

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Guadalupe Arredondo Uresti**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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Transcript

GOODSILL: Thank you for coming to be interviewed today, I appreciate it.

URESTI: My pleasure to be here.

GOODSILL: I thought we might start with how your family got to Fort Bend County.

URESTI: Very well, my name is Guadalupe Arredondo Uresti and I was born in Rosenberg, Texas on April 21, 1944.

My grandfather Carlos Arredondo came from Piedras Negras, Mexico but was raised in the San Antonio area. All his six children were born in Texas; he came to the Needville area in 1919 when my father was five years old. He stayed in Fort Bend County all his life. My grandmother Francisca Mireles was also born in Mexico but was raised in the Fred area working for German families. Carlos and Francisca were married December the 17th, 1910 in Boerne Texas, Kendall County. They had six children, Anestacia, John, Petra, Ester, Cosme and Isabell. My aunt Petra is the only one living, in Port Lavaca and she is ninety-seven years old. My father was John M. Arrendondo who was the son of Carlos and Francisca Arredondo.

My mother, Nicolasa Becerra Arrendondo, was the daughter of Jose and Severa Galvan Becerra. My mother had three sisters. The oldest was Natividad, second sister Dolores and the third sister Dorotea. My mother was between Dolores and Dorotea, her name was Nicolasa. She had four brothers the oldest was Paul, his real name was Apolinar but it was shortened to Paul...here. Richard was Ricardo, Julio was always Julio and Antonio my uncle Tony.

My grandfather and my grandmother on my Mother's side both came from Leon Guanajuato, Mexico also around 1919. They came from Mexico to escape the fighting going on during the time of Pancho Villa. That was the time when you see in the movies in the villages there in Mexico the soldiers come in and take all the men and they the steal chickens and rape the women. All that was going on during that time so my Grandfather and my Grandmother with my Uncle Paul and my Aunt Natividad on my mother's side, they were the four family members that came to Texas. He brought his family over and settled in the Needville area. They did farming when they first got here. They settled in the Guy / Needville area and then they moved to Rosenberg where my Grandfather Jose Becerra started a grocery store business on Second Street called Becerra's Grocery.

My Grandfather Jose Becerra bought about ten lots on Second Street and as the family was getting married he gave each son and daughter a lot to build a house on. My father and mother constructed a house in 1940. My Uncle Paul had his house across the street, my Uncle Richard had his house by our house. My Aunt Natividad had her family also by our house, my Uncle Julio... All the uncles and aunts lived in the block. My only aunt that did not build there and did not get a lot was because she didn't stay in Rosenberg. She got married and moved to Houston and was looked down for abandoning the family. I called it a compound really, all of us together. All the cousins were our own community. We played together, did everything together.

We practically lived at my Grandmother's house, which was right across the street. All holidays were spent at my Grandmother's house, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter. My Mother's family was so close-knit community that I was closer to my Mother's family than I was to my Father's family. I was at my Grandmother's house all the time. I was born in 1944 in my grandmother's house. The forties, fifties, sixties was when I grew up in Rosenberg, Texas. I lived there until I got married and I turned twenty-one. It was an area of Rosenberg, which was noted for being "across the tracks". "Across the tracks" always had the stigma, which was very evident and very real during my time of growing up. There was a divisional line in Rosenberg, it was a line that we hardly ever crossed, it was just there.

GOODSILL: Did it feel like you weren't welcome on the other side of the tracks?

URESTI: Let me backtrack. I now work with the Rosenberg Historians; it is a group that has been meeting for almost two years now. We try and define the original buildings in the downtown Rosenberg area, when they were built, what businesses were there, is the building still standing, what is it used for now. We try to fill in as many of the blanks as we can. It will become a book maybe next year or the year after. We meet at the Old Time Soda Fountain right there on Third Street in Renee Buttler's building. I remembered coming into Pickard and Huggins and buying ice cream but I couldn't sit there. Hispanics had to go outside and eat. That's the Rosenberg I grew up in. And at the Cole Theater we could only go to the balcony, we couldn't go to the bottom part. I have always loved Rosenberg, but that was the way it was at that time. That's the way we were conditioned, I think the thing that made me more of an outward person was my close family ties and my relationship with our church. My grandfather had the business and my father opened a furniture business in 1951. The business community came across the tracks to actually do business in the furniture store and do business in my grandfather's grocery store.

GOODSILL: So the grocery store that your grandfather had was on the north side of the tracks is what we are talking about? People from the south side would come over the tracks?

URESTI: Yes.

GOODSILL: Non-Hispanics?

URESTI: Non-Hispanics, yes would come across the tracks. When my father started the furniture store in '51 there were some customers that would say, "Mr. Arredondo please deliver this at night so my neighbors don't know where it's coming from."



GOODSILL: Why? They didn't want it to be known it was coming from a Hispanic provider?

URESTI: Yes! And in the sixties the Rosenberg division line was pretty much there. There were very few Hispanic families on the south side of the tracks that were property owners.

GOODSILL: Because?

URESTI: They just did not want to sell or rent to Hispanics, up until the sixties. I have a friend and when she got married she and her husband wanted to rent an apartment in Rosenberg. But because they were Hispanic they were turned down.

GOODSILL: Was there an economic difference between the south side and the north side of the tracks?

URESTI: Yes, the north side of the tracks was considered the economically disadvantaged.

GOODSILL: And was it because they couldn't get equivalent jobs?

URESTI: Only the Hispanics and the blacks lived across the tracks. In the downtown area, the surrounding streets, where the houses and everything was owned by whites.

GOODSILL: Was it true that it was harder for the minority residents to get high paying jobs?

URESTI: The majority of the residents were laborers. Before my father started the furniture store, he worked on the railroad and then he went to be a laborer with the constructions going in Houston. He would take workers in the truck and they would go to work. In fact he got a beautiful recommendation letter from Fluor where he worked as a laborer .

GOODSILL: Fluor Daniels, you mean?

URESTI: Yes. They gave him a reference letter to Shell... he was going to seek another job.

GOODSILL: It sounds like your father was one of those people who rose to the top.

URESTI: He did. Daddy did, he was a person with a lot of charisma and a lot of personality and there was never a bad person in the world for my father. He would go up to you and look at you and say, "You like your going to pay me." "What do you want?" (robust laughter) EXACTLY! We get stories all the time from people that will come up and say, "I still have my dining room table, the one that I bought from your dad in nineteen fifty-what ever."

GOODSILL: That must have been quite a thing when he went from being labor and then managing labor to running his own business.

URESTI: Doing labor the salary was not that good, but he took these other ten or 15 workers and they paid him to transport them because they didn't have vehicles but he did. I can close my eyes and see the truck with the back bed with the little slats on the side. The men would all sit there.

GOODSILL: And he would drive because he had a vehicle?

URESTI: He would drive them in because he had vehicle, which was extra money. Plus my father and my mother were never spenders. My mother was not a flamboyant person.

GOODSILL: But your dad probably took care of the men to and make sure they got treated fairly decently?

URESTI: Oh, yes, yes, yes Daddy had an impact of everybody that he met. Early on when he was working at the railroad and had just married my mother the superintendent came up and said, "What on earth are you doing? I keep paying you your check every week and I never see it clear, where are these checks?" Mother was just saving them not cashing them. He said, "Please cash those checks because you're getting my book keeping all out of whack here."

GOODSILL: (giggle) Was mother thinking, a check, a piece of paper was like money?

URESTI: Yea, she could just save it and save it.

GOODSILL: What year were your mother and father married?

URESTI: They were married in 1940.

GOODSILL: You didn't tell me the names of your siblings.



URESTI: My father and mother were married in 1940 at our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church there in Rosenberg. I have three sisters and two brothers, 6 of us.

GOODSILL: Tell me them all in birth order.

URESTI: My brother Carlos is the oldest, then me then my sister Lydia, then my sister Frances, then my brother John and then my sister Peggy. Peggy is adopted. She was one of my mother's nieces. Mother and Daddy adopted her and she was the last one, the youngest one.

GOODSILL: You mentioned your mother and father got married in a Catholic church? Was the church a big part of your family?

URESTI: Very much so, we lived two or three blocks from the church so everything was on our side of the tracks; the church, the grocery store, the furniture store, the whole family. Really and truly that was our life, growing up...that's all we knew. Other than going to school.

GOODSILL: Where did you go to school?

URESTI: First I started with our Lady of Guadalupe, the catholic school but then my parents transferred me to Travis Elementary.

GOODSILL: What was that like?

URESTI: There weren't very many students at that time.

GOODSILL: For example, how many in your class?

URESTI: I don't know but there weren't that many students in elementary. I think that was the only elementary in Rosenberg, Travis Elementary.

GOODSILL: Was it much of an adaptation for you or for your brother?

URESTI: For my brother it wasn't, my brother never went to catholic school. I still don't understand to this day why he didn't because I think my cousins went to public school and he just went when they went. I have no negative experiences from school.

GOODSILL: Did the black children go there?

URESTI: No we had no integration in Rosenberg until after I finished high school in 1963.

GOODSILL: The Hispanics would come to school with the Anglos but not the blacks?

URESTI: The blacks went to A.W. Jackson School, which was first grade to high school right there across the tracks.

GOODSILL: On the north side?

URESTI: Yes, Jackson

GOODSILL: OH, so the black population stayed on the north side?

URESTI: They stayed in the school there. That was a couple of blocks from our house.

GOODSILL: How did the black population and the Hispanic population living on the north side of the tracks?

URESTI: From my perspective... I didn't see any problem, we always knew our place... like we always knew our place with the Anglo population, we always knew our place with the Hispanic population, and we always knew our place with the black population. We didn't interact with them.

GOODSILL: Everybody stayed in his or her own little area.

URESTI: Everybody stayed in their own area. It was very segregated.

GOODSILL: And it worked.

URESTI: Yes, it did.

GOODSILL: Except that it was harder for a minority to work their way up the ladder of success.

URESTI: Yes, oh definitely. When I was graduated in 1963 the sister of my friend Alice Guerrero, from Richmond, had been going to college in Brownsville in south Texas. And she told Alice, "You have got to come to school over here because there are doctors and lawyers and they are all Hispanic. It was very rare, well almost non-existent, that we ever grew up with a doctor or a lawyer that was Hispanic who had any kind of higher education.

GOODSILL: How come the people in Brownsville did? They had been integrated longer?

URESTI: Well, Hispanics had been there forever and ever.

GOODSILL: So did your friend go?

URESTI: She did.

GOODSILL: And did she meet a nice somebody to marry?

URESTI: She did, she married an Anglo man fluent in Spanish. She didn't know Spanish but he was fluent in Spanish.

GOODSILL: She didn't know Spanish but he did? (laughter) That's an interesting twist isn't it?

URESTI: He was Anglo and they married and she became a principal and she stayed there most of her life.

GOODSILL: In Brownsville?

URESTI: She just retired and they are living now in Irving, Texas.

GOODSILL: I bet she had to learn to speak Spanish, did she not? (laughter)

URESTI: Yes I am sure she did. It was very rare that you saw any role models.

GOODSILL: Your dad was the beginning. His generation was the beginning of the ones who worked their way up.

URESTI: Daddy worked his way up. That's another thing that gave me an advantage, I grew up in a business. I was thirteen when I started helping my dad at the store. I was thirteen when I started teaching at church.

GOODSILL: So what education and what career did you choose?

URESTI: When I graduated from Lamar High School in 1963 I went to the University of St. Thomas and stayed there until 1965 and the fell in love, madly in love and got married and quit. Eventually I got an Associates degree from Wharton County Junior College. Then went back and took some courses at the University but I am still lacking some for my full Bachelors degree. One of these days when I have time I am going to go back. That is the extent of my formal education.

GOODSILL: So what kind of work did you do?

URESTI: Because I had started teaching Continuing Christian Education (CCE) when I was young I wanted to be a teacher. That is what I really wanted and my major was in teaching and my minor was in Spanish.

GOODSILL: When you take a minor in Spanish and you are Hispanic, what do you learn?

URESTI: To be able to write and speak correctly. We grew up with Spanish, but it was the Tex-Mex Spanish. Make up our words, half our conversation came out in Spanish half in English. I will be talking to my granddaughters, I just had lunch with one of them and I will start talking in Spanish and "Mo-Mo Mo-Mo I don't know what you're talking about!" Because I was speaking Spanish half and half English.

GOODSILL: She only speaks English?

URESTI: She only speaks English.

GOODSILL: So did you teach?

URESTI: Well, I taught but never in a school setting.

GOODSILL: In a CCE setting? And you raised a family?

URESTI: I got married in 1965 to Gilbert Uresti and we had two daughters and I now have five grandchildren. I got divorced in 1995 after thirty years of marriage.

GOODSILL: You have also had some political involvement? Tell me about that.

URESTI: In 1973 at Our lady of Guadalupe we had a parish priest. His name was Father Enrique Bravo. I was very close to the church, BUT in our church structure only men were allowed to take part in any decision-making. When the father would want to consult a group of parish members he would pick the men and they would go into his room, women were not even allowed to walk on the alter unless it was to pick up things to wash or fix or clean. When father Bravo came in 1973 I was twenty-nine years old. He decided parishes were supposed to have a parish council. We are going to have elections for a parish council in our church, which had never ever happened. The positions were president of the council, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. He took names from the parishioners. Of all those positions president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, which is the one position that is almost geared for a woman? The secretary! So people put down my name.

You have to understand I almost lived at the church all the time. I was the one that got the most votes for secretary when they put me on the ballot. Well of course I won for secretary. I was the secretary for the parish council in 1973. That was not even heard of... when that happened. I will never forget, I was the secretary and I took notes verbatim, I must have written every word everybody said because I wanted to do a good job. At the same time I never wanted Father Bravo to feel bad that he urged me to do this. I would type them and have the minutes for the council. That went on and then he pushed me to be a delegate for the Catholic Diocese Conference and I went to Houston trembling, but I was representing the church.

GOODSILL: Like your father, moving up.

URESTI: [Nods] So I did that. Then in 1975 Dora Olivo from our community had gotten a grant from the Fort Bend Voter Registration Program in San Antonio. She wanted to have a voter registration drive in the community to get people to vote. Backtrack... the year before I think Paul Cedillo had run for school board. I think the Hispanics came out to vote for him but the officials gave the voters a very hard time at the poles, gave them a lot of hurdles and requested things before they let them vote. So Paul Cedillo got very upset and he wrote to the state and made a formal complaint to the state department. Barbara Jordan during that time enacted some legislation for the voter right act. I was not involved in Paul Cedillo's election. Maggie Rivas Rodriguez, PhD, a professor from U.T. called me last week and she gave me that history of Paul Cedillo and the voting rights act. She said Rosenberg is the key name that jumps up so they are coming down to do an oral history of the voting rights. They are coming Sunday. She said somebody had given her my name that is why she was calling me. I said, "I cannot give you any information on that because I was not involved in that election." But she wanted my political history.

1975 is when I got involved with Dora Olivo's kickoff. We had a kickoff meeting, no I didn't Dora did. She and another friend of mine came to my house in 1975, December and asked me would I consider being a guest speaker. I had never been a guest speaker of anything. Because of my involvement with the church, because of my involvement with the business community with my dad and being a delegate to the diocese they said you would be a good speaker. I had never spoken before in my whole life to an audience. And I agreed.

GOODSILL: Was your dad still alive at this time?

URESTI: Oh, yes, yes yes. Daddy didn't die until two years ago. Daddy was 97. Anyway I went to be a speaker and that was December '75 and it just so happened that in that Paul Cedillo was in the audience. After the meeting he comes up to me and says, "You know, Lupe, you should run for city council." I had never even thought there was a city council in the City of Rosenberg. I thought this man is not all his senses. In 1976 the voter registration had registered a lot of Hispanics. Now let's get somebody to run for council. We need to get somebody to run for council. There was a concerned citizens group they endorsed three candidates. One gentlemen, Mr. Steve Zamora ran for Mayor, never before had an Hispanic run in the council and Felicita Arriaga and myself... there were three candidates on that ballot in 1976 to run for council. Right now you can go and check the records the voting records of Rosenberg. It was highest turnout in the City of Rosenberg - they came to vote against us.

GOODSILL: The Anglo population?

URESTI: The Anglo population. Because it was the first time you had three Hispanics in an actual ballot. NOT ONE, but three. So that year holds the record for people coming out to vote. And we did everything wrong that could have been done wrong. We aligned ourselves, we went in a coalition we did everything wrong.

GOODSILL: Who won the election?

URESTI: The incumbents, the incumbents...

GOODSILL: The Anglo incumbents.

URESTI: Oh, yes. You have to also keep in mind that my father was a very respected member of the business community. Members of the City Council had all been men during the 70's. In 1970 one of the councilmen died. They had to fill his term for the remaining term. They asked my dad to fill that council seat. When Daddy filled that council seat he filled it until it expired. He then said, "No I am not political. I don't want any of this I just did this to fill it in." So Daddy had already been on the council so it wasn't anything foreign. As a woman, in 1976 when they said let's get somebody to run I was very much in agreement. But in my mind I wanted a man. I wanted a very distinguished Hispanic man with a suit that looked business-like and really meant business. That's the only thing I could equate, not a woman.

Anyway we couldn't find any man to do it, so in 1978 they came again and said, "Lupe you have to run again." Whatever they told me must of worked so I ran. I put my name and I was the only one at that time there was nobody else except one Hispanic candidate, but I had five people vying for that position. Five people were running for that position. When the elections were all done I didn't get fifty-one percent so I had a runoff with an Anglo man. It was me and this gentleman and I won the runoff election. It was a victory. It was a victory for the community. Well first of all the community was mad because the fifty-one percent that you had to have the majority of votes to be able to win and there were five candidates. Even though I out-placed the other person by three hundred votes I still didn't have fifty-one percent. I still had to have a runoff. They did not understand this so they got upset and came out to vote more.

GOODSILL: They thought it was prejudice against you and they said we are not going to have that.

URESTI: Yes They thought it was like that but it wasn't. It was the way it was. Anyway I ran 1978 and won, then I ran in 1980 and won, I ran in 1982 and won, 1984 and won, in 1986 and won, 1988 and won, and won in 1989. It was my last year on the council.

GOODSILL: 1978 to 1989?

URESTI: Yes, '78 to '89, eleven years I spent on the Rosenberg City Council.

GOODSILL: Wow, that must have been interesting for you.

URESTI: Very interesting and in the late seventies I was asked, because we were in business, I was asked to be a member on the board of the Chamber of Commerce. There were no women in the in the '70s, absolutely no women. Eventually I became divisional vice-president of the chamber, which was also the early '80s. I tell everybody I'd go to the meetings and here are thirty men and I am the only women. A women - strike number one. Then strike number two - I am Hispanic. That was the biggest hurdle for me when I sat there in the city council being elected in 1978. I am sitting but Mrs. Lynett Self was also on the council.

GOODSILL: Lynett Self. Why do you mention her? Because she was a women? (laughter)

URESTI: SHE WAS ANOTHER WOMAN. She softened the blow for me because otherwise I really would have been totally intimidated. At first I would just sit there and listen. I wouldn't say anything I was scared to death and eventually I would think, he is saying the same thing that's in my mind and they are agreeing so I guess that decision was good in my mind. It must have been good. Little by little I started voicing my opinion or what I felt I knew. At the end they really respected me. They respected my opinions and they respected my outlook on the issues.

GOODSILL: That is quite a story. I don't know how long we might go here, but I guess you could tell some interesting things on the development that happened here in Rosenberg during those years.

URESTI: Oh, definitely, definitely.

GOODSILL: Do we want to talk about that or do you want to talk about the development of the Hispanic forum? Where should we go at this point?

URESTI: In the city of Rosenberg for the Salon Zaragosa was the focal point of the Hispanic community in the early 30's, 40's, and 50's.

GOODSILL: Explain that to us.

URESTI: The Salon Zaragosa was a dance hall. It was a large dance hall that was constructed by the members of the community in the 30's when the majority of the people lived in the farms. The Salon Zaragosa was the place where people would get married, have their dances, and in fact our Lady of Guadalupe church started in 1936 by the Basilian Fathers. There was no church constructed but they started having the masses at the Salon Zaragosa. It was the original place for the masses and then the church was constructed and finished in 1940. The majority of these families that were from the area had come from Mexico. They held close to their heart the Mexican celebrations and Mexican customs and Mexican traditions. Diez y seis De Septiembre (Sept. 16th) is day of Mexican Independence. They reenacted those celebrations here. In September they had a BIG dance where they would crown the Queen of the Fiestas Patrias. That was the highest honor any young teenage girl could get in the City of Rosenberg, to be the Queen of the Fiestas Patrias. Different groups would sponsor girls. Like Mr. Duran says in that article, it was a penny a vote, so the ones that collected the most money were crowned.

GOODSILL: Was it a fundraiser?

URESTI: It was a fundraiser. It was like a chapter group named Cruz Azul (Blue Cross) where they had their officers and the upkeep of the Salon Zaragosa and for the putting on the dances.

GOODSILL: So they paid their expenses.

URESTI: They paid their expenses ...

GOODSILL: With these pennies

URESTI: Renting the crowns and renting the capes. The capes would span from... they would crown the Queen on the stage and the cape would span about fifteen or twenty feet, coming out, you know those long capes like the royal capes.

GOODSILL: Were they colored?

URESTI: Red, just beautiful, beautiful. It was an elaborate thing and little booths would be put in front of the Salon where you could go and eat food. Everyone would come out.

GOODSILL: Where was it?

URESTI: North of the railroad tracks, 400 block of First Street. My grandfather's store was on Second Street and the Duran grocery store was on the other corner.

GOODSILL: Are both of those still there?

URESTI: The Duran grocery store no, everything has been raised. The grocery store was bulldozed. The old Zaragosa hall dilapidated and just fell down and they just tore it down. They really demolished it about in the eighties. Somewhere in the 1980s.

GOODSILL: It says [in the article] that the ladies charged fifty cents to seventy-five cents to dance.

URESTI: In the hall, they would have ladies that would dance.

GOODSILL: Is this leading up to the Hispanic forum?

URESTI: The Fort Bend Hispanic forum was actually started in 2005. It was strictly set for Hispanic scholarships in the community. The focal festivity is the Cinco De Mayo the big fund raiser that is held every year.

GOODSILL: Raising funds for scholarships? For Hispanic students? Based on need, based on merit?

URESTI: Yes, based on need and merit, both.

GOODSILL: So it was formed in order to raise money for scholarships and what was the vehicle for raising the money?

URESTI: The vehicle for the Fort Bend Hispanic Forum is sponsorship of Cinco De Mayo. Last year the Hispanic Heritage Forum gave out twenty-five scholarships to students.

GOODSILL: That is very impressive. Sponsors pay money to be part of the parade?

URESTI: The sponsors are part of the Cinco De Mayo celebration, their sponsorship goes directly to the scholarships.

GOODSILL: That must be satisfying to be involved with that.

URESTI: It really is because you read the essays. We had a student that graduated and she was accepted by A&M. She was accepted by all the large universities but her mother works at Wal-Mart as a maintenance person so there was no way that she could afford to go even though she got a scholarship. There is no way that you can afford the room and board and the living expenses. It just was not feasible. She was separated from the father and the mother was left to raise the children. She went to Wharton Junior College. From Wharton she went to University of Houston. She graduated about a year ago with a Bachelors in business and international studies.

GOODSILL: It will be interesting to see what she does with her life. Talk about giving people a leg up. Is it for residents of Rosenberg only?

URESTI: No, it is for all of Fort Bend County.

GOODSILL: That is wonderful. That must be very satisfying.

URESTI: It is, it really is. The Hispanic Heritage Forum was originally going to be called the Hispanic Heritage Foundation. We were invited to a reception in Houston, where several people from the country were coming because they were going to present an award or something. We are there in that reception and this lady walks up to Joe, one of our board members. And says who are you with. He says I am with Hispanic Heritage Foundation. She says REALLY? I am too. I am with Hispanic Heritage Foundation.

GOODSILL: Oops!

URESTI: We had to come back to the drawing board. That's why it's the Hispanic Heritage Forum (laughter). We didn't want any conflicts with names. It has been growing every year. We see a great need for education, we see a great need for students out there that really want to be educated.

GOODSILL: So part of your mission is education?

URESTI: Education, yes. Very much education and being a helping group in the community.

GOODSILL: Are there scholarships available for people who aren't citizens like the "dreamers"?

URESTI: Yes, yes.

GOODSILL: Tell me about that.

URESTI: We actually give the scholarships to anyone that is accepted in a University or College. The money goes directly to the College; it does not go to the student.

GOODSILL: And there is no distinction, what city they are from or what their citizenship is?

URESTI: No, no as long as they have been accepted then the money goes to the college.. Money does not go into the hands of the student

GOODSILL: What were some of the significant changes that happened during the time you were on the Rosenberg City Council?

URESTI: One of the most significant changes was the awareness of the people of the importance of the involvement. I guess I forgot to tell you, we lost in 1976, in 1977 I was urged by the Father to be a delegate for the National Catholic Conference in Washington D.C. That was the first time I had ever gone in a plane. I was 33. So we went to Washington. These were all Catholics, this was the National Catholic Conference and thousands of people... the majority of them were Cubans. This was in 1977 so these were the people that had come in the sixties to Florida. They were in Washington at the conference. I don't know if you know Cubans but Cubans are very vocal very pushy, very, very involved.

GOODSILL: Aggressive?

URESTI: Very Aggressive.

GOODSILL: Now just for those of us who don't know, would be Cubans be considered Hispanic?

URESTI: Yes, I think so. Anyway we were there. We are all Catholics but we were Mexican Americans from Texas and they were Cubans. They were making changes to the church, remember this was church related, rules, resolutions and what ever. They would say "Y'all have been here in this country for so many years and haven't done anything. We are taking over and we are really going to move." This was their mannerism; they would quite us down all the time, like we didn't know what we were talking about.

In 1978 they came and asked me to run again...I guess I was still fired up from the Cubans saying we had never done anything and we were stagnant. That's when I decided to run and it was positive at that time, thank you Jesus, praise the Lord. It was positive.

GOODSILL: So what were some of the changes you saw in your eleven years?

URESTI: When I first got elected it was for the people to realize that they had a voice in government. They had a voice to pick and choose who they wanted to represent them.

GOODSILL: How on earth did you get that message across?

URESTI: Very rigorously... I really and truly made them understand. I had meetings, come understand your government. I would have the mayor, and I would have the council actually be there and actually explain how things worked.

GOODSILL: How did you get people to attend?

URESTI: Because I would ask them to come and invite them at city hall so they would feel comfortable in the City Hall chamber. Comfortable seeing this is the way the government works and this is this department, we would have the fire chief...

GOODSILL: Was anybody else doing that?

URESTI: No, no no, no. I was the only one that ever did.

GOODSILL: Was it just for the Hispanic population?

URESTI: I made it for the Hispanic population, yes. And it was very well received.

GOODSILL: Did you have some people who stepped up as a consequence of that?

URESTI: When I was in office as the Mayor, I had a lot of little girls groups...

GOODSILL: Wait a minute, as the MAYOR?

URESTI: Oh, I didn't...

GOODSILL: You were the Mayor of Rosenberg??

URESTI: Yes

GOODSILL: (giggles) You missed mentioning that point.

URESTI: Anyway when I was in office I emphasized the importance of voting, the importance of understanding your government and actually pin pointing the areas north of the railroad tracks that had always been forgotten. There was no money for that area.

GOODSILL: Things like infrastructure, paving...

URESTI: Infrastructure, large ditches that were caving in, dilapidated buildings.

GOODSILL: Trash delivery all the things that the city is responsible for providing.

URESTI: Trashy lots that nobody ever cared about. People over here, they don't care about us. We don't have any lights in the street because we are over here they are not going... so I would actually make a neighborhood meeting with the residents. I would say if you care that much about your lights then you be here at six o'clock because I am going to bring the chief of police here and I am going to bring the mayor over here and I am going to bring... You are going to tell them that your concerns. And I would have neighborhood meetings. From there a neighborhood block organization was built. It gave them a little bit more backbone.

GOODSILL: And a feeling of participation in their own community.

URESTI: Yes, a backbone and they had voice in what would happen. Numbers are great. I keep telling everybody all you need to do is count to four. If you count to four you can have anything you want. In 1989 I left the council. I didn't run. I chose not to run. Diane Wilson once told me, "Lupe when it stops being fun just get out." I always remember that and so I got to that point. It's not fun anymore. In 1988 I had the City manager, the Mayor and all the council... we were all in a working cohesive group. We could do and undo. Well in 1988 the mayor was ousted, EVERY council seat was replaced. I was the only one that did not lose the election in '89. We had drawn that year for the stagger terms and I got one year from eighty-eight to eighty-nine, that's why my last year is only one year. I said, "I can not work with a group of people that were too... and I was the enemy to them because I was part of the other...I was part of the group that was the enemy to them. So I said no, it's not fun anymore so in eighty-nine I left.

I left in a positive term. In 1992 I was at my mother's house, my dad was there and my brother, Carlos, at the kitchen table. The newspaper was there and it gave a recap of the city of Rosenberg. All the progress that it had done in the year, it was a whole big page. I was looking at it and said, "You know what I am thinking? 1989 to 1992, I am thinking of getting back into politics. I think I would like to run but this time I don't think I'd like to run for council. I'd like to run for Mayor."

My father looks at me and says, "If something isn't broke don't fix it. The city is doing fine, why would you want to do that? Why would you set yourself up to a disappointment?" My brother Carlos says, "Let her run I will be there to take her to the hospital when she has the heart attack when she looses." They were having a BIG laugh, a lot of fun at my expense. I said, "If I hadn't decided before, you have made my decision... I have decided I am going to run." Because they made me so mad, so I did run and I won.

GOODSILL: What were your years as Mayor?

URESTI: I was the Mayor from 1992 to 1995. All my elections have been at large. I have never run in the district. In 1992 the League of United Latin Americans Citizens (LULAC) came in Rosenberg to fight for single member districts, because before that, it was all at large. Well the Justice Department approved it and because of that we had to have another election in August and implement the single member districts with candidates running for the districts and two at large. I was elected in April, my term ended in August when the new election came by because I had to run again. I ran again at large and won.

GOODSILL: So what happened during your term? What are some of the accomplishments that your proud of?

URESTI: During the term when I was the mayor it was almost an open door policy. People could come in and voice their opinions and come to the city council meetings. There were so many people coming and Lyn Adophus, our city secretary, said, "Lupe you are like a revolving door here at city hall. You are the only mayor that ever had a revolving door in city hall." Because people would feel comfortable to come in and say whatever. Another thing was the council, I still had people that were not in my corner and they did not make it easy for me but at the same time, it was very positive for an Hispanic to actually have been elected as the Mayor of the City of Rosenberg Texas and a Hispanic women to boot. As I say all the time I had two strikes against me, I was Hispanic number one and then I was a women number two.

GOODSILL: And you never got that degree

URESTI: And I never got that degree.

URESTI: I got elected in April, in June we had a Texas conference of officials in El Paso. One of the guest speakers was Lena Guerrero the Railroad Commissioner under Ann Richards. She got ousted. She was in her lime light at that time. She was a guest speaker. She walked in the lobby area and she had an entourage, she had her photographer, she had the camera with the umbrella. They were setting it up to take pictures... it was a big thing. She passed by me, she read my name tag and she came back again said (softy), "Am I reading this right, you're the mayor of Rosenberg Texas?! How on earth did you do that?" (laughter). I will never forget that. I said, (sheepishly) "Oh, they voted." I had to really be comfortable with is a lot of the men who did not like the idea of a woman much less a Hispanic woman telling them what to do. I was the boss of the 165 employees. I mean a lot of times; golly we have a... beep, beep mayor in the city of Rosenberg. There were a lot of people that just could not accept it. I always said I am a mayor for the community. That was the hardest thing in my mind ... okay I'm Hispanic, I am a women but at the same time I have to look at the whole picture. What's going to benefit the whole community? Not the individuals...

GOODSILL: It's not the north or the south or the east or the west...it's the whole thing.

URESTI: Exactly. I am looking for the overall benefit of everyone. No I didn't go on the Hispanic banner, I was just trying to be an elected official representing the people.

GOODSILL: Were you ready to retire by 1995 from that job?

URESTI: No, I lost. I lost because I never could get into the political... how do I say it? To really stay afloat you have to go with flow and a lot of times I acted in sincerity and naivety. I acted and reacted how my heart thought was the right way. The housing authority director at that time wanted to bring public housing into the city of Rosenberg. They made a plea; they went to talk to all the council. In my heart... oh my God we need low-income housing, for the citizens! Well never in my whole life did I realize the can of worms that I had opened up. Everyone, I mean the Coalition of the Christian Pastors, the Coalition of the... there was standing room only, there was people standing outside the yard of the city council and there were people in the back with NIMBY signs. . I am sitting up there wondering, what does NIMBY mean? What is that? (Not In My Back Yard) What do they have that for? They talked to me and said you know you have got to change or whatever, but it was just too late. The thing was already there and the election came and I lost, that was it.

GOODSILL: Did housing authority build low-income housing?

URESTI: No, no no. no. No it wasn't able to BUILD them without A LETTER from the council to actually start an application. It was just a letter, but it wasn't even... there was NOTHING. There was no property or anything. I lost the election that year and got divorced that year (chuckle). In 1996 I was offered the director of the Housing Authority and I have been the director for seventeen years now.

GOODSILL: What does that job entail?

URESTI: It's a rent subsidy voucher program where the office qualifies families, low income, handicapped disabled people to get a voucher and actually go out there and find a place to live and the federal government subsidizes the rent of the individual based on income and family composition. Lets say the going SSI check is \$721 and that is their only income. They get a voucher, go out and get a one-bedroom apartment. Out of their \$721 they'll pay maybe \$86, the federal government subsidizes the balance and they can live independently in their own apartment.

GOODSILL: So this is a successful program?

URESTI: It's very successful.

GOODSILL: Do they have to do anything to keep their benefits?

URESTI: Only comply with the rules and regulations of the housing authority, which is the housing voucher rules and regulations.

GOODSILL: They don't have to work or anything like that?

URESTI: The majority of our handicap disabled people they can't work. But the families do have to have income to be able to be on our program, yes. They cannot just walk in and say, I don't have any income.

GOODSILL: So you have been doing that for seventeen years. My goodness you have had a very interesting career. When you were a little girl running the streets between grandma and home, who would have thought?

URESTI: Never, never, never. I sit with those historians in Rosenberg and here I am trying to piece together (laughter) history that I never even knew, it is very interesting, I love history, I love history.

GOODSILL: What a great interview, thank you so much.