April 2007

Melanie Gonzmart oral history interview by Andrew Huse, April 27, 2007

Melanie Gonzmart (Interviewee)
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Andrew Huse: Okay, we are rolling. It is April 23, 2007. I am here with Melanie Gonzmart at her home. This is Andy Huse. We are continuing our series of interviews on the Columbia restaurant and the Gonzmart family. First, thanks for being here, Mel.

Melanie Gonzmart: I am very happy to be here.

AH: And thanks for inviting me here. Let’s start at the beginning. Tell me a little bit about your background, where were you born, where you grew up etcetera.

MG: I was born here in Tampa, Florida. My parents, my mom, was born here as well, as well as my grandparents. So, her grand—my mother’s grandparents emigrated from Sicily, my grandfather’s side and from Spain on her mother’s side, from Asturias, which is where most of the Spanish came from as we know in Tampa. And my mother and father met at Loyola University in New Orleans. My mother had been assigned a husband as the Italians do, and you know they hooked her up and she did not favor that. Anyway, she was very ornery—she still is and she chose to go away to school, which of course as an only child was horrific to her father. Anyway, that’s where they met, came back here to Tampa, and I have an older sibling, a sister and two younger brothers and—my mother grew up in Ybor City. My father who was a major cracker, had to acclimate to these crazy Latinos and he did it well, and I went to school locally at Sacred Heart Academy, the Academy of the Holy Names, where I met Richard in my high school days at fourteen, and he was sixteen and he was my high school sweetheart. And I married Richard at eighteen, and he was twenty and the rest is history.

AH: Okay, well, tell us a little about your guys meeting. You were a cheerleader, right?

MG: Yes, I was.
AH: Okay. And he was a football player?

MG: Yes. That sappy story, yes.

AH: It’s all-American.

MG: Yes, Richard—kind of Hispanic all-American—Richard was the full back (inaudible) and, as we say, and this is not to say anything bad about anyone, the fastest white boy in town and I was a cheerleader. He was very instrumental in getting me elected to the cheerleading squad before he even knew me. So, he had eyes on me and I had eyes on him big time. So, anyway, yes and we dated through high school and we did split up for awhile. He went on to school, University of Denver. He was a year ahead of me; I went on to Florida State [University]. It drove him crazy, so, then he came and asked for my hand in marriage while I was in Tallahassee at Florida State, and that’s when we married.

AH: So, what did you major in?

MG: I majored in—I loved art and you know (inaudible) so, I loved art and then I also thought about food, of course the feeling that I was going to marry Richard, but one year was just not enough for anything. Anyway, I got my art thing.

AH: Okay.

MG: See(??) [the] picture hanging?

AH: So did you finish your degree, or no?

MG: No, I never finished my degree. I just had that one year at Florida State.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: Once we married, we were off to Spain where we lived there and of course I took Spanish lessons.

AH: Okay.

MG: That was my degree.

AH: Okay, so let me ask you [a] little about—you told me a little bit about your family, what was it like, I mean, first of all, you knew of the Gonzmarts—

MG: Oh, who didn’t?

AH: —before. Yes. You described them coming to the football games, and all dressed up and everything. Tell me a little bit about—first I’ve heard the story about Richard, who
wanted to wait to get married and Cesar saying “Get married now and then go to Spain; you are going to be miserable.” What do you know about this and did this surprise you at all, or—

MG: No, Richard being the youngest son because he has his older brother Casey and then his half brother Cesar Jr. None of them—and Richard was the baby. Cesar had seen what Casey—anyway, Casey’s life is very tumultuous. Let’s go back to Richard, when Cesar saw how very happy we were together, I think he feared that if Richard went away that I would find someone else and Richard would as well. And so, therefore, maybe he liked me more than I thought especially at that moment, of course at the end I knew how very much he loved me.

AH: You mean Cesar?

MG: Yes, Cesar. Because Cesar never really showed his feelings per se. I mean, he didn’t want to get too close. I think he had a fear, and he must have liked me because he said, “Let’s do this,” and I don’t think Richard felt that he could go to his father and say “I want to get married,” because he was afraid of his father was going to tell him he was nuts. So, he knew we would pine for each other terribly because we were already pining for each other when he was in Denver and when Richard came back all the letters that I wrote him everyday, so I mean there were hundreds and hundreds of letters. And Cesar thought, “Well, we’ll give this a shot,” I mean, at least I came from a Hispanic family. I knew their customs and you know things that women were supposed to do, which I still feel like they should do, they should take care of their man, and stand behind them, and always support them. And that was really the way I think, I can’t speak for Richard, that’s the way he felt and I—in my mind that’s what it was.

AH: Okay, all right, so then how did he propose to you?

MG: That’s a secret nobody is supposed to know.

AH: Really?

MG: Yes, I can’t really tell you that. (laughter)

AH: Okay.

MG: Well, he actually flew to Tallahassee and proposed to me then okay and that was really what he proposed to me.

AH: Okay, so before he never talked to Cesar about this?

MG: Yes. Because we had made an agreement that he would date other people and I would because he was in Denver and I was at Florida State. And of course, I told him all about my dating which drives him crazy.
AH: Oh, sure.

MG: So he got in the car and he says “Look, I want you to marry me; I don’t want you to go out with anybody else.” That’s it. That’s what I was hoping for.

AH: Okay.

MG: So, then actually, when I came home that Christmas my freshman year, he proposed to me there and he proposed to me at the Columbia restaurant and of course everyone knew but me and it was—yes that was it, so yes. The first proposal of course meant more to me. I can remember that one very differently.

AH: Okay. But then at the Columbia everyone knew that this would happen (inaudible).

MG: My parents and my—everybody knew. I didn’t want to go out and my mother said, “You need to get dressed and go.” I was like, “I don’t feel like going out.”

AH: Yes.

MG: You know me; I wanted to leave it out. So, anyway that is the night I have pictures of that night.

AH: So that was kind of for public consumption—

MG: Oh yes.

AH: —that night.

MG: We had to make it available.

AH: Yes, yes.

MG: Yes, by then, he had talked to his dad and he had gotten a ring and—

AH: How much time elapsed between—

MG: Not very long because you got to figure I went to school in August or September he flew up or whatever or down, whatever it was and by Christmas we’re engaged.

AH: Okay, okay. All right, good.

MG: And then the following September, we we’re married.

AH: Okay.

AH: Yes, now let’s talk about—is there anything that stands out in your memory about the wedding, was that at the Columbia?

MG: Yes, it was a very large wedding. It was very stressful for someone who was eighteen. I still suffer from (inaudible).

AH: Well this is the first, what third generation to get—

MG: The first one.

AH: Yes, okay to get—

MG: The first one to get married and the baby. And of course, to be the mother of only sons, it was very difficult for her, she did love me, I think. She was just afraid, as every parent I think is when their child gets married. I mean you just never know.

AH: Yes.

MG: And there was a big to-do, a big to-to. We ordered five hundred invitations. Of course, my parents—my sister got married in June, no May 18, I got married in September. (inaudible) My father had to take out a loan, and of course with Cesar and Adela, we have a lot of people we need to invite. The first wedding, having lived in Tampa all their lives and my list was big; their list was very, very big. And they said, “We want to help with the wedding, and of course the reception.” And so, we basically did the wedding; they did the reception. And, of course, the invitation read, “Mr. and Mrs. Rudolf Lawrence Heidi and Mr. and Mrs. Cesar Gonzmart request to have your presence” because it was only fair, and that’s the way I wanted to do it.

And so the wedding wrote five hundred invitations, but it reached a point where my father-in-law, who is so funny and can be a little sneaky, he was the (inaudible) and after it was all said and done—all the invitations were addressed and sent, because I had addressed everyone of them myself, and that was before calligraphy—and Cesar went and looked for, because they make plates (inaudible), the engraving. And of course, when I picked up my invitations, they gave me my plates. One for my informal “thank you’s” and one for my wedding and Cesar wanted it because he wanted to print more invitations behind my back. So that was not good, that was a big fight. And of course Adela said, “Cesar, you’re wrong” because he was, but anyway that was just, you know water under the bridge.

And a very, very large rehearsal dinner held at the Columbia as well in the patio dining room, as big as probably some people’s wedding receptions and of course, the next day, the wedding. We married on a Wednesday, because I was hoping no one would come (laughter). But my mother married on a Wednesday, as well and to some extent there is an Italian thing that if you marry on a Wednesday, it’s very good luck, so maybe it did work. My mother married on Wednesday morning, but I did marry on a Wednesday
evening and of course my father loved me for that because it didn’t disrupt any of the weekend business.

AH: Yes, that’s great.

MG: You know, the sales, we’re still fine. And it was still a lot of fun and everyone came.

AH: Well, I know one person that was missing, George whose lungs collapsed—

MG: Oh yes—

AH: —as a result of—

MG: —he was cleaning the floor, the marble or granite whatever the floor is there in the patio dining room and of course Cesar wanted everything just right, which it was beautiful and—absolutely beautiful. And poor George, I mean, [I] do not know what type of concoction he mixed up—

AH: Yes—

MG: —but he sent himself to the hospital.

AH: He probably shouldn’t—

MG: He inhaled something really bad.

AH: Yes.

MG: So anyway, yes, he—

AH: Yes, it was ammonia and something. Yes, okay.

MG: Yes, something. Some concoction.

AH: Yes, okay. I just thought that was kind of interesting, it was like never a dull moment, you know.

MG: Oh yes. No, always something until the last moment. (inaudible)

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean George is the I-can-do-everything guy.

AH: Yes, exactly. Okay, now let’s talk a little bit more about the family dynamics then. So you came in and of course Adela was scared of it. And did you have any idea or
inkling just how important it was for a family business, like marriage and these things; I mean, obviously you didn’t understand as well as you do now, but did you have any?

MG: I had no clue. I actually always said, “I knew what I was getting into.” But I think at eighteen, you don’t know what you are getting into. And having such strong in-laws, because they were very strong people, which I admired them very much, and I think it was wonderful and of course they had their ideas and my parents were relatively strong as well. So therefore, I was very torn. You know, that Sunday dinner thing, where do I go? I just wouldn’t go either way. I just, and of course it was very devastating to the parents but I was the one who broke that little deal and especially my mom was very hurt. And I know it hurt her and I said, “You know, I don’t see you all week, you work horrific hours,” because he would. Sometimes, he’d go early in the morning to pick up the bread, and then he’d close at night. But that is the restaurant business. That’s the way life is, so eventually once she and I got closer, she would see me and the children, which I think was what she was trying to maintain and as a parent I understand well, so it all got better.

But at that time, it was very, very hard and he did work hard hours, long hours, and even when we started having children. I mean I don’t remember him really eating at home with us for dinner during the week ever, ever. That was the hours he was gone, gone for sure and we didn’t have the structure in the management team that we have now either, so therefore, he closed or one of the maitre de closed. But we didn’t have as many management people as we did, that there was a real schedule-schedule like thinner schedule opposed to this, you know, “You go to close tonight” thing. You know, and Cesar was there every night because he played violin every night except Sunday, every night. And it was very strange if he wasn’t there.

AH: Okay, now so when (inaudible) there was little tension in the beginning—

MG: Oh, yes.

AH: —but that’s always going to happen. Now what about Cesar? You said he doesn’t show his feelings much?

MG: Oh, yes. But he would just glare at you, but yes. And you know I would really let it roll off my back to a certain extent. It did hurt me because I am very sensitive person. But I have to really say that I had Lauren on my twenty-second birthday, and that was very difficult, that she was born in September, the height of the season.

AH: So, you have been married two years by that point, then?

MG: Four.

AH: Oh, four years, oh yes, of course, yes he was twenty.

MG: Really, well almost three—almost, yes. You know, here I am; I have this baby. I’ve never had a baby and I have to have a C-section. Which of course my father-in-law told
his son—we are having dinner. This is a terrible story. And it’s the four of us and I’m very pregnant and the baby turned breached and her head was up under my right rib cage and I told him, “We have got to tell your parents that this baby is not going to come normally.” It is not going to come vaginally; it is going to have to be a C-section. And he said, (inaudible) because we’re both still very young, I said, “No, we have to.” So we are going to take them to dinner and we’re going to tell them.

And my parents of course, I remember my dad, my father was very, very sick. My father died, Lauren was born in seventy-six [1976], I think he died in seventy-seven [1977] or seventy-eight [1978]. I mean, seventy-eight, he died in seventy-eight. And daddy was already very, very sick because I remember going nine months pregnant to be with him in the hospital. And I swore I wouldn’t have the baby until he got out of the hospital, which of course (inaudible). We sit down and have dinner with Cesar and Adela and you know, we said, “Look, we have to tell you something.” Of course they got very nervous. And Richard said, “Look dad and mom, Melanie—it’s not a big deal, but Melanie is going to have to have a C-section. The baby is breached. It was in the head down position before, but it’s turn[ed] and they have been trying to turn it for weeks on the outside and they can’t do it.” And so his father looked at him like I wasn’t there and said, “Have you ever seen how horrible a C-section scar is?” And of course, me young—

AH: Yes.

MG: I was totally, totally devastated.

AH: Yes.

MG: And of course I held it back. I mean Richard, like, wants to kill his father and the next time we go to the doctor I tell the doctor, “Look, this you know, my father-in-law says this is going to be a horrible, horrible.” And he goes, “Look if it’s an emergency it’s going to be, but we are going to schedule you.” Because I’m way overdue. And he said, “We’re going to schedule you and what we’ll do—” because I have [a] very small umbilical scar he said, “To match your frown we are going to put a smile and the only people who see it will have to be invited.” And so, needless to say after that I was able to wear bikinis.

AH: Okay.

MG: And I survived the whole ordeal.

AH: Okay.

MG: And of course, and showed him very much that I did have an intact stomach.

AH: Yes, showed Richard.

MG: No, Cesar.
AH: Oh, Cesar, okay.

MG: (inaudible) I mean, the next baby, the doctor told him, “This thing is way too low.” But anyway you know that was just one of those stories. But Cesar is from the old school and he couldn’t have it, I mean, he wouldn’t go see my father because he was afraid of catching cancer.

AH: Yes.

MG: So that’s just you know, one of those things that comes with your past.

AH: Yes, okay, interesting story there.

MG: I’m sorry.

AH: That’s good. So yes, I want some more insight as far as living with the Columbia. I mean obviously, all right, Richard’s not there much and but—

MG: I would try to go on the weekends and that was not problem. Which his mom was there very much on the weekend and I would spend time over the weekends. And I think that’s when she and I started to get closer and once Lauren got a little older and then my father passed away, they were there for me in a heartbeat. I mean, these people—my father died very early in the morning and by the time I had got to the hospital, they were waiting for me. And they scooped me up. They scooped me up and they took care of me.

And, from then on, things really changed. I think I grew up and I was able to accept what they were doing, they were doing it out of their love, not because of any malicious reason because I just didn’t know. After that, I mean, everything changed. They took care of me they took care of my mom. My mother-in-law would make sure that she didn’t stay home and didn’t just wither away. And she’d take us out and we’d all do stuff. From then on, which was a long time ago, because Lauren is thirty, everything was really good. And we got closer, closer and closer. And my father-in-law I think saw how much I truly did love him, because I did. (crying)—I’m sorry.

AH: No, it’s okay. It’s okay. Okay, so obviously, by that time, you are really part of the family then.

MG: I really am.

AH: Yes.

MG: My brother-in-law now has married his high school sweetheart, which he said, “If my little brother can do it, I can do it.” So he married her about a month after or two months after we married, while we we’re living in Spain.
AH: Okay.

MG: And he went to the courthouse and didn’t tell his parents he married her. So at Christmastime they gave a reception for her.

AH: So when was this about, what year?

MG: That was the same year we married which was seventy-three [1973].

AH: Oh, seventy-three, okay.

MG: So, we married in September, I believe he married in November. And by then, told everyone that his father was not happy and [in] December they did throw a reception. And they did do like a Catholic ceremony of some sort, which I still question. Anyway. Yes, so now we were two daughter-in-laws and my mother-in-law of course, (inaudible), by the time my brother-in-law divorced her—she stole all of my wedding gifts out of the closet (inaudible) and got (inaudible) back her money—by the time he married a second wife, my mother law said, “Boy, all these girls my son marries make you look like a star.” And we always kid about that.

AH: Okay.

MG: But, you know I was a good daughter-in-law, I think. And she knew she could always call on me and of course I could call on her on any given moment. When like, Andrea fell once, split her lip like someone had torn it, below the lip line, her sister pulled her hot wheel out from under her while she was watching Batman. I'll never forget. And the child fell on her face on the tile floor and so of course, I can’t find my husband he is at some meeting somewhere and this is pre-cell phone time. And of course, I call my mother-in-law she meets me here on Armenia [Avenue] or Habana [Avenue] and MLK [Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard] which meant she came from Davis Island and met me at Dr. (inaudible), where we think we know, he goes, “No, no, no we are calling the plastic surgeon, this is very serious.” And she was with me the whole the time because I had Lauren and we went to Tampa General [Hospital] and where Dr. Pizzo had set her up. And he said, “The only client or patient that he has ever had that fell asleep while he was sewing them up, was Andrea.” She took a nap.

AH: Okay.

MG: And the moment I come out carrying Andrea in my arms because she is sleeping, in burst my husband. But she was always there for me in so many ways, so very many ways. Even when he would give me trouble, I would call her and complain.

AH: Okay.

MG: She’d say, “My son’s a pain.”
AH: Okay. All right that’s great, all right—

MG: You know, I got too many stories!

AH: Oh, no it’s fine, it’s fine. I got time. Well, now when you went to the restaurant on weekends, Adela would be there, was this some of these celebrations of life that I heard about? Was it weekly or weekends?

MG: It was weekly.

AH: Okay, but usually Saturday nights?

MG: Always Saturday nights. And that was when they would do the big show in the Siboney. Where they had, it was like a variety act almost. They’d have singers and I mean, it was not like the Flamenco show today. It was more of—the singers would come out and they would do different—you know. Like you would see on the T.V., like “Ed Sullivan.” You know, everything is a combination.

AH: Yes, yes variety.

MG: Yes, variety that’s the word, thank you. And so, yes. When I would get there, of course, I wanted to sit and be with my husband. Which we would have very late dinner. And of course, you go in which is normal and go greet everybody and they were there. When they entered that room, well, like I always said, “When she came into a room she made an entrance.” I could see her breezing through. And head held high and telling everybody “Hello,” and truly—just gives me goose bumps, because she was just so cool.

AH: Yes.

MG: And go to their table center front and depend on who was invited, and their friends would say “We’re invited this week.” And they would take turns. Because, yes, these were her buddies she played cards with and all that—Eddy Spoto, Eddy and (inaudible) Spoto, Lily and Sam (inaudible), Dr. and Mrs. (inaudible). I mean that group right there, those were the main ones, okay.

AH: Okay.

MG: Because then they would go and they would invite all that and you’d walk in and this table had CC [Canadian Club whiskey] and all their mixers and scotch and their—whatever.

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean—and buckets of ice because it was just like party, let’s party. And the appetizers would be on the table already; they’d be pre-ordered. And they wore beautiful
gowns with the sequins and the chiffon and they were like movie stars. They were so cool.

AH: Yes.

MG: They had soap in their cigarettes and they were just having so much fun, anyway.

AH: So were you kind of introduced into this order then?

MG: Well, actually while we dated, I saw this whole thing happen. And of course, you start thinking this is what everybody does, which of course, I was very confused.

AH: Yes, yes.

MG: And then on Sundays—which I was barely able to get my butt out of the bed—they would take turns to different people’s houses. And they would start in the morning with the Bloody Marys again. Not that they were lushes but they did enjoy life. And that person who was entertaining that Sunday, cooked. It wasn’t like ordering Chinese. They were trying to out do each other, who could cook better than the next.

AH: Yes.

MG: And who could come up with something different. So it was always an adventure.

AH: Okay.

MG: But Richard said as a child, this was something they always did—he always did this. But to me this was so incredible.

AH: Yes.

MG: And they were all dressed up again.

AH: It was like Tampa’s rat pack or something.

MG: Yes.

AH: Yes. You got entertainers and—

MG: They had a marvelous, marvelous, marvelous, marvelous life. They didn’t have one they had many lives because they did so much.

AH: Yes, okay. So, now obviously as your marriage is progressing and everything, Richard’s role in the restaurant gets bigger. He starts making his own moves etc. So let’s try to trace some of those activities through your eyes and I know, like, I find the whole—I am about to start writing about the café and the warehouse here soon. I find that
chapter especially interesting—adapting to the times, singles clubs were in, T.G.I. Friday’s was a hit—

MG: (inaudible)

AH: Yes, and Malio’s [Steakhouse] even had its private club to really hook into that nightlife and into younger people and single people and that whole scene. So, how is it that Richard started getting into it and I know you guys would go out every weekend and stuff, just tell me a little bit about how this whole thing progressed through your eyes.

MG: To me, my husband has always been very ahead of the times. He, for some reason could foresee the trends, and I guess as a businessman too. You read and see your life and the life everyone else is living. So, he knew the Columbia had to make a change. And we couldn’t stay where we were with this huge menu and old stodgy waiters, which was, you know, fine but you can’t be rude to your customers. I mean, they are your customers. So anyway he came up with this idea that he was going to go hire a band and he was going to take the café just that one room he told his father, that one room only, and do a different menu. And of course that was the time of the union.

AH: Yes.

MG: And he said he would hire non-union people there.

AH: Now this was before the—

MG: The wall was up.

AH: Yes, the wall was up. I just wanted to make sure.

MG: The wall was up. The wall was up—between—right down the center of the bar. Right where the back bar is because we copied that (inaudible) bar on the backside.

AH: Okay.

MG: Everything was just copied. And so he went and hired this band that he heard about—went to New Jersey and hired them instantly. They played in some basement. I didn’t go because I had the children. Andrea was just born actually and that was seventy-nine [1979].

AH: Okay.

MG: And hired them and they said, “Okay, we’ll come.” And so we proceeded to start getting the room ready and hanging plants. And of course this seventy-nine, late seventies, early eighties, little plants and the disco and you know, you dressed different. Everything was very different.
MG: And (inaudible) and the band came, the music started, and we started getting these huge lines, huge lines, because basically there was no where to go like that in Tampa. I mean, we really were a destination and because it is not like Ybor [City] today where you have multiple places—

AH: Yes.

MG: And (inaudible) and the band came, the music started, and we started getting these huge lines, huge lines, because basically there was no where to go like that in Tampa. I mean, we really were a destination and because it is not like Ybor [City] today where you have multiple places—

AH: No, there’s no places (inaudible). Yes.

MG: Yes. Yes. There was nothing.

AH: Just the gay bar. That was it.

MG: Exactly, El Goya, El Goya?

AH: Yes.

MG: Yes. So here we are and now we are like, “Oh my goodness, this is really working.” And the lines would form and he would eventually had to—because it was only one room, he started charging cover charge and then he thought, “Look, I have this warehouse in the back and this would be totally cool, I’m not telling my father because he probably wouldn’t approve.”

AH: Okay.

MG: Okay and we’re trying to seat people in La Fonda, which is the room that is still now the café to the other side of the bar—

AH: But that’s still union.

MG: —but that’s not working, but it’s not working either because you can’t see the band. And you can hear the music but it just wasn’t—I mean, we were losing money.

AH: Yes.

MG: So he decides—and this warehouse, it was a warehouse, and it took you down this narrow, narrow corridor past the staircase it went out to the corporate office (inaudible). Anyway, it was just a little room with no windows where they did all the book-keeping.

AH: Now, wait the corporate office was above—

MG: Oh, yes. Above—

AH: —above the restaurant itself back then?

MG: Yes. And actually the liquor room—
AH: Not where it is today—

MG: Oh, god, the liquor room is not there anymore. My father-in-law’s office was right there. We then turned that room into the liquor room. That’s later. Sorry, I am getting ahead. So, anyway you had to go down this long narrow corridor and you go to this warehouse where there was a (inaudible) iron gate that locked between.

AH: Okay.

MG: You know, because it was (inaudible). Nobody needed to be back there. You could hear the dishwashers, because that is where the dishwashing machine was and that’s where they cleaned the pots. It was right there.

AH: Okay.

MG: When you walked by, it had a little vent. I’m really reminiscing. And he literally didn’t tell his father anything. And he did this.

AH: Now Cesar was traveling?

MG: No, Cesar was working there every night playing the violin.

AH: So, he did it right under his nose? I always thought he was on vacation or he was—

MG: No. He was bringing the people in through the back. And what we had to do was empty the warehouse. I don’t know how we did it. He built bathrooms! Okay.

AH: Unbelievable.

MG: So finally one night his father goes, “What the heck, what the hell are you doing in the warehouse, I just went back there.” So, Richard has to fess up. (inaudible) But we were in so deep.

AH: Yes.

MG: He had gone and bought—they were looking for this wood—I mean, there are so many stories—to put on the walls. So, they went looking at trash places and they found all this (inaudible) and it was so beautiful but they needed to put that on the wall for the acoustics because everything was concrete. They had to build a bar. We found this big bell and (inaudible). It was just truly—

AH: What’d you ring the bell for?

MG: Every time there’s tips.
MG: And in there he put the jazz band. And he put the door on the outside facing that back—facing the railroad tracks. Where people could come in that way or then of course, they could come in through the café.

AH: Okay.

MG: So now we are almost ready to open. And it’s rain, rain, rain. And we’re there; it’s Friday, Saturday night. And I can still remember what I had on—with our friends. And we (inaudible) and it’s raining so bad and the roof is leaking so terribly. This room, the warehouse, is now filling with water. There’s about a foot of water. Okay. And we’ve got boards because we finally had to knock the hole in the wall for the water to drain on 22nd Street.

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean that was the only thing we could do because it was sitting there. So we put boards because the floor is not even and now we are walking across boards, I mean just showing everybody what’s going on. Well, in walk these four gentlemen. And they go, “Hi, we are Tapestry.” And Richard goes, “Oh, yeah. I know I hired you.” That’s the jazz band he hired. And they go “So you’re ready?” And he goes “What date can you come?” And they said whatever date it was and he said, “Coincidentally, I have an opening.”

AH: Okay.

MG: But he was lying through his teeth.

AH: Yes, he had no room.

MG: Yes, yes he had no room built. So he came back, scrambled, did all this. In they walk. So then, now, he tells them, “We’re renovating,” you know, another fib. But of course they eventually knew the whole story which became quite hysterical.

AH: Yes.

MG: And, but by the time they did come of course, we were ready. The only glitch in the whole thing was that they were putting the air conditionings in with the exposed duct work—

AH: Yes.

MG: —finishing the bathrooms, and of course, someone called in on us, and we were red tagged. And they shut us down.
AH: Oh, because you didn’t get the proper permits?

MG: No, we didn’t have any building—we didn’t have any permits! So now—

AH: Yes, I found out that you got to get a permit if you just want to replace part of your roof.

MG: Well now—those were the good old days though—we start pulling strings and my father-in-law, of course, now was in the whole mix. And needless to say everything worked out fine and we opened. And it was great, and of course now there’s more people. So now—have we already taken the wall down? I can’t remember that. In the café.

AH: Yes.

MG: I think we have.

AH: Okay, so—

MG: But now it’s just more and more people. And they created a card. You know, you get in because you are a card person and—

AH: Yes, if you are like a member.

MG: Right, a member you also are entitled to house charges which back then they still had house charges anyway in the Columbia itself.

AH: So I understand—take me back. House charge, what do you mean?

MG: House charge means we write down and we do.

AH: Oh, you have a tab like. Yes, okay.

MG: Yes, yes, and some people never paid us still.

AH: Yes, yes.

MG: One guy in particular I can think of has never paid us.

AH: Okay.


AH: Yes, okay. It sounds like the kind of guy that wouldn’t pay.
MG: Yes. But we met so many—and of course people like Dennis Howard Judge, attorneys, Mike (inaudible), all these attorneys—Ralph (inaudible). I mean all these guys. Everybody was there every weekend.

AH: Yes. You know, it’s funny because there was an obvious need for night life and everything, on the other hand it sounds like Richard and his friends didn’t really have anyplace to go.

MG: No, all they’d do is go to the Columbia and sit there and eat dinner.

AH: Yes, so here where you could have more of night life experience and mingle more and not sit at a table.

MG: Yes—and being with people—your contemporaries.

AH: In a way, I mean, I’m not saying it was self-servicing.

MG: It was.

AH: But in a way it was, because it was suddenly—

MG: It always was. Whenever he would bring in any band—the way he loves music even when we lived in St. Augustine. He would bring in bands announcing in the newspapers (inaudible) having this jazz thing. And his father goes, “What are you doing?” And he goes, “I miss music.” He would bring in his (inaudible) people, and then we actually started hiring [a] pianist there for a weekend. But he has this need, he loves music so much. But he would bring in groups, like he has brought in Meatloaf to the Pier and I mean people with some notoriety.

AH: Yes. Well it’s also interesting because you know, it’s really effective as far as the next generation asserting itself because Cesar’s show was from a different a time. It was from the forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s]. And you know by the time the sixties [1960s] were over popular culture has changed completely—

MG: Drastically.

AH: —and fractured into a lot of different pieces where as that variety show may have, might have pleased everyone [of] Cesar’s age at a certain time. It was no more, you know—

MG: It was (inaudible)

AH: Yes, it wasn’t for everyone. And it might be nice for nostalgic purposes and for your parents, but not for you.

MG: No, it was not, no.
AH: Okay. And obviously, nightlife had changed where as you would have a bottle of CC on the table before, I mean, the partying in the seventies [1970s] and early eighties [1980s] was a lot different.

MG: Way different.

AH: Yes, so, I mean just like Studio 54—you’d have people sniffing cocaine at the tables.

MG: Oh we (inaudible)

AH: So it was, were there similar scenes—

MG: Of course there was. At that point in time too we were—well, we still are—very friendly with the [City of Tampa] Police Department, the city of Tampa, and the Sheriff. And (inaudible) always advised that they were selling cocaine in the café. And of course, at that point we had to put the spotters in.

AH: Now they meaning who? Just customers?

MG: Just customers, yes.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: Richard did put spotters in. He had to hire a private detective company. And we put spotters in and, of course, then we found out that our bartenders were stealing blindly. And you know, you learn. It’s a learning process. Just like you said. He asserted himself, just like Cesar did.

AH: Yes.

MG: And he learned. And actually Cesar did let him stumble—on purpose.

AH: Yes.

MG: And actually, after that the whole story about the cocaine, which was very (inaudible). Oh, god, I better not tell this story. I’ll tell you later.

AH: All right.

MG: But by the time it got so bad because this was the early eighties [1980s]. I would say eighty-two—eighty-three, it got really bad.

AH: Now, what do you mean? Tell me—
MG: The cocaine, the cocaine, the cocaine.

AH: Yes, but what does that mean?

MG: It means—meaning we would go around the corner to the patio, we would see people’s plates and lines of cocaine.

AH: In the patio?

MG: Yes, behind bushes and stuff, or in (inaudible) you open the door and you’re there.

AH: So, it wasn’t even confined to the café or the warehouse. It spilled out?

MG: Well, see we stayed open until two [in the morning]. And once the Columbia cleared, they all got smart and said, “Okay we can find a (inaudible) this is a huge place.”

AH: Yes.

MG: So, they found all the nooks and crannies.

AH: Oh, yes. Okay.

MG: And so now, we’re getting nervous. And my father-in-law is putting his foot down and says, “That’s it. It’s over. It’s done.” And we’re opening St. Augustine. We had been traveling back and forth to St. Augustine.

AH: Okay, that was eighty-three about, right? Eighty-two, eighty-three?

MG: Yes, I would say so.

AH: Yes I think so.

MG: And Andrea was four—so it was eighty-three. And yes. So, Richard says, “Okay dad, whatever. I’ll go to St. Augustine and I’ll open it.” Which, he really knows how to open [a] restaurant. I mean this guy—from designing a kitchen to whatever, he’s got it. Sorry, he’s my husband, but that’s the truth.

AH: Sure, Sure.

MG: So now he says, “We’re going to St. Augustine for the summer with the girls and we’ll rent a condo for three months.” And I thought, “This is very cool, live on the beach.” So we move there, we take our microwave, and our bathing suits. And we were like little happy campers in both cars. And we lived there. And of course, the restaurant opened.

AH: Okay, now let me just back you up just for a second.
MG: Okay, all right.

AH: All right, so, it was a combination of things that closed the warehouse?

MG: Oh, I forgot about that. Well, yes.

AH: So you had a drug problem.

MG: Yes, we were having problems with the band. We switched bands. The original street beat band; it got very lackadaisical. Richard got more demanding—need to learn new songs. It was just a combination and things in Tampa were changing. We were very upset though we did not want to close.

AH: Okay. I see, okay. It sounded to me—Casey went through a similar experience in Sarasota.

MG: With the patio.

AH: Yes and that you know, the culture was once again starting to change too.

MG: Yes.

AH: So, maybe it was better that they closed when it did rather than outlive—

MG: Exactly—while we were on top.

AH: Yes, so now what happened to the warehouse afterwards?

MG: It’s a warehouse again.

AH: It became a warehouse again, okay.

MG: But now, of course, the café has opened up—all the redoing is done. It looks great, but of course it’s been redone again just before our centennial. And of course, now it is absolutely beautiful. It’s taken back to exactly what it was, minus the wall.

AH: Yes. Now, why did that wall come down?

MG: Because we needed a room for the café. And we were making so much money that my father-in-law agreed.

AH: So, when you bashed that wall down, did the whole room become non-union then?

MG: No, I don’t think so. I don’t know. I can’t even—
AH: Now I am sort of curious to that, I’m sure Richard will be able to talk—

MG: I can’t answer—

AH: —more about like what—well, not just about that but just about the whole union. (inaudible).

MG: Well John-Edward Alley, an attorney here in town, who I will always remember as the guy—

AH: How do you spell the last name?

MG: A-L-L-Y, Ally, or A-L-L-E-Y. He’s retired now, but we still see him. And he and Richard together were the two that broke the union as far as I am concerned.

AH: Okay.

MG: And in the eighties, okay, because Richard was bound and determined because they were so good to their employees. They really didn’t need the union, and Richard tried to get that across, and in fact slowly he did. Everybody came around. There were very few of them left. You know it happened and for the good because everybody—We do treat our employees very good. I care about these people, they are very much a part of my life, and they’re very important to me. Some of them have even worked forever there. Since I married Richard some of them. That’s a long time.

AH: And Joe Roman had mentioned that a lot of the people just died off. The diehard union people—

MG: The hard-cores.

AH: Yes, they were tired or they died off and you know, it was—

MG: Too much of a struggle.

AH: Yes, and the younger people weren’t all from Spain. They might be an immigrant from Puerto Rico or Guatemala and there’s a lot of other—

MG: Yes, and also too, we never had women up in the kitchen or women waiting tables. And of course, Richard women brought the women in. And of course, they were in very short clothing and scantily clad to be our cocktail waitresses for the café.

AH: Oh, okay.

MG: And so then of course, the cat calls and everything else in the kitchen, I mean, this is pre-sexual discrimination. Richard had to go back there and you know say “Stop, this is no.” And you know, Hey baby, if you want your dish—I mean this is very classic Latino.
AH: Yes. Now were these women—they were going into the kitchen to pick up food and stuff?

MG: Yes, because we did serve food. And we did serve appetizers, and things like that. It was a totally different menu.

AH: Yes, okay. Yes and it’s funny. I just found in your collection that review of the cafe and the Columbia and it was a glowing review. Yes, but anyway, sorry to back you up there.

MG: No, it’s okay.

AH: We’ll go back to St. Augustine. So also you guys are leaving for St. Augustine—you wouldn’t be there.

MG: Well, yes that’s when—shut it down. Shut it down. And we said, “We might as well move to St. Augustine, what the heck are we going to do here?” And so we did.

AH: So, then did the café become union again?

MG: You know, I think by then—I don’t know when the union was broken, but it was right around there, Andy. And I think that’s when everything started to dissolve.

AH: That was the beginning of the end.

MG: The beginning of the end would be a good way to put it. If not already the end, I don’t know. I can’t honestly tell you that.

AH: The menu disappeared too.

MG: Oh, yes, (inaudible) we go back to the regular menu.

AH: Okay, so then—

MG: And now, Richard’s gotten more involved in the menus as well, okay. And trying to get rid of some of the stuff that—I mean now we have computers. With computers you can track it. You can see what you sell, how many you sell, and then you can go “Oh god, we need to get rid of that,” or ,“We only sold one this week.” And of course life you know, moving ahead becomes a lot easier. And of course, to this day that’s what we do. And of course, he watches the trends because he reads all the trade magazines. But he always knows. I mean now I know he is putting crab (inaudible) on the menu.

AH: Oh, good.

MG: Oh, yes.
AH: Okay, that’s an old classic. Good. I’ll be looking forward to trying that.

MG: He made it the other day (inaudible).

AH: Okay, I bet.

MG: Fresh sauce, yes.

AH: Now, this is with the crab meat pulled out of the crab.

MG: Oh, yes.

AH: So you don’t have all the mess, okay.

MG: Exactly, oh yes, no it takes too long.

AH: Yes. Okay, so then, St. Augustine—actually let me stop.

MG: Stop, okay. Go to the bathroom.

pause in recording

AH: Okay so, we left off at St. Augustine and you’ve got your swimsuits and everything is going to be hunky-dory and the restaurant opens.

MG: Yes, and it doesn’t open quite smoothly. It opens—we had to pass the [St. Augustine Historic Architectural Review Board] Historical Review Board down to you know, your doorknobs and screws.

AH: Now, I want to ask you, you can answer off the record, I’ll turn off the recorder if you want. But I have heard from reliable sources that to get around the archeologists doing the dig at the site, Cesar poured concrete at midnight—

MG: No. I mean, no. And I was pretty, you know, involved there at this point. I would say no.

AH: Okay. Yes.

MG: No, not at all. There (inaudible) and St. George Street but no, we had to pass a lot of stuff. But no I don’t believe we did anything like that.

AH: Okay.

MG: And if we did, it’s too late anyway. But anyway.
AH: Well yes, the idea. It sounds like Cesar to me.

MG: I know, oh, no. I know. But now you’re making me think. But I really think—not that I know of.

AH: You didn’t know about it.

MG: Yes, I did not know. And so yes, so we moved and we’re there and Lauren was going into—

AH: And I wouldn’t put that into the book, anyway.

MG: Oh, I know. I’ve told you worse.

AH: I’d be really tempted, but (inaudible).

MG: What was I going to say? So yes—

AH: It didn’t open smoothly.

MG: No, it was very hard and it was very hard to get accepted in this little town. We’re talking very little town, like one Publix [Super Market], one McDonald’s [Restaurant], maybe three traffic lights. Not a lot going on.

AH: I know Casey had a similar experience, like everyone is kind of looking at this place like, “Who do these people think they are?”

MG: Yes, and they of course, you know, we had management that came in that spoke Spanish, and they would get of course, our (inaudible) of whoever is in the kitchen, which I think it was (inaudible), a Spaniard. But they would speak Spanish, and of course, they (inaudible) with their Spanish just because they do. It is a natural thing for them. They don’t do it to be secretive.

AH: Sure.

MG: And of course people there (inaudible) they said, “Speak American, boy.” I mean, this is America and it really made us start thinking that maybe we were, [being] discriminated [against]. I don’t feel discriminated against; I mean I can deal with it. But looking at Tampa having the Latins, Spanish, the Italians, the Puerto Ricans, [and] everybody, I mean, we just were—it was normal to hear Spanish speaking people. I never felt offended by it or did any of my friends, who are very American. So anyway we moved there, and there were difficulties in getting it organized, and getting it set up, and getting accepted.

AH: Yes.
MG: The acceptance was very difficult, and the sales were not that good in the beginning from what I understood. Of course, I can’t you know, (inaudible).

AH: Yes.

MG: It was a struggle. And Richard struggled and struggled, and in the middle of summer or towards the end of summer, he decided that we were staying, and he was going to have to stay and make this thing right, and so we did.

AH: Okay.

MG: And I got very upset, anyway.

AH: And this is kind of the beginning of his period of having unbearable pressure.

MG: Tremendous pressure.

AH: From his father and, so obviously, you saw it kind of taking a toll at home, too?

MG: Oh, it took a toll. He would withdraw and (inaudible) he couldn’t go out anymore. He had severe anxiety and stress, I mean, that was coming at him from all angles. It was not just his father. And he knew he wasn’t performing. And he was always a success, I mean, he was just tremendous player. He was a triple player, and he’d always been successful at whatever venture he took. And this was a very big blow to him. And it did take a toll on him. And he eventually, of course took (inaudible). That’s when he started cycling; he was very overweight. I was very overweight, as I am right now again but anyway.

AH: You’re doing fine.

MG: I was skinny in the middle and he was very, very overweight. And there were a lot of issues and so he started cycling because he had to see someone—speak to a psychologist. [He] tried to get himself—I mean, because he wouldn’t go out.

AH: Well, he kind of had to get out of that warehouse mode too, right?

MG: Well no, no, no—we were already out of it because we were there two years? No, we had been there for quite a while.

AH: Okay, okay.

MG: No, no, no. This was already done and we even had music there in St. Augustine. We had done a lot—gotten involved in the community. We would do happy hours on Friday nights. No, it just eventually reached a point where it was the combination of the lack of sales, my father-in-law, his feeling of poor performance, and it just became too
much. And I missed him so terribly so I’m sure that I contributed. And he just broke down, that was it.

AH: Now I want to pick up here again, but before I continue I want to back up a second because—

MG: Of course.

AH: Cesar was much the same way—always a success. You know, almost to a point where you take it for granted that you do something that is going to work. Mariel didn’t. And I did want to talk to you about that before we, kind of—because once we get past St. Augustine, we are in an entirely different territory. So tell me about how this, what are your insights about [the] Mariel [Boatlift]? 1

MG: Mariel. That was another horrific thing.

AH: I know it must have been difficult on Richard, too.

MG: It was very, very, difficult on all of us. This was a point in time that was 1979 to eighty [1980] I believe. And (inaudible) the way (inaudible) do is of course by my children’s age, I remember holding Andrea in my arms—she was six weeks old—and they broke ground on their new house. The one on (inaudible) as opposed to ninety-five [1995] the one that is on the bay.

AH: Okay.

MG: So, I remember the breaking ground. And the house of course, took a year to build. So, in that year, that’s when this whole Mariel thing started. And these Cubans—everyone is going to get their people. So my father-in-law decides not to do it in a small way, to do it in a very large way. With the Rio (inaudible), the boat, the ship, the ship, not a boat.

AH: Yes.

MG: Huge ship. He gets a ship and then he tells her, “I got a ship.” And of course, Adela was furious and she says, “What are you thinking?” And then he had meeting where everyone came and brought their money. And paid to get their family out. Of course, you had to limit it, but he didn’t know how much, because by the time he had got to Cuba the new rule had gone in effect for every person you bring, you had to bring three or four inmates, or prisoners, or insane asylum people. Castro immediately threw them on to get rid of the loons and send them our way, but that was your little toll, you had to pay. You had to take them if you want your person. That was your payment. You take them with you and get rid of them. By the time he does—you know that whole story—by the time he goes and all that and the president, and the whole thing doesn’t work.

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1 Transcriber’s note: AH is referring to the Mariel Boatlift, a mass movement of Cubans from Cuba’s Mariel Harbor to the United States between April 15 – October 31, 1980.
AH: Yes.

MG: And now the money’s gone. And in the meanwhile, he’s putting my number, my home phone number, because at this point they were almost ready to move into the house and they had to get out of their house. So, now they moved in with me which is fine, but now my phone number is going on the radio, and I don’t speak Spanish and it’s on the Spanish radio. “Call this number if you need information about the (inaudible).” So I get a phone call, “Richard what’s going on? Why are these people calling my house?” Well of course, Cesar is no longer home, so now he’s transferred it to me. And so he now catches a plane or catches a boat or whatever he does, and leaves. And he goes to Grand Cayman.

AH: Yes, he—

MG: And my mother-in-law is just fretting—got this huge enormous house they are building that is costing quite a bit of money. He is not there to you know, [to] offer any support or whatever. She’s having to live with me, which I’m sure she wasn’t so thrilled with. You know, two little kids running around. I don’t make Cuban coffee in the morning. I mean, a lot issues, so anyway. Needless to say, she and I got really close then because we spent a lot of time together. And of course, it was really hard. People threatened my husband. They were going to kill him if they didn’t get their money back but there was no money to give back. It was very bad but nothing happened, no one was saved—except by the Miss Columbia. You heard that story?

AH: No. What’s that?

MG: Oh, we had a yacht.

AH: Okay.

MG: You haven’t heard that one?

AH: I haven’t heard this one. No.

MG: Oh wow. Forty-six foot—forty-eight foot, I don’t know how big it was.

AH: Is this one, no? The one in the hurricane was along time ago?

MG: Oh no, that was the Miss Columbia as well. But this was another Miss Columbia.

AH: A new Miss Columbia, okay.

MG: Forty-seven foot, forty-seven foot.

AH: Forty-seven foot yacht, okay.
MG: Miss Columbia. It had two bedrooms, whatever they call—staterooms, I don’t know what they call them.

AH: Yes, cabins—

MG: Had a head, (inaudible), shower, a kitchen, a living room—it was very, very nice. And my father-in-law had this boat, this yacht. And so Casey had this very good friend who worked for us, Thomas Sal Gado, who really—very close to us. He was the one who was the manager when we opened St. Augustine.

AH: Okay.

MG: So, Casey—

AH: Thomas Del Gado?


AH: Okay.

MG: Salgado. And Thomas has family and my father-in-law had other reasons why he wanted to go to Cuba as well to get friends—some friends of his family back as well. And so they sent Thomas, who was a very experienced boatman and fisherman with the Miss Columbia.

AH: And now when was this? Was this before the Rio ___?

MG: You know what? It may have been before the Rio ___.

AH: Okay.

MG: And—or maybe it was after. I don’t know Andy.

AH: Okay.

MG: It may have been after in desperation. Because of—

AH: By then the president had already made that announcement and everything.

MG: So you couldn’t—yes but, but they still had to bring back lunatics.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: That I do remember.
AH: Okay.

MG: Because these people, they had to blockade themselves away from these people, because they were so threatening on the trip back from Cuba to Tampa. Because they were able to get some family members out.

AH: Okay.

MG: And of all these people that needed these family members out, if you know what I mean. So anyway, so they come back, the boat is destroyed. Totally destroyed. They (inaudible) horrific things to this beautiful yacht. That was the end of the yacht.

AH: So they picked up a lot of people?

MG: Well they picked up what they wanted. But, and of course ______

AH: And they got all these loonies too.

MG: Exactly.

AH: Yes.

MG: And the loonies don’t care and I mean, they’re prisoners, they’re killers, they’re— whatever they are.

AH: Exactly, Scarfaces, yes.

MG: Yes, they’re all of the above. Okay. Because these people—the people that are coming back and of course, Thomas as well, and whoever he took as his skipper or whatever. They were all scared to death and so anyway, that did happen.

AH: Okay, got you.

MG: But Cesar was on a mission.

AH: Yes.

MG: He had to bring these people back.

AH: Yes, yes. And it must have been terribly humbling for him to not just to not be—

MG: Oh, and when the people came after us, when they wanted money—

AH: Yes.
MG: Richard had to really go to his father’s defense. Of course, his mother had wanted no part of it and they really had tremendous, tremendous marriage problems. You’re not going to use this in the book either.

AH: Okay.

MG: But that’s when she sat Richard down, I remember at my kitchen table and it was night. She was spending the night because he was gone, and she told Richard, “I am going to divorce your father and he is going to [be] left out of the Columbia.” And Richard said, “Okay, Mom, that’s fine; I’m just going to give him my shares.” Because of his loyalty to his father.

AH: Yes, of course.

MG: But she was very angry; she had many reasons to be angry. So it was very tough but of course they worked it out well as well.

AH: Okay.

MG: And the house was built; they moved. We carried everything by hand across the street. All those (inaudible).

AH: All the boxes, yes.

MG: Anything fragile. All these women are running back and forth across the street. It was hysterical.

AH: Okay.

MG: And we got them moved in and it was a beautiful house, a wonderful home, lots of memories.

AH: Okay. I’m going to stop it right for a second.

*pause in recording*

AH: Okay, so we are leaving behind all the nasty Mariel memories; we’re moving on. So, St. Augustine, we pretty much got there.

MG: Yes, and everything happens before Richard suffers terribly and now at this point they are planning to open a Harbor Island [restaurant].

AH: Okay.

MG: But meanwhile my father-in-law, who cannot take any weakness in anyone, proceeds to come to St. Augustine with my mother-in-law and see my husband, who of
course, had been hospitalized. Because they put him on the (inaudible), thought he was having heartache. He couldn’t breathe; he had pains. My father-in-law of course thought he was just a mess and he didn’t (inaudible). And I remember having a phone conversation when I had to call him and say, “Look, he’s very sick he is in CCU—” My father-in-law of course—

AH: Now is that Cardiac Care Unit?

MG: Yes. Thought this was some kind of a, I don’t know what. And he said, “You know, I know you are going to tell my son everything I tell you.” I said, “Yes, there’s nothing I don’t tell your son.” He’s my husband and so anyway, they proceed to come and he comes and looks at him down his nose. And of course, Richard got a little better after that, just out of sheer fear.

AH: Yes.

MG: And they (inaudible) talk and (inaudible) listen, and he wrote him a very beautiful letter in which I still have. And—

AH: Cesar did?

MG: Yes, about, you know, you’re my son, how much I love you and because I’m sure he knew he had been very hard on him and he had.

AH: Yes.

MG: So, it’s a very beautiful letter. And then they talked, you know, about us moving back. I mean just the stress of being away.

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean, a combination like I said. So now we come home. And we still have our house, which is empty, and we bring back our stuff and we move back in. And the children get to back to school where they are supposed to go to school. And we open Harbor Island.

AH: Okay.

MG: And my father-in-law gets to do his black and white floor. In which he proposed to (inaudible).

AH: He had always wanted—

MG: —the Siboney.

AH: Yes, now about what year was this, Harbor Island?
MG: Oh, gosh. I don’t know. I don’t know—

AH: Okay, that’s all right, that’s all right. I can get it.

MG: I can look or look it up in the menus or whatever—

AH: Or I can look it up in one of the other interviews, okay.

MG: So, all I know, we come back, and Harbor Island is supposed to be really this hot thing—and it never really takes off. We eventually open Cha Cha Coconuts [Restaurant] and that was our first Cha Cha Coconuts.

AH: Okay, yes. And basically, the location was kind of [a] dud—at that time.

MG: Well, yes because nobody really—I mean, downtown had not met it’s what it’s supposed to be. I mean, this is very premature.

AH: Yes, yes.

MG: And so now we have the Cha Chas. We don’t have a bathroom. And of course, we got around that by having a doorway, you can see it, it was like a doorway that was in the Columbia and the bar, all the walls were mirrors with a (inaudible).

AH: Yes.

MG: And so, it had a door there, but you couldn’t see it. And of course, on the Cha Cha side it was painted all these wild colors (inaudible) so you didn’t know it was a door, it was like a false door, like.

AH: Yes.

MG: But that was the only way to get to go to the bathroom is—we got around it, by having the door there. But that’s (inaudible).

AH: Yes.

MG: But we open, and of course that was another red tag day, because you heard the Gasparilla story?

AH: Yes.

MG: Okay. So anyway, life lives on. And everything’s good. Harbor Island was so much fun. I loved Cha Cha Coconuts, there we had an outdoor seating. Which Tampa really didn’t have per se, and we’d do music. It was a lot of fun, a lot of fun. And of course,
Gasparilla was incredible, I mean, because we owned like our own little spaces, so (inaudible) happened right in front of us.

AH: Yes.

MG: So, it was very wonderful. I have wonderful memories of Harbor Island.

AH: Okay.

MG: But when we were the first ones in, as far as restaurants, and we were the last ones out because of our lease ended. And we chose not to renew it again.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: It just wasn’t worth it.

AH: Sure.

MG: I mean, it was going to become an office building.

AH: Okay.

MG: As opposed to retail restaurant.

AH: Yes. All right, so the next in the empire is the pier.

MG: St. Petersburg, yes, so now St. Petersburg comes—

_Tape 1, side 1 ends; side 2 begins._

MG: —St. Petersburg, now.

AH: I know. I have a few memories already recorded on the—what am I thinking—oh the concerts you had there.

MG: Right, the jazz festivals.

AH: So I have that, but—

MG: Which he knows more about, I really don’t know. I couldn’t make it the third day, because I was just so exhausted. But now we opened, and it opened well and that building—I don’t know if we told you this—that building, that fourth floor where the Columbia sits had always been a restaurant of some type.

AH: Okay.
MG: But no one had ever made it, no one could ever survive there, but everyone thought the pier was being (inaudible). And of course, then they redid it. And of course brought us in that was when Neil Elsey, E-L-S-E-Y out of Kansas City, came in and he was in charge of that Baywalk and that whole revitalization of—

AH: Yes.

MG: —of downtown St. Pete. And he was of course before his time because he—

AH: Baywalk (inaudible).

MG: Baywalk is still now—

AH: Yes, finally.

MG: But it didn’t happen until a long time.

AH: Because I just remember everyone pulling out that was supposed to be in it, and yes.

MG: Oh, but you see the pier is where it started.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: Because that building was already there.

AH: Okay.

MG: So of course, my father-in-law gets approached and now puts the Columbia on the fourth floor and Cha Chas on the third. We also lease the third floor which is, of course, the smallest of all the floors—except for the aquarium which is the second floor. And the third floor, we use as a banquet and we had a banquet kitchen there.

AH: Okay.

MG: So we virtually paid rent for three floors. I’m sure we got a good deal, because of the wheel and dealing that the Gonzmarts do.

AH: Yes.

MG: But it was a risk.

AH: Yes.

MG: So, now we go in there, things are much better business-wise, and the Columbia is very beautiful. Richard goes in and I’m sure his brother had something to do with and, of
course, his father had a lot to do with it, and where they had and of course the view is
tremendous.

AH: Yes.

MG: It’s a 360-degree view.

AH: Yes, it is.

MG: But what they did they had taped off or solar screen—put a blackout screen on the
windows to put offices on the—which side, I want to say the west side but I’m not sure,
it’s not the side facing the city.

AH: Okay.

MG: So, anyway, on one side. And what they do in it is they build offices so you can’t
see the mess inside they block it. They black it. And they put the liquor room there too.

AH: Oh, okay.

MG: So now they’ve taken away like one whole side of this beautiful view. And of
course, that immediately comes down, they reorganize, and they do everything to the
third floor where we had a banquet kitchen, and we had a place to put the liquor. But
anyway it became much more conducive to our customers and of course, the view and
everything else.

AH: Yes.

MG: And that restaurant was a success. I mean, the view is killer; Cha Chas has always
done well.

AH: Are they still there, right?

MG: Oh yes. The only two Cha Chas that we have now are St. Petersburg and St.
(inaudible).

AH: I remember there was a time I couldn’t turn on the radio without hearing a Cha Cha
Coconut’s ad.

MG: See that was the other thing. Richard was always very instrumental in talking—well
we don’t advertise anymore. But there was a point where we needed to. But he knew how
to advertise; he knew how to get logos; he just has this knack and he would even to this
day—and we don’t do it because of advertising—but we’re very good friends with many
of the radio personalities because they’re our friends. Because we love especially
(singing) 94.1 [radio station]—
AH: Nine—okay—one, okay.

MG: But those people, Al Santana, I mean, (inaudible), all these people we were buddies with early on before Cha Cha Coconuts. So I mean, we would call in, they would talk, and you know—

AH: Yes.

MG: It was just a different era. It was a wonderful time.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: But because of Richard and his personality and his energy, he got all these people all psyched up; everyone was excited.

AH: Yes, okay. Well now let’s move on then and talk about the darker days in the nineties [1990s]—

MG: Oh, my father-in-law dying.

AH: Yes, now was there anything leading up to that? There was obviously no indication that’s there’s a crisis around the corner, right?

MG: No, there really was no indication.

AH: It seemed to come out of nowhere.

MG: There was no indication.

AH: Okay, and he had been sick for a while, right?

MG: Well, yes with (inaudible) cancer which was very devastating and—At that point we had now—Richard felt good enough wanted to move. We needed more help in the corporate office; he wanted to move the office out of the restaurant because it was very distracting to Richard as well, because Richard’s gotten much more involved now. But people knew they could come and find in the restaurant. I mean it was very distracting.

AH: Yes.

MG: And he and his father discussed it and it was very cramped quarters—very, very bad work situation.

AH: Yes.

MG: So they decide—because they own that building across the street anyway that—which they owned a lot of buildings in Ybor city, which eventually they all got sold off,
except for this one, which I’m glad they kept. But they put the corporate office there
above and by the time they opened that—had Cesar died? Yes, Cesar was dead. But
(inaudible) to the corporate office.

AH: Okay.

MG: But it hits the fan, I mean, it gets bad. Richard creates—because his father is gone.
And of course they are co-president, which we discussed that. And Richard creates this
pyramid with management team like he’s got. And then it hits him—
that the debt his father has left is so huge, millions of dollars, and he doesn’t have
anything to pay.

AH: Yes, not to mention that the restaurant isn’t really running itself.

MG: Right, well—

AH: People weren’t getting paid and—

MG: No, no, we couldn’t make payroll. No, no, our (inaudible) I mean, we cash only for
booze. It got really bad and now my (inaudible) and Casey is getting a divorce, so he
goes to sit by the pool in at my mom’s.

AH: He goes to do what there?

MG: Sit by the pool.

AH: Okay, yes.

MG: He checked out. And Richard is left with this mess.

AH: Now what’s Adela’s role in this, I mean—

MG: Adela’s very, very distraught, like, life is over.

AH: Yes.

MG: This is the most horrible thing that has happened, which it was—kind of. She has
had other bad things.

AH: Yes.

MG: And I do appreciate, because she was older—

AH: This was worse than Mariel—

MG: Yes, but Richard gave her an option.
AH: Yes.

MG: So he said, “Okay Mom, you got the (inaudible) sixteen karat diamond—” Oh, no, that was the (inaudible), that was the bracelet.

AH: Okay.

MG: But “—you got the sixteen-karat diamond Dad bought you when the yacht sank and then you got this bracelet, you got all these gold coins, you got a home, that’s really, really 5,000 square feet, Mom, you’re all alone, let’s talk about it.” Okay, well, she didn’t want talk. She would not—

AH: Yes, She didn’t want to give up those things?

MG: She did not want to let anything go.

AH: Okay.

MG: And Richard could not—he did not feel that he could force her, because she was already very fragile.

AH: Yes.

MG: So he thought, I’ll have to find another way. Which he did. Which was just go be honest and say, “Look, I got a big problem, I can’t pay you. I’ll pay you this much a month but I promise I will pay you back.” And our name was in the mud for a long time.

AH: Yes.

MG: And it was very bad and very embarrassing and I remember having to go to certain functions and I knew people—it was very bad. But anyway—

AH: Okay.

MG: I survived it. Been there, done that.

AH: Can you give me any examples of functions that were difficult—

MG: Oh, yes.

AH: I mean, I’m only looking for one?

MG: The one that sticks out in my mind (inaudible) our state accountant, what do you call that? CFO [Chief Financial Officer]? Richard went to her and said, “Look, I really need some help—”
AH: I thought your CFO was—

MG: No, no, we’re talking about the state of Florida, right now.

AH: Oh, yes. I know who you are talking about.

MG: Okay, she was the head of (inaudible), what’s her name?

AH: Carmen Sink?

MG: No, not Carmen, but Alex.

AH: Alex Sink.

MG: Yes, her grandparents were there—the Siamese twins.

AH: Yes, okay.

MG: Right, do you remember that?

AH: No, I didn’t know they were Siamese twins.

MG: You know the Siamese twins from the circus? Those were her grandparents.

AH: Yes, I remember you mentioning that before.

MG: One of them was her grandfather. Yes, so anyways, she was married to—what’s his name? Anyway, who was a very nice man. But she refused my husband, she wouldn’t have anything to do with us, totally turned her back on us.

AH: Yes. So you had to go to an event of some sort?

MG: Yes, and there was an event at her house, because Richard was involved in the Tampa Convention Center, the Chamber of Commerce—it was one of these committees—which he still is.

AH: Yes.

MG: And he never gave it up. But they were also on the same—whether it be her husband or I think it was her husband and Richard were on it. So we went to their home. I remember getting there and feeling like, When can I go? I want to die.

AH: Yes. Yes.
MG: Not nice, okay. So anyway, that’s (inaudible). That’s water under the bridge too. But those are the things that happened that you don’t forget. And of course, seeing my husband suffer terribly as he did and really being so very concerned about not just my (inaudible) but his mother, his brother, every employee at the Columbia Restaurant. And I mean, he was heart set and of course, the Columbia Restaurant, this institution. Like he says, he doesn’t want anything to happen in his generation. He’s almost done.

AH: Yes.

MG: He’s almost done. He just wants to make it. But you know it’s a terrible thing that— But anyways we paid everybody back.

AH: Yes.

MG: And everything is fine. And of course, now we are way better, because he finally has the control in his hands, as he should have.

AH: Yes, and a team to help him.

MG: But with his knowledge, he hired these people.

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean, he did everything just like Curt Gaither did. He does. Curt Gaither does. He did everything. There was no break.

AH: Yes.

MG: No break. This was a mission. I mean, and it was very hard for him to give up the reins.

AH: Oh, yes.

MG: And you see, Cesar never did—until it was too late, when he died. And of course, then Richard was left holding the bag. And of course, now everything really makes sense.

AH: Yes, it’s run like a business.

MG: Yes it’s run like a—Yes, there’s no secret stuff. There is no—I mean, it’s all IRS—everything. And of course, he has had to with the attorneys restructure the way things are done with the family, as well because of Casey’s divorces.

AH: Yes.

MG: Because when Casey divorced she named Richard, my mother-in-law, and the Columbia Restaurant in the divorce.
AH: Yes.

MG: And of course, everything was too co-mingled. Now that’s been solved. So the next divorce which was eminent, hopefully. You know—and Richard tells his brother “You’ve got to stop,” but the attorney says I have to do this. Well he goes that same attorney told my daughter, “Not to pay, to let her husband pay, so therefore, you don’t pay. And go to your wife and tell her she needs to get money from her (inaudible).” Because what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

AH: Yes.

MG: And that’s about it.

AH: Yes.

MG: Shut it down.

AH: Okay.

MG: Please.

*pause in recording*

AH: Well I just improvise.

MG: You’re good.

AH: But I’ve been thinking about this question for a little while.

MG: Oh, god. It sounds serious.

AH: Well, no, it’s not a Mariel question. But you know, I really had an enlightening interview with your daughters. And one of the things I was curious about is: at what point did Richard or you or whoever start thinking about them as successors? I mean, were they successors from the beginning because Adela, there was no precedent for this in the Columbia.

MG: I actually think that my mother-in-law was probably the one that said, “You need to name Lauren as a vice president.” We need to check with Richard. But I am almost positive my mother-in-law—but my mother-in-law being a woman and coming from this Latin background, and of course the only child, she was the only successor. But of course Cesar stole a lot of her limelight, she thought—he didn’t but she thought. And—

AH: She had plenty of limelight still. Is that what you are saying?
MG: Without a doubt, without a doubt. No, she stood on her own whether it be business or anything else. This woman was savvy.

AH: Okay, let’s finish up here.

MG: Right, but she was so savvy (inaudible).

AH: Okay.

MG: Well, she always told me, you know, I—

AH: Adela did?

MG: Adela. Adela always told me that I would follow in her footsteps, that I would be the one that would have to do what she did, which of course I never believed that I would.

AH: Yes.

MG: To this extent.

AH: Now, what did she do?

MG: Well she was—as far as the socializing, the Columbia restaurant, the standing behind your man—

AH: Yes.

MG: —the couple.

AH: Yes.

MG: And I didn’t realize how much it entailed either and (inaudible) but I mean, it’s a lot of fun but it’s a lot of work too, anyway.

AH: First lady of the Columbia.

MG: Well whatever I am, I will never be what she was. So, those are big shoes to fill. But she did always give me that, which was a compliment that she thought I had it in me to be able to do it. And I think I’ve done a pretty good job, okay. And I’m not committee oriented like she is. I am not—I mean, I do different things. Because of course, we are all individuals, but she had faith in me. Which meant a lot to me. And as far as the girls, she knew I always raised my girls that they could do anything. And of course, I always used her as a prime example and I truly admired her. And the girls—whether they believe it or not—that I did give that to them, she gave it to them because she gave it to me. But we were partners in that (inaudible) and she encouraged it. I encouraged it and—
AH: And at what point, I mean—

MG: Being Richard’s wife, as you know, I mean, the little bird said into his ear, okay. And he knows even to this day—I don’t know what I told him yesterday that “You need to think about this.” But she was very good at telling me that, because she knew I had a knack to tell him. And then it’s his idea which is fine, as long as it’s a good idea it doesn’t matter. And he has a very difficult (inaudible) giving it up. But like I’ve been telling him and of course, he’s hired this person who is helping us with our family issues. The transition to the next generations you know, (inaudible). And I told him, “Look Richard, you know Barry’s concerned too.” I mean, have you—

AH: Now what’s the last name?

MG: Banther. B-A-N-T-H-E-R, Barry. And I said, “You know, Barry’s concerned” because, of course, the girls share everything with me. And they have met with him recently—or at least Lauren has. And I don’t think you have told the girls enough, you may think you have, but just like what happened with your dad, you need to really get more specific. You really, really need to share. You assume that they know what you’re thinking. And he knows I’m right, because he assumes I know what he’s thinking. But I point-blank tell him, “Put it in e-mail, give it to me in writing, okay, because you think you’re telling me and you didn’t.” And to me, it’s very important that these children be prepared.

AH: Oh, yes.

MG: So you know, whatever they think, it’s fine. All I know, I want this to be a transition that my girls will be able to make and Lauren admitted to me, “Mommy, if something were to happen to Daddy tomorrow, I know Andrea and I couldn’t do it.” And it’s scary for them.

AH: Oh, I know. They’ve expressed it.

MG: I mean, he’ll be gone.

AH: They’ve expressed it to me, yes.

MG: And he just has a hard time letting go, Mr. Control Freak, so.

AH: Well he’s come a lot farther than—

MG: Oh he’s gotten much better—

AH: —Cesar did.

MG: Without a doubt.
AH: I mean, Cesar didn’t let go of anything.

MG: Oh, no. I remember one (inaudible) the sales, one of the sales was a secret, I mean, (inaudible) whatever.

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean, who am I going to tell? I’m not a spy! You know, but you know that’s—

AH: So it’s kind of a gradual process though—

MG: Oh, of course it is and I hope every generation gets into it.

AH: Yes, of you talking to Adela, and then you talking to Richard, and then Richard kind of coming to terms with—

MG: Well, Richard needs—I’m trying to train him.

AH: Yes.

MG: He needs to learn. I mean, it’s very hard to give that which you’ve been taught all of your life because your parents did it. I mean, you mimic them. And I want them—it has gotten much more open, I always talk too much okay, and I always ask too many questions. But those questions and all that talking made everyone else talk more, so then everybody else understood. Because I didn’t understand why everything was a secret and I really was very curious. So therefore my curiosity—and there’s stuff I don’t want to know, like you know. And even when Richard starts, I don’t really listen because I have that unique knack. All I know [is] I just want everything to be happy. That’s probably my biggest problem. I don’t like controversy.

AH: Oh, sure. Any mother wants their family to be happy.

MG: And right now, I think that the girls are very happy. They do have concerns of course about the business. Not the business itself but the transition and—

AH: Yes and the fact that—

MG: And I, as a mother, too, and a wife, and I know he hasn’t provided them (inaudible).

AH: And they want to be involved.

MG: Of course, well they wanted to take risks.

AH: They don’t want to be—
MG: Oh, stuck in the corner—

AH: Be silent partners of the inner circle, you know. Yes.

MG: Exactly.

AH: Yes.

MG: Well what it comes down to it, what’s going to happen? Who’s going to step up to the plate? Richard did. But do they have enough knowledge? He did. He went through the school of hard knocks. These girls have been living on the sweet street. So he needs to tell them. And I remember. I wasn’t involved in the business, but I lived it.

AH: I was impressed that they both have, you know, gathered a lot of experience on their own too. I mean, at different, you know, working at one restaurant or the other and you know experimenting with a few roles.

MG: But I’m going to tell you, Richard did do that. Richard did say, “Work the kitchen” did say, “You got to drive to Orlando.” And Lauren drove that, I don’t know how many months, okay.

AH: Yes, a long time.

MG: And she never complained and that was a test. And Cesar (inaudible) you know it’s always (inaudible) to me that’s why (inaudible) it’s a test.

AH: Yes.

MG: I mean, they’d come through. I mean, Andrea worked the kitchen. And you know he throws things at Andrea “I want this wine list—” You know and “Are you sure?” And once she said, “Every one she checked in every unit.” She checked it three times to make sure they had it because she didn’t want her father questioning her on anything. And that to me was very impressive, I mean, and very smart because you don’t want your butt kicked.

AH: Yes, absolutely. You want to be thorough. So okay—

MG: So that’s really it, Andy. I mean I don’t know (inaudible) say anything—

AH: No, no, no that’s fine.

MG: They’re very smart, they have a background, and I think I’ve given them the confidence and the knowledge as far as womanness goes.

AH: You’ve done a fabulous job.
MG: Well, for whatever it is they are what they are. And they—it’s done; it’s cooked.

AH: Yes, yes.

MG: It’s cooked. I can’t change it.

AH: Yes.

MG: They give me hell, so I think I did something right.

AH: Well thank you so much for sitting down and talking with us and being so frank and—

MG: Well, thank you.

AH: And everything—

MG: Thank you for letting me reminisce.

AH: Yes.

MG: It’s been very wonderful.

AH: Yes, and you know, this whole oral history project based in the library, is just been—really is going to do a lot to, I think, tie a lot of loose ends together on Tampa’s history and what’s—

MG: Well, you will tell—you will tie all the knots, my dear friend.

AH: Yes.

MG: Who, I love so very much and without a doubt I am so grateful to have met you.

AH: Likewise, thanks.

*end of interview*