

Interviewee: Black Navarro, Yolanda

Interview Date: November 1, 2010

MS: For the record could you state your full name?

YBN: Yes, Yolanda Black Navarro.

MS: Were you born in Houston?

YBN: Yes I was.

MS: What part of town did you live?

YBN: ... I lived in East End part of town on Navigation Boulevard.

MS: Could you describe ... what was that like? What are your earliest memories of the East End?

YBN: Well ... we called it, and it is the East End, but specifically the neighborhood is Second Ward ... and so I went to school there at the... Our Lady of Guadalupe school. My memories are just about ... we lived in a two-story house I had my uncles and I was the oldest of six children so ... I guess my memories really are just of the neighborhood and about playing with my neighbors and going to school... and I do remember that my mom of course would always cook. So we always had food at the table.

MS: Did you help with the cooking?

YBN: Well you know I look back and I think I helped just a little bit. But I think that because you know because of kids and school and things like that I just ... She would just get the meal ready I never really honestly, I guess I never thought about helping her and I don't recall helping her too much.

MS: Is there a favorite meal that she cooked?

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YBN: Gosh well we always liked in the mornings we had what we call *atole* in Spanish which is oatmeal and that was a favorite for me. She always made a good breakfast and of course we always had tortillas. So ...pretty much everything she cooked I really enjoyed. I enjoyed the potatoes she made. (laughter)

MS: Where was your mother from? Where did she learn to cook?

YBN: My mother was ... her parents ... were born, or her mother I should say was born in Hondo, Texas and the family is the Arcos family. So then my mother lived in San Antonio, was born in San Antonio, and then later on probably at the age of maybe 17 or so moved to Houston. They moved to Houston. So my mother, I think, learned her cooking of course from her mother and she ... also worked in different little restaurants and *panaderías* and I think that's how she was able to expand more in her cooking.

MS: Ok, so how did Villa Arcos get started? Whose idea was it?

YBN: Actually it was my mother's idea. Because she had, like I mentioned, she had had a previous restaurant, as a matter of fact, way back like on South Main. I remember I had my First Communion reception there. (laughter) So my mother's background was always in cooking, restaurants. So I think having worked in so many different places for other people ...I believe we were having a conversation and she had mentioned because that there was a building there that prior to Villa Arcos was a bar, and mentioned that she would really like to open up a little restaurant we now call *taquerías* and they're all over the place now. So we talked about it and we thought... I said of course it's a great idea, because it was going to be right next door basically. So that was her idea. I was already working and stuff, and so I guess my side of it was to help her financially to get people to support her.

MS: You received your degree from U of H. Did you already know that the restaurant was going to start?

YBN: No, I went to night school mainly most of the time I went to the University of Houston. I graduated in '73 and the restaurant was established in '77 so at that time, no, I didn't have any idea that we were going to open up Villa Arcos. It was something different.

MS: And so you said the location was perfect basically? It was in the neighborhood?

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YBN: Yes, it was in the neighborhood.

MS: What did the rest of your family think about this? Your friends... were you supported?

YBN: We were supported, and you know, we thought it was ...of course everybody was exited about it when she started. She only started herself, as a cook, and then a lady, that we call Doña Maria, and she was the lady that made the tortillas. One of the things about Villa Arcos, in the 33 years that it's been around, we've always had fresh handmade tortillas. So everybody, you know of course I was the oldest of six, so my brothers and sisters, of course were younger, and my mother of course had brothers and a sister and everybody was very supportive.

MS: Ok, and ... financially? You mentioned yourself...

YBN: ... Financially, of course you know, at that time because we had the building it wasn't as expensive as if we had tried to find a place so ... we started with some people being investors and helping us out and at that time I think we asked for a thousand dollars which wasn't very much, of course we're talking about 33 years ago. So ... I helped my... one of my sisters helped, friends helped, some family helped and so with that money she was able to buy the equipment that she needed and get started. It went from there, and she opened in September of '77.

MS: So what was your initial role?

YBN: Initially, when she started her business I was already working for [Southwestern Bell](#). I had a career there from 1974 until 1997. So I worked for 23 and a half years for Southwestern Bell. So my role really wasn't a full-time role. I would help her on weekends, I would help her with writing the checks, making deposits and helping on the financial side. So initially my role, already two of my sisters were helping her in the business, so mine was sort of you know I guess more of an administrative role.

MS: What was Villa Arcos like in those first few years, did you struggle?

YBN: Yes I would think... I would probably say it was a struggle even though I mean compared to these days. ... It took a while to establish our business, of course, it was a very small place.

When it first opened you had to order out of one of the windows that there are now fans on the

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windows. So you ordered from the outside and then you got your food also from the window. So there was no entry into the building itself, but by word of mouth she opened. At that time she opened at 5 am in the morning, so by word of mouth, you know, you had truck drivers come by, people that already knew her, people that we already knew. So I would say that because it was a limited amount of payroll, and you know expenses were as low as could be, that it wasn't as bad as maybe conditions would be if we were to open up a place today. So it wasn't easy. It was hard mainly more on my mother because she would have to get up at four to open up at five, and she opened till three, so she usually stayed there till four. So I think the struggles were more an internal struggle about, you know, just getting things and being... she was a single parent you know for most of our years, so a lot of the things she did she had to do them on her own. Like going to the market, one of her brothers would help her with that, she had to get stuff on her own. So yes it was a struggle.

MS: Was she close to any other restaurant owners at that time?

YBN: Well not per say. She did know, of course, Ninfa Laurenzo because at that time Ninfa had the tortilla factory and ...so we knew each other from church and so forth. I knew her kids as well and perhaps, and I can't speak for her, but she might have known restaurant people in other parts of the city that she just happened to know. So she did know some. Of course, later down the road. Irma opened up Irma's Restaurant, I don't know, about 10 years later. So we knew her from school as well, and so she did know some.

MS: Would you say this is a good environment for the business? With Mama Ninfa starting and I know that in the area there are a lot of Mexican restaurants...

YBN: Well, at that time there I will tell you weren't as many as there are. But I do know that when my mother first opened hers the only restaurants that were there were what was called the Green Leaf Café. That was very popular, it is right across from where L & K Flower Shop is, and there's an existing flower shop there now. So that was the one on Navigation, and then on Canal there was one and of course now the name escapes me ... that was opened like late at night and ... so there wasn't as many restaurants as there were. But I think that for women especially, and single parents like my mother, it was more of the need to survive and make a living for her children. So she wanted to do what she knew best. So always... and being involved with people that had restaurants she knew what it took, and she knew she could do it. So I think the environment was a good environment in the sense that it was ... an environment of will and persistence and not having as much competition. Taquerias, then, were very few and just blossomed years and years later.

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MS: So when did you officially take over the restaurant?

YBN: I suppose it was officially that I took over when my mother passed away. She passed away in 1990 ...prior to that as I mentioned I would help her out on weekends and stop by and things like that, but officially of course is when she passed away. So we had to...we continued the restaurant and ... I ... at that time one of my sisters was helping and I left Southwestern Bell in 1997. So she passed away in '90. Sometimes I get my years wrong, yeah because I was 23 and half years with Southwestern Bell so ... in any event, my sister ran it for a while after she passed away, but I was in charge, and then I went full-time in 1999. So full-time in the sense that I'm there everyday, all the time, and then my son started helping out in 1998 and he was with us for like 10 years and then he proceeded ...he got his law degree and over a year ago he set up his own law practice. But he was there for a good, solid ten years.

MS: Did you do any of the cooking?

YBN: Well ... it's, I wouldn't say hilarious, but it's odd that we're four sisters and two brothers. So the oldest two sisters have restaurants. One of my sisters and her husband have a taquería but it's way on the north side of town. So we are, of the four, we are the ones that cook the least. The other two are just phenomenal, and they're the younger ones. I really think that because, you know, I was really focused on school and all those other kinds of things and that because they were younger and she had more time to spend with them that they really learned a lot of the cooking from my mother. Unfortunately I have to say that I'm not a good cook (laughter). I will cook when I have to but it's always been so easy because from my mother being a cook and then of course I did cook somewhat at home ... but then she, after she left of course, we had people who were trained to cook so I never had to be in the situation of having to cook so therefore I don't cook (laughter). So that is the answer to that question in all honesty (laughter).

MS: When you officially took it over did you discover that it was easier or harder as a manager of the entire restaurant?

YBN: Well, when I took it over I realized how much more time consuming, how much everything takes time to do. That it's not just about the process of making the food, but its the process of preparing and its the process of having everything available. It's the process of all your equipment working. It's being sure that you give good customer service so it was certainly more than I would expect in the sense that unless you're there all the time and know every detail of it you don't realize how much you have to do. (laughter).

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MS: So I understand you formed the Navigation Area Business Association. What year did that start and why was it needed at that time?

YBN: We started that ... in let me try to recall... because in the 1980's ...

MS: '86?

YBN: Yeah, because we ... at that time they opened El Mercado del Sol which is now the Alexan Lofts. I had a business there and several other people had businesses, and of course it wasn't what we expected. It never became the wonderful business, money-maker that people expected, but ... in any event we decided to have a Hispanic festival there because to promote it of course and because there are other festivals but there really wasn't a Hispanic festival. So for two years we did that and it was quite successful, and we did it under the auspice of our non-profit Navigation Area Business Association. During that time I had ... I banked at Navigation Bank and the president was Bill Woodby and so we would go to lunch and this and that for different things. Somehow at one lunch we were talking about when he had gone to school that he used to walk to school without any shoes; and that he really wanted to help kids and so he asked if we could do something. So we talked and brainstormed and he said "well why don't we try to give shoes to kids in December." We came up with the name Shoes for Kids and through his bank and through his customer base we sent out letters. The first year of Shoes for Kids we did it at Ripley House and that year what we did is we invited 50 families and we gave them gift baskets and we gave the kids shoes so that evolved from that and we've been doing it now for 23 years. So now what we basically do we give brand new tennis shoes to kids and we do it at Austin High School and we've been doing that there for the last five or six years. We give between 1200 to 1800 new pairs a year. So we've been very successful. That's mainly what the Navigation Area Business Association does; it puts through the Shoes for Kids program which will begin this year on December 16.

MS: I know that you've been involved with so many organizations and many different groups. How have you been able to juggle the restaurant and all these other things?

YBN: Well the good thing about the restaurant is that we do close at two and we're out of there by three. So a lot of the events and things that I'm involved in, of course, are in the evening If I've juggled it it's because during a lot of that time I had my sisters there to help and my son helped, and when my mom was alive she helped a lot because she would help me in doing things that I needed to do for organizations or anything like that. So I think that it's just inherent in some people to be involved. So I think I got that from my mother, from her brothers and sisters who were involved in the movements who were involved in political causes. When I was married

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and we started doing things we were founders of AAMA, the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans and so we just continued and so it's just (laughter) part of what I do even though it's just like anything. It may be difficult but you know it's just because you're doing and you enjoy it and you just figure out a way to do it. As they say when there's projects you give it to the person that has the most to do because they seem to be able to juggle it better (laughter). So maybe that's what it is.

MS: Speaking of the ...you mentioned your uncles and their involvement... what effect did that have on you? I know you were involved with the Women's Bureau and you went to the National Women's Conference, what kind of ...was that motivating?

YBN: Oh well I mean absolutely! The Women's Bureau, I was involved with that, because they had a program 'minority women in leadership.' They were the ones that secured that job for me at Southwestern Bell because of the minority program. So I went through that. Through that association I was involved in other things with the Women's Bureau. The Women's Bureau, which, by the way coming up in on November will be 90 years of the Women's Bureau, but ... they wanted to do a lot of things that helped minority women especially here in Houston to promote programs and so forth. So everything I've been involved in from the caucus to the issue of voting, and other things, so those are all things ... when you're so much younger there's just so much of a dynamic and so much excitement and so much desire to make a difference. So to me, all that, looking back of course there's a lot of history in the sense that a lot has been accomplished. I really enjoyed everything, helping the community I worked with ... when you first start, you're not as aggressive your not as knowledgeable, you know, you learn and so I learned a lot from that. It made me more vocal more aggressive. You learn to stand up for what you believe in and so it was a great experience.

MS: Moving back to the restaurant... is there a community of women restaurant owners that you find support in?

YBN: Well I know a lot of them I don't know that there's a group that ...I'm aware of, I know there's the Texas Restaurant Association , the Houston Restaurant Association at one time I was a member, I'm not anymore. I just know some of the women like I mentioned Irma Galvan ...I know her. I know of some other restaurant owners. I know Nelly Quijana owns a lot of the McDonalds'. I know them by face in many cases [inaudible] and I know the names of many women owners I don't know [inaudible] I do know that there's quite a few [inaudible].

MS: Speaking of that... there is an article in the *Houston Chronicle* that was written in 2007. She wanted to know how many restaurant owners in Houston, and chefs, were female. She found out

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that 12 of the prominent restaurants in Houston are run by women, and at least half were Mexican Restaurants. Does that surprise you?

YBN: No not at all, because like I said if you look at the history of a lot of Latina restaurateurs you will know that they began, the women, they did it because of the need to survive. It's what they needed to do if they lost their husbands either because they left the family or got divorced and so they did what they knew best and I think ... it doesn't surprise me. Because I mean Latina women especially, and there's a lot of Latino restaurateurs as well, but I think that they've found that people of every ethnicity really enjoy Mexican food. So there's a time when you say, well, I know how to do this and let me open a restaurant because that's what I do best and so it doesn't surprise me.

MS: That same article also said that... they quoted women chefs in New York as saying that for women it's harder in the industry to raise money, attract investors and forge good deals with landlords. Has this been your experience?

YBN: I think it is true because most of the time I would say that people that open restaurants already have a connection to a banking industry. They have a connection to someone that already has the money. I think that in many cases they've thought of having a restaurant, in other words they have already established their financial picture to them. On the other side, like I mentioned in a lot of our cases, it's more of a survival issue. So it's opening a restaurant to make money and so we didn't have that experience or knowledge to have already secured funding, to have already secured a banker, to already know a banker, to know a line of credit, to have that capital already there. So ...and traditionally regardless of ethnicity it's always been and continues to be, even though its not as strong, an environment that is dominated by males. So inherent in that, and that fact that because it is, then it is easier. I'm not saying that I think that many banks, whether male or female bankers, have really made it so much easier now because they realize that Mexican restaurants all do well and if they close it's mainly more of mismanagement or not having a good product. So there is more help now, but the answer is that it is more difficult.

MS: Do you speak Spanish?

YBN: Yes fluently (laughter).

MS: How has that affected your career and management of the restaurant?

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YBN: I think that it has helped quite a bit because you still get people that do not speak English. I think that it helps to make them more comfortable. I think it just helps over all to do good to know the language because, in this day and time, the ability to be bilingual is certainly an asset... and I think that I'm glad that I can, and I know that it does make a difference.

MS: The restaurant has been called a place to catch up on East End news. When did the restaurant become more than a restaurant?

YBN: Well I would probably say it became more than that... probably when I started being there full-time (laughter). Because of the fact that I was already involved in so many things and so people would come to eat... but at the same time being involved, and being involved in politics... I ran for office twice, I supported many candidates that have run and won, and because of that I think that people come either to talk about things or catch up with things. I'm always trying to see if I see somebody that comes in that I happen to have a question for them regarding an issue, or a candidate. So I think that that's how it got started. Then some of the candidates would come. Some of the elected officials would come. We've had mayors come. Mayor White has come to visit. Sylvia Garcia our commissioner, a lot of our state reps... so I think that what happened is that the fact that I was there and it was a restaurant and they knew I was involved in so much of the Latino issues ...it just became a spot that where "let's go over there and talk about it," or let's eat and talk (laughter). So it is ...I'm proud of it and I think that people tend to know that if there's a question about something they can come there and get it, and if not an answer at least they can find out about something.

MS: So the clientele is diverse?

YBN: Oh it's totally diverse, I would probably say that it represents the city almost because it is ...it's, I'd say, that it's probably 35% Latino, maybe 30% African American and the rest Anglo. We have blue-collar, white-collar, we have truck drivers, we have policemen ...a lot of police officers that come, and we have community people. We have kids that come with tattoos (laughter). So there is not a mix that perhaps we don't have there and I think it's good because, you know, everybody (laughter)... all everybody wants to do that goes there is to eat some good food (laughter).

MS: Do you every have anybody surprising come into the restaurant?

YBN: Well we have. We've had Geraldo Rivera. A year and half ago he was here to talk about immigration. He went to Ripley House and they brought him here to the breakfast place.

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MS: Oh I've seen the picture!

YBN: The picture is there. We've had ... when the 2008 presidential campaign we had Hilda Solis come, she was campaigning for Hilary Clinton. We've also had several people from the Farm Workers [UFW]. We had, of course, Mayor White. We've had a lot of elected officials. We've ...I'm trying to think... we've had Raul Marquez, the boxer, he's come before so ... we had you know quite a few little surprises here and there and so it's really nice.

MS: So how has the restaurant changed over the years? I know you mentioned that you couldn't eat inside... any other changes?

YBN: Well at one time you came in through this door that is now the entrance to the back entrance, and there was a little counter that you would order there... and there was just one little table that someone might be able to sit at. But really...it was really a take-out place. Then about 1999 or 1998 we opened up the patio on the outside. We had like outdoor benches but now it's enclosed and it is a patio. But there's tables, like about 8 tables, and so it seats about 40 people. We've also put a little parking in the back of the restaurant. We now have little tables in the outside that adds more space, and so we have tried to have enough space for people to eat, even though there's not very much space. We've probably added a little bit more to our menu than we had before... we've taken some things out and added a few things, and so it has changed in that regard.

MS: What about the hours?

YBN: We've changed the hours, because like I said, my mother opened at five a.m. Given the climate of crime, and so many things like people not going to work as early, it's now open at six a.m. and it closes at two. When she first opened it was from five a.m. to three p.m., and now its six to two ...and plus we were opened 7 days a week and it really got to be ...we have the same crew we really don't, you know, we don't have like shifts. So it got to be so much and so hard when we got busy seven days a week. So now we are closed on Mondays. Then we take a nice long break during Christmas and then we take a week in July, and so that helps because like I said we have one crew.

MS: What would you say is unique about having a restaurant in Houston? Is there anything that Houston has been able to provide you that you may not have gotten anywhere else?

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YBN: I would probably say that you know Houston, is probably,... is probably in the top five in terms of the number of restaurants per, you know, per person. So I guess I would say that what would be unique, if that's the right word, would be that of course Houston... if you were starting a business... to be able to buy property or to lease it's not as expensive as if you tried to open a restaurant in Miami or New York or someplace like that. So I think that Houston gives you more of an ability to start a business with less money than in other parts of the country. I think the fact that there are so many restaurants that people do not ... are not surprised when there's a new restaurant because there's so many, so they expect more. So I suppose that the uniqueness is probably that Houston is a restaurant city and people go out to eat five out of the seven days.

MS: Very true. What items on the menu are the most popular?

YBN: Popular? Well what has become the most popular is our "supers." We call them our "supers" because they have everything in them; like a bacon, egg, potato and cheese. We have our "pork super" and our "*chorizo* supers". I would say that our *carne guisada* is very popular and ... one of the basic ingredients that is very popular is our bacon, because we make them very crispy so people love the crispy bacon. So the product itself and I guess at the core of all that, what makes it special, is that we make our own tortillas and they're very very good.

MS: Is that what keeps people coming back? The food and the environment?

YBN: I would say it's the food, and the price, and the customer service.

MS: What is your favorite part of running the restaurant? Of all the things...

YBN: I would probably say my favorite part is, even though it gets too hectic sometimes, but I really enjoy talking to the people (laughter). I really enjoy talking to my customers and so I think that's the best part of it. I think that knowing that they are enjoying the food gives me a lot of pleasure too.

MS: Alison Cook, who writes for the *Houston Chronicle*... she called Villa Arcos an "East End Treasure." How does it feel when people refer to the restaurant in this way?

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YBN: (laughter) I know I thought she did such a marvelous, marvelous article and so I think that for her to say that. I mean it's nice to hear that, number one, and I think that I would agree with that in the sense that it is unique and people like the ownership. They ask about franchises in other parts of town 'you should do this and you should expand' and so I think ...and I really believe in history and maintaining it. The old buildings have history and historical ... and I mean not that I did anything to speak of historical significance. It's true when I describe it sometimes I'm like 'oh yeah that hole in the wall' (laughter). So ... but it's unique. It's different. It's not, we have pictures of...of softball teams from the 1940s. There's a lot of history there so it's a treasure in the sense of what it represents. It's certainly not an architectural treasure. It's not a, something that certainly strikes your eye all of sudden, but you know it's a treasure in what it represents. It's a treasure in the food that it serves. It's a treasure because it is significant to the community and I'm proud that people so many people from all over come, and that it's been highlighted in CNN ...and so when people come from out of town, that's one of the places they come to and so when they come to our place they have a chance to see part of the Second Ward. I'm glad about that.

MS: How has the community affected the restaurant? I know that the restaurant has affected the community very much, so how has it been the other way... the other way around?

YBN: The community has affected Villa Arcos via its support. It has affected via... its the fact that it's something unique to our East End community. Its effected it because they support us. We support the community, and we're involved with Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. We try to have ...deliver shoes for kids. I try to buy East End as much as I can. I really support the institutions here [inaudible] I think that the community has embraced us and I think that we appreciate the fact that we probably wouldn't be here doing good without the community [inaudible].

MS: You mentioned that there are photos on the wall of the softball ...one of them says "Velia's?"

YBN: Oh yeah one of them does say "Velia's Cafe" because at one time after my mother passed away we opened up right across the street it was called Velia's Café. It used to be the Shanley's Cafe and we had it for about six years. So it was very popular, the food was very good, but was just such a big overhead that we did not have the turnaround of the people coming in as much as we wanted to. We did good the several years that we were there and so we sponsored a softball team through Velia's Café. Because my mother's name was Velia, that's why we named it Velia's Café. So there's one, and the other one from the 1940s is because prior to Villa Arcos, that I mentioned earlier, there was a place here that was a lounge and it was called Los Compadres. So some of those teams were named Los Compadres and some of my uncles were

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there on the team. So there's a lot of history there of the guys that were ...and the families that are related to the history of the Second Ward.

MS: What is the future of the restaurant?

YBN: Well, we celebrated ...we celebrated 33 years this September so ... I would probably have to say that we'll just have to take each year at a time you know. I'm getting a little older and I'm not sure... that's not to say that if I leave I won't let somebody else run it but I think the most important thing that you can do in a restaurant or in anything else that you do is you need to know when it's time to leave, or when its time when you can't do it anymore, or that your cook ... even if you lose your cook and you bring in somebody that's not the same you don't want the reputation of Villa Arcos to end on a bad note. I would never want that to happen. So if we can do another ten years that would be great. If it's just five... but at the end of the day, if it's five that's ok too. I would say that we just have to see how things go and hopefully if we can have another cook that can cook the same or if other people can do it and if I'm not there one of my sisters can do it... if we just retain the same quality that we've always had so hopefully I'd say we'll give it another five years for sure.

MS: I think that's all I've got, is there anything else you would like to add?

YBN: Well I'm just grateful to the fact that the University of Houston is doing such a good project to talk about some of the history and some of the restaurateurs, about the Latinas there and [inaudible]. I think it's important to remember that history and so it's a great thing to do.