted a couple of times but I didn't see myself in that type of environment for the rest of my life so...

JACQUELINE:

By that time, where was your father working?

SAL:

So he was in poultry, he was still in poultry, that's all he has even done since he came to Harrisonburg. So obviously he started at the line like everybody else and over the years he moved companies and currently he is in, Pilgrims' pride which is in Broadway, right next to the school where I went to school and he works in the HR department. So you know, he doesn't work in the line anymore but he has been able to kind of gain some status there. So he is fine now but my mom is still working on the line. She's been there, she has doing it for a good while, over 20 years, very hard work.

JACQUELINE:

Yeah. Where are your siblings? Have they stayed in Harrisonburg? Have they moved elsewhere?

SAL:

Mhmm. Some of them are, well, most of them are. So Silvia is the second in the family. She is right behind me. And Silvia works at RMH, the hospital here, at Sentara. She is, she was able to also get an education, as a matter of fact, she is working on her PhD, she has class, what's today, she has them on Mondays, this is her second semester at JMU. And it's a lot of work she tells me but you know, it's a goal that she has. So she went to JMU for undergraduate, went to Chicago, Western Chicago maybe for Master's and now working on her PhD. She is the coordinator of diversity at the hospital. The next sister, Ophelia, who is the middle one. She works at RMH as well. She is an interpreter. She tried to go to college, she didn't like school when we were growing up, she didn't like school, she was always complaining and didn't, very bright and very smart, and didn't want to do her homework and didn't want to go to school, anyway, she ended up graduating from high school but didn't go to college. She attempted to go to college in her adult years, maybe 6 or 7 years ago, but with two kids, it was just difficult so she kind of put a pause to that and is currently not in school. She does not have a college degree. The fourth kid, which is Erika. She has a teaching degree from EMU, Eastern Mennonite University. She is currently in Mexico. Her husband was deported. And so – He was deported for 10 years so he ended up having to go back to his home, which is a different state than our home state in Mexico, so she left a teaching job here in the city schools to move back with him and he has been gone for 8 years, maybe close to 9. And she has been gone for probably 4, she has tried to stay here and work, it was just too difficult to be away, for the kids growing up without a dad so she is currently there. She is doing well. She is keeping up her teaching degree, she has an English school, a little English school that she started over there,

so she is still teaching. And my youngest brother he is currently in school at Blue Ridge Community College.

JACQUELINE:

Have you – you mentioned that her husband got deported, have you experienced any problems with “la migra” that we say here, throughout this process?

SAL:

So, no. We haven’t – fortunately we haven’t. When we got here, my dad, like I said, my dad had already submitted the documents to get our papers, to get our legal status adjusted. It was really a slow process and cost a lot of money. So you know, my dad eventually became a citizen and that helped the process get a little more expedited. So I believe we adjusted our status in maybe, 1998, around that time. And so by that point, we all became legal residents. And within five years, I believe, I became a citizen. So I have been a citizen for a good while and so at this point, I believe I don’t have to worry about anything, (laughs) but I don’t know. (laughs)

JACQUELINE:

So where do you live now?

SAL:

I live in Harrisonburg.

JACQUELINE:

And do you live in the same area you lived in before? Do you see your old house that you used to live in?

SAL:

So, no. We live on the opposite end. My kids do know where I used to live because we go by there sometimes. I still have family that live in that trailer park. When I graduated from JMU, back in 2004, I had just recently married my wife that spring break before graduation.

JACQUELINE:

Aww. (laughs).

SAL:

It was really nice, but at the same time, well, what are we doing? (laughs) Why couldn’t we just wait until we graduated? (laughs) So anyways, I graduated from JMU, I took a job and I told my wife, I don’t know what your thoughts are but I would like for us to get a house. And we are going to get it soon. Let’s give us a year. So we, in a year, we bought a home, and we have been living in that home since.

JACQUELINE:

Wow!

SAL:

We made it a goal and we did it.

JACQUELINE:

That's great. So can you tell me more about, going back to how you said you were working in poultry for a short period of time, what was your experience with that? Can you give some more details? The environment?

SAL:

Sure, I worked in poultry for two years, two summers, two different companies. And uh, the first experience obviously was at the plant where my mom and dad worked and so a lot of the people that I knew that were there, were people we knew, a lot of people from the community and it was a great part of minorities, people we knew so the work itself was very hard, very physical, very demanding. You know, obviously the lines were going really fast and had to be done at a high rate. People were obviously nice to me because they knew I was a high school kid and I was trying to make some money during the summer time. And they knew my family so people were very nice to me. But the work, nevertheless, was really hard. So the conditions were not the best for employees. And so, my second experience was with another company and because I did speak more of the language at that point, I was able to have a job within the plant that was much more flexible, right. I was floating around different places, I was helping out in different ways. And so the job itself is not as difficult and I think I was able to utilize my language skills because a lot of the people that worked there did not speak English. And so, I was able to help out so that kind of gave me a different perspective. That I as a new, temporary employee was coming in and had some privileges that others didn't have who had been there for some years. And so that company had the same expectations, the production had to be high, so the working conditions were not as great because they demanded the best of people every day and it's a lot of physical labor.

JACQUELINE:

Were you the youngest that was there? Was high school age the youngest age of people there?

SAL:

I don't remember any other young Latinos that were there at that point. In neither of those places. Oh yes, the first one, there was a good friend of mine that was also in school. His parents also worked at the plant so when he heard I was going to get a job there, he said "Oh I'm going to get it too!" so we worked that summer together but then he ended up moving to North Carolina, I believe.

JACQUELINE:

Was there a mixture of documented and undocumented people that were working there?

SAL:

Yes, for sure. And that is still the case nowadays.

JACQUELINE:

And would you see experiences of like raids there?

SAL:

So, yeah I never saw it myself but I do know there were several in some of the plants and I know that because I had relatives there working. But um, the last one, I don't even know when it was. It was years ago. So yeah, they had a few raids at a couple of the plants.

JACQUELINE:

Were most of the Latinos from Mexico or were there other countries?

SAL:

So the demographics of the Latino community over the years have changed. It used to be that the majority of the Latinos in Harrisonburg, at least in the mid 90's were from Mexico. They were some from El Salvador but mostly Mexican based. Over the years, things have changed. Less Mexicans are coming to the U.S. You know, we have had a significant influx of Central American families that have come. With my job with the city schools, I am able to pull demographics and I know that Mexican is not the largest group anymore. It is typically kids from Honduras and El Salvador. Those are very rapidly growing populations.

JACQUELINE:

What is your job? And the process of getting to that current job?

SAL:

So I started as an ESL teacher. I worked at multiple schools in the city and then I became an assistant principal after I got my masters.

JACQUELINE:

Which schools were they?

SAL:

I was an assistant principal at Stone Spring Elementary, which is on Port Republic Road and then I was an assistant principal at Spotswood Elementary School, which is down off of Reservoir. And then during that time, I obviously was doing some other things, involved in different things throughout the community. I saw a great need for an outreach person from the division level so I spoke to the superintendent and he was really fond about the idea. And so, for the last year and a half, almost 2 years, I have been the coordinator for family and community engagement for the division. So I get to work with all the schools in our division and then I get to collaborate with many businesses, employers, and organizations.

JACQUELINE:

So what does a typical day look like for you? As an assistant principal at Spotswood Elementary School?

SAL:

When I was at Spotswood Elementary School, my last year was two years ago, a typical day was basically getting to the school early, being ready for the students as soon as they got off the bus, greeting them with a big smile and giving them a high-five, and saying welcome, good to see you. And once the kids were in the building, just kind of patrolling the hallways, and more than patrolling, interacting with teachers and students. And then, after that, there were meetings, instructional meetings that would take place but surely you would often see me with the kids. Whether it was having lunch with them or going outside at recess with them or waving them goodbye as they were on the bus to go back home.

JACQUELINE:

What made you want to pursue a career in education?

SAL:

So out of JMU, I majored in kinesiology, a sports medicine major and became an athletic trainer. I worked in Augusta County as a athletic trainer and not only did I do that, I was also required to teach an elective. I taught sports medicine. Uh, and I really enjoyed teaching. I never thought I would like teaching. So I did that for two years but I wanted to make a bigger impact in Harrisonburg, not in another county. The demographics were growing in our area and I felt that my skillset was really able to fit here. And obviously, I lived in the city. I never left the city. So I decided to pursue a position within the city. My first job was actually not as a teacher. My first job was as a homeschool liaison. The homeschool liaisons are in every school. They are bilingual personnel that work full time. Their main job is to be the link between the Latino families and the school. And they help with interpretations, with translations, and the advocacy for the families. So I did that for about a year and in the meantime, I went back to school to get my teaching degree because I saw myself becoming a principal at some point but in order to be a principal, obviously, I needed the classroom experience, which by that point, I didn't have a license. Went back to school, got a license, first year I was a homeschool liaison, and the second year, I became an ESL teacher and I taught for about 5 years before I became an assistant principal.

JACQUELINE:

So how is it being an advocate and liaison between the Latino families and the school? Was there any specific experience that really stood out to you?

SAL:

Well, it was very helpful that I knew the community. Many of the people that would come to the school, I knew or either formally, or informally. I had met them through different things I was involved in, in the community. Whether it was through a soccer league or an after school

program or church or whatever it was. I had a connection, not anymore because we have grown so much, but people were able to recognize who I was so when it came time to really engage in really difficult conversations or really meaningful conversations, we had that relationship, which made it much easier.

JACQUELINE:

Already had that trust.

SAL:

Yes, the trust was already there so people knew that it was safe for them to come and speak and share anything that was going on. I mean, I still get phone calls from families that I used to work with. As a matter of fact, this morning, I got a call from one of the families I used to work with at Spotswood. They are having trouble with their kids at another school so they wanted me to see what I can do to help. In my position now, I oversee those homeschool liaisons now so I am in constant communication with them.

JACQUELINE:

And more about the ESL program, I have heard a little bit about it, that it has expanded a lot in recent years. Can you share some details about that?

SAL:

Right. So the last numbers I was looking at recently, we have about 6,300 students in the city schools and about 2,000 or so are language learners so it is a pretty large percentage of students who need services, which means we have to have specialized teachers, right? Like ESL teachers. We do have a lot of kids that exit out of the program who are no longer, ESL – not considered ELL. For example, my son Danny is in the sixth grade. He is a language learner because his first language is Spanish. And he was receiving services up until maybe second grade or third grade. Now, he is not considered an ELL student.

JACQUELINE:

Services for?

SAL:

For learning the language. Language support. So we have ESL teachers in every school to support the needs of the students. We have an ESL specialist that works at all the schools to facilitate professional development and support for the students and within that, we have a newcomer program, which is really a program that helps kids accelerate their language acquisition and we have multiple programs around the city from the elementary to the high school level and those programs have done really well for our kids. These programs have done really well for our kids. Our kids in a short period of time are ready to go into a mainstream classroom and do really well with support. Those programs are really specific to those who have just moved to our country, who speak no English or very little.

JACQUELINE:

And do you guys talk to the parents at all as part of this job?

SAL:

For me, I spend most of my time interacting with parents. And what I do is basically, my role is to be able to be strategic about the way we engage our families. We try to find what is working better, how do we empower our parents and obviously knowledge is power so we try to bring some knowledge. We also seek feedback as to what it is you are needing from us. This week, I was in Cargill, which is a poultry plant out in Dayton and I bring workshops to the plants during work – well, actually it is right after work hours but the plant is paying the employees to attend these workshops. The same day we were at Keester and we had a parent group in which we were able to have a listening to kind of know what are parents missing, what is the school lacking, efforts so that the school can do better and increase outreach, so parents feel welcomed and feel like their voice is important and it matters. So I am looking at different ways of really engaging our families, whether it is at the school or the community, at work, after Mass at church, or whatever it takes.

JACQUELINE:

Continuing on the community since you are really close with them, when did you see that shift from knowing everyone to Harrisonburg expanding greatly?

SAL:

Oh my. I don't know if I can pinpoint when it was.

JACQUELINE:

Just like an estimate.

SAL:

I think it was like a gradual type of a thing, you know what I mean? And if you look at the statistics of the growth of the city, you can see it's not like boom and then we are kinda there, it's an increase over the years, just happening. Yeah I don't know when it was, I just know I go out and about and I see people I have never seen in my life. And you know, we get people who are moving to Harrisonburg from all over the state and all parts of the country. Last week, a person from Alexandria wanted to come visit a school because they are moving here. So why are they moving here? And it's because we have a great city. We have a lot of great things to offer, and people just keep moving. And JMU brings in a lot of people, a lot of professors and obviously their kids, it's a growing city for sure.

JACQUELINE:

Is there anything economically that you have reached from working in poultry to now being principal of a school? Do you see yourself in this change in economic status and has that impacted your outlook – we had to fight for what we needed and what we wanted and to now looking back, having a stable life?

SAL:

Obviously, you know it makes a big difference. Not only the fact that now we have the opportunity to raise our kids. My wife and I have raised our kids in a different way than how we were raised. We have honestly, a very stable income that allows us to have a home, to allow us opportunity to travel and take vacation, to have insurance, to go out and eat. Just to do the things we wouldn't have been able to do if we had not been able to achieve at least the goals that we set for ourselves. I think it's definitely changing in the way that my kids will have access to other opportunities. Danny, for example, does travel soccer. We travel with him all the time. I mean, we go away for the weekend and we don't have to worry about having the money to go, or the time, or the flexibility with work. And obviously, that is an opportunity that will enrich his life. An opportunity that he will take on and also with college, you know, he is one that – he will go to college. That is an expectation that Danny will go to college because of my experience and I feel like it is no longer "if" you would go to college one day or what if you would go? It's like "when" you go, here's what you gotta do to get there and so I think those expectations are different now. Things have definitely changed in many different ways for us.

JACQUELINE:

And you spoke about your wife. What does she do for a living?

SAL:

So she works for a small company. She is a production manager for a small company. You know, herself, she has been able to overcome a lot of different things. She came to this country at maybe 21 and she wasn't able to go to college. She went to school to learn English obviously but...

JACQUELINE:

And where is from?

SAL:

She's from Mexico. We're from the same town actually. We grew up in the same town.

JACQUELINE:

Oh wow!

SAL:

And so, you know, she has been able to overcome a lot of different things and she still continues to struggle with the language but she has a great work ethic and works well with people and has high expectations for herself so she has been able to get some promotions to where she is now the plant manager for production.

JACQUELINE:

And can you tell about how your kids have been in Harrisonburg in the school system? From their eyes, what is their perspective from kids that look like them and kids from Honduras and El Salvador like you were saying?

SAL:

So you know, obviously, when I was in the building as an assistant principal, they would always come with me to the events. Now that I am at the central office and I do outreach for all the schools, they still come along. So they still get to see all the schools, they get the chance to go with me on home visits, go to neighborhoods, they get a chance to see the reality of many of the students, not only at school but at home. So they have a good understanding of where everybody kind of is. I think they see the school as a great place to be. They know that I work for the schools. They know that I love our schools and that I am a great advocate. The beauty about children is that they don't see differences, at least in my experience. They see kids for who they are, how they behave and how they treat others. They see past the color of your skin. And that's really a good experience to have and they teach us so much about that. And you know as they grow and they begin to look at themselves and identify who they are as people, that's where we as parents have to be there to really ensure that they understand their family background, they have a good understanding of what it means to be a Mexican-American so there is no conflict standing for one flag or the other flag and respecting the fact that this country so many opportunities and we are not only thankful, but we are blessed. And so, it comes with teaching, and your own teaching as a parent.

JACQUELINE:

So kinda going back to your parents for a second, you said they still live in Harrisonburg?

SAL:

Yes.

JACQUELINE:

Seeing that now, your whole family has been living in Harrisonburg, how has that impacted your life? Having your parents still here and still seeing them? Have they economically grown from where it was before?

SAL:

I think culturally at least the way I was raised, family is there and will always be there for you. Not only when you need them, but also when you don't need them. They are always going to be there for you. So you know, we go to my parents house all the time. We actually make sure we go once every other week and have a meal together. After we got our small trailer, which was really small, we were growing up and they noticed we needed a bigger place. So they bought a double wide which was really like a house and I told my dad, I was like, and my mom as well, you guys need to be thinking about a house. They said, well, we are happy here. Once you get married, and your sister, we will get a house. So my first year, like I shared before, when I completed a year of work, I went ahead and started looking for a house. So, a little story, I said

to my dad one day, Dad – I am looking for house, I really want to get a house. Can you help me? Can you come along? I want to get some feedback. I don't want to make a mistake here. And you know, I was just a year out of college. So we went and saw a house, he looked and he just kept looking, I said, "I like the house but it's probably not for me." He said, "how much is this house?" And so I shared with him the price of the house, and he said "hmm, that's a very nice house. I think your mom will like it." Well, they ended up buying the house.

JACQUELINE:
(laughs)

SAL:
They still in the same house. Fourteen years later, they still live in the house. It was because he came along and he actually took the off the blinders on his eyes and said "we can actually afford this house". And how awesome would it be to live in a house. So they bought that house and they keep it really nice. They live for us and they live for their house.

JACQUELINE:
That must have been a really special moment for them.

SAL:
Yes, so my mom I remember she came to the house and she looked at it and she was like "we can't live in a house like this". And I said "why because it's big and nice?" And, they bought it. They were able to kind of see the potential even though their jobs were not high paying jobs. They were able to see that having a house is a life-time investment, not only for retirement. That's what we come to every single day.

JACQUELINE:
You said earlier being Mexican-American and what that means to your kids. What does that mean to you?

SAL:
Right. So to me, obviously I came at 13, so it is a little different. I feel like I have a – my roots are really – I had really deep roots of being a Mexican. Because I grew up there, and at the age of 13, I had a pretty good understanding, it felt, of what it meant to be a Mexican. Here in the U.S., I have been here for 26 years, this is my home. This is my home, this is not any different than being back home in Mexico. I have values. I have memories. I have stories. I have traditions that are unique to Mexico that are very important to me still. We celebrate them as much as when can and when we go back to visit, they are there and they are a part of who I am. But I have been able to grow into this country and understand, that you know, all that I have has been in great part, yes the hard work and the perseverance and everything else, but just the opportunities that this country provided me. And I just love this country so much, it's like, I keep telling my son, you know, I am a true Mexican. And maybe those in Mexico don't believe that I am, (laughs), but I can tell you with certainty that we, that I, owe this country so much that, you

know, we have to be thankful and respectful and appreciative and if I ever have to fight for someone, I would fight for this country. I have a big part of me is this brown skin obviously but I feel as American as anybody else. I feel like the things I do in the community to contribute to a better society, to our children, and adults as well are worthy of any American and if more people were doing things like that, we would have a better country. I don't know if that is a great answer.

JACQUELINE:

No, this is great information. Thank you. You said you visit sometimes, do you visit with your kids at all?

SAL:

Yeah, we go back every year since they were – well, Danny is 11 and he was probably 3 the first time he went. So we've gone for a good 7-8 years together. And Jackie was just a baby the first time she went and any time we go back, they get a chance to visit the town where both my wife and I grew up. They get a chance to see some of the traditions, some of the culture, some of the food that we often times don't have here. So they have enriched their lives obviously as well by learning what Mexico is about, and the people, and everything else. So they enjoy – they love going.

JACQUELINE:

So you said there wasn't even a grocery store there, has your town changed in Mexico since then? You going back?

SAL:

It's changed some. I mean, there is a small, little grocery store. The nearest town is probably ten minutes. It is a small town with, you know, they have some grocery stores, everything you need. But that little town remains similar that it used to be. We like the tranquility of it, we like the fact that we know everyone there and how safe it is. And the fact that you feel right at home, because a lot of it is family. When I go back, people remember me, the older people know who I am and those who don't know who I am, I tell them who my granddad is and they know who I am, because my granddad was someone – almost like a founder of a lot of things in that town so yeah, it feels like home when we go back.

JACQUELINE:

When your granddad came and brought you guys to the border, did he go back?

SAL:

Yeah, he went back.

JACQUELINE:

Did he ever think about coming?

SAL:

He actually, my dad and another uncle, ending up adjusting my granddad and my grandma's status so they ended up coming to the US and they lived in Virginia for a long time. Actually when my granddad got sick, he lived at our house with my wife and I for a good six months. I was very close to my granddad. My grandma is still here in Harrisonburg, as a matter of fact, I visited her yesterday. She is a little sick so I went to visit. She is 86 years old. Hanging in there, doing well.

JACQUELINE:

So if you could see the future of your kids, do you see them going to JMU and staying in Harrisonburg at all? Is that kind of your hope or?

SAL:

It's one of those things, I feel that it would be great to have them around because I do have a very close relationship with both of my kids. But at the end of the day, it is going to be a matter of what is best for them at that point. Danny plays soccer and he is pretty good at it so my hope is that he continues to use as a way to express himself and look at it as a potential way to get a scholarship to get into college. Anyways, I think that soccer is going to be his motivation to get through school. He likes school but he is not a big, big fan like my daughter. My daughter could be in school every day until 8 o'clock.

JACQUELINE:

What is she interested in?

SAL:

(laughs) She has a lot of interests. She is very social and she likes to –she likes a lot of different things. But right now she wants to be a baker and I said "I will support you in anything you want". I'm thinking this is just a phase. Maybe she will – I keep telling my kids that you know, what I need from you guys, I want you to be good people, if you are good people, and you get along with others, you make a difference in the world, you be whatever you want. That is my goal to have good kids that people can look up to you and say you know what, you are a good person. That is really my goal and in the process, get an education and get a good job where they will be able to have good opportunities for their kids, that's the goal.

JACQUELINE:

Looking into the future, what are your plans?

SAL:

So, when is this gonna be archived – when is this gonna be – well by then you will probably know – I will be running for city council, which I hope nobody can hear that because it is still not official. So I ran for city council back in 2010 for the city of Harrisonburg and I was 31 years old and I was a teacher at that point and I was a director of an after-school program. And I was running against some older politicians, I am not a politician, but yet, I came very close to being

elected, which was really, really encouraging. Because you know, as a minority in politics, I was prepared for the worst. But over the last year and a half, I have been thinking more about it and it's time to do it again so I will be announcing in the next few weeks so we will see how it goes.

JACQUELINE:

What are some of the goals for the city on your platform?

SAL:

So I am working on that. (laughs) I don't know if I am ready to speak about that. (laughs) I think one of the plans that I have – I have a lot of connections in the community, so I want to organize a way for us to plan some listening sessions, I can come up with a good platform and be like this is what I want to work on but I really wanna get feedback from our community. What is needed? What do we need to improve? What do we do to make our city better? You know, that is really my plan. I am not sure what I am going to be working on, obviously, education is going to be a key one. We'll see.

JACQUELINE:

That is great information. Thank you. Also, I wanted to ask about – this is a more serious question if that's okay.

SAL:

Sure.

JACQUELINE:

In our political climate right now with immigration being such a huge issue – it has always been a huge issue, but especially now with the past election and everything going on, what are your views about how the country is so divided right now?

SAL:

Well, I mean, to be honest with you, very worrisome. I don't know how anybody would be happy about what's happening right now as far as the climate that you encounter. You know, in our society, I had never felt discriminated against before, or felt like people looked down on me at any give time here, but I remember right after the election, I went to a travel soccer game with my son south of here, and we went into a restaurant with my family, my two kids and my wife, and we were speaking Spanish and we got some really, really intimidating looks from people that were there. It was not in Harrisonburg, it was actually in Roanoke. And I knew it had a lot to do with what was happening and so, you know, nowadays, I keep up with a lot that is happening around the city and you know, uh, the state, and around the country. And it is really, really scary what is going on right now. Our society is very divided, like you said. I think that we have to do something about it. We cannot just continue to live in a society that is this divided. It's not a good thing for sure, not a good thing.

JACQUELINE:

Thank you so much, Sal. I really appreciate you talking to me today.

SAL:

Yeah, no problem.