

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSIONER  
*ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Robert Gracia**  
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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner  
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18 Pages



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BAUMGARTNER: My name is Karl Baumgartner and today is September 27, 2022. I am conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Robert Gracia at 1925 First Street in Rosenberg, Texas, on behalf of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

Mr. Gracia has been an important civic leader of Rosenberg for many years. He served in the Rosenberg Police Department for thirty-three years including twenty-five years as Police Chief. He served as Interim City Manager on three occasions as well as being appointed City Manager, and served as leader of numerous civic activities during that period.

Robert, what is your full legal name?

GRACIA: My full legal name is Robert Gracia.

BAUMGARTNER: No middle name. And your date and place of birth?

GRACIA: May 26, 1956. I was born at Polly Ryon Hospital and grew up in north of the tracks in Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: What were your mom and dad's names?

GRACIA: My mother's name is Janie Galicia Gracia, and my dad is Joe Zavala Gracia.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you know your grandparents?

GRACIA: Yes, I was fortunate to have known my maternal grandmother, Martina Martinez Gonzales and my great grandmother Juanita Guerrero Martinez. I did not know my paternal grandparents.

BAUMGARTNER: Did they live in town or they did they move here?

GRACIA: They all lived in Rosenberg. My dad grew up in the Damon area, served in the military during the Korean War and was honorably discharged at the rank of sergeant.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have siblings?

GRACIA: Yes, two brothers and a sister. Joe Richard Gracia, Ray Gracia, and Rebecca Gracia Nimmons.

BAUMGARTNER: Robert, you've seen a lot of changes here over the years. What was Rosenberg like when you were in high school and growing up?

GRACIA: Rosenberg was a small community. We didn't have all the box stores and restaurants in the area. Everything was centered around downtown Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: Basically, surrounding the Third Street area.

GRACIA: Third Street between Avenue F and Avenue H. My uncle and dad operated a boot, shoe, and saddle repair business in downtown Rosenberg. I attended first grade at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic School, then transferred to Travis Elementary. My brothers and I were raised across the street from A.W. Jackson School. We would hang out at the football practice field where the Jackson Eagles practiced. Harry Wright was the head coach at the time.

BAUMGARTNER: He became principal.

GRACIA: Yes, he moved over to Lamar High School as an assistant principal and then was named principal at B F Terry High School.

BAUMGARTNER: When you were in grade school, was that before integration?

GRACIA: Yes, the schools were segregated. I grew up in the black and Hispanic neighborhood north of the railroad tracks in Rosenberg. On weekends I remember going to the Cole Theater; black citizens were not allowed to sit with the general population. They had a separate entrance and sitting section. I also remember that my doctor's office had two waiting rooms, one for white patients and one for black patients.

All the Rosenberg businesses and stores were located in downtown. The most popular

businesses were the Cole Theater and 2Ms Burgers. Later came Rose-Rich Shopping Center built east of downtown followed by Lamar Plaza Shopping.

BAUMGARTNER: And when was that?

GRACIA: Lamar Plaza was built in the 70's.

BAUMGARTNER: I moved here to go into business in 1973, I guess when you were a teenager growing up. My initial location was the corner of Third Street and Avenue I two blocks from downtown; I had a little mobile home place there.

GRACIA: On the left side. I remember that.

BAUMGARTNER: You have a good memory. Not many from Rosenberg will remember that. Leon Danziger leased the lot to me.

GRACIA: I knew Mr. Danziger, he owned and operated a shoe store on Third Street. Saturdays were busy in downtown and I remember him standing outside his store peddling his shoes. He was a good caring individual.

The city has grown and the cotton fields and rice fields are gone. There's been an increase in retail and residential development in the area.

BAUMGARTNER: I remember reading about that, but it was before my time, I didn't see that.

GRACIA: Yeah, there were cotton fields in town. And back then you knew the people in the area.

BAUMGARTNER: It's like the county fair. You used to go to the fair and you'd know about half the people there. You go to the fair now and it's so crowded it's like a zoo. You don't know anybody.

GRACIA: Like church. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church grew from a small congregation to 2,500 members.

BAUMGARTNER: What would you guess it might have been?

GRACIA: I think it was less than 500 back in the days.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Okay, so you went all the way through high school here?

GRACIA: Lamar Consolidated. I graduated in 1975.

BAUMGARTNER: And then what did you do when you graduated?

GRACIA: I attended two years at Wharton County Junior College and worked at K-W Industries, Inc. a steel light pole manufacturing company. My dad at age 92 still works for the Company.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow, that's great.

GRACIA: In 1979 I married Olga DeLeon Gracia and we started a family. We've been married 43 years, with three children. Robert Brian Gracia; Steven Michael Gracia; and Marissa Lauren Gracia.

In 1980, I decided working for the manufacturing company wasn't what I wanted to do for a living, and in February 1980 I quit my job.



*Top row l-r: Robert Brian and Steven Michael.  
Center row l-r: Sabella, Lelia, Olga, Robert, and  
Marissa Lauren.  
Front row: Avy.*

**HIRED BY THE CITY OF ROSENBERG**

GRACIA: I was hired by the City of Rosenberg as a police dispatcher In March 1980.

BAUMGARTNER: Let's see, you were 24 then. So why the police department? Was there anything in your background that gave you any inkling that you might want to be going into law enforcement?

GRACIA: No. I felt that what I was doing at the time was not something that I wanted to do, even though the money was good. I felt that I was not fulfilling my needs. I think my purpose in life is to help people, and I felt that I could do that working as a police officer.

BAUMGARTNER: Why do people go into law enforcement? Is there a typical motivating thing why people decide to join the police department? I have a vague idea that in some cases police officers were rebellious when they were growing up, and as they matured then shifted to the other side.

GRACIA: I honestly believe that it is a calling. It takes a special type of person to be a police officer, or for that matter a firefighter. I believe these occupations are callings.

Not everyone is cut out to be a police officer. During my time at the Rosenberg Police Department, I witnessed officers hired and gone in six months or less.

BAUMGARTNER: You noted that one of your motivations was wanting to help people. Would you say that's typical of some police officers?

GRACIA: I think so. In the neighborhood I grew up in, I would see friends that were addicted to drugs. The same people living in the area were the drug dealers. For these very people, i.e., drug dealers or peddlers, it was their way of making money. People got addicted to the drugs and even alcohol, resulting in them getting hurt, and some other people were dying because of their addiction.



When I became a police officer this dealing of and addiction of drugs and alcohol was one of the things that I was able to identify as the contributing factor to the crime in that area. And once we identified the problem, we started a working partnership with others in the community to minimize crime in this area.

We took initiatives that made an impact. Crime in that area I believe decreased by 24%. Although, it took many years as Police Chief to be able to fulfill my goals and objectives.

BAUMGARTNER: Was this kind of one of your goals when you joined the force? Why did you start as dispatcher?

GRACIA: Well, at the time, I was not a licensed police officer. I decided that the best way to learn about police operations was to start at an entry level position. During this time, I was working full-time in dispatch and attending the police academy.

BAUMGARTNER: You advanced real rapidly, didn't you? That's what it looked like to me on your record.

GRACIA: Well, I worked at it. I was given the opportunity to work in every division in the police department. It helped me to attain an understanding of what officers assigned to each division go through and what some of the issues are. It helped me understand the day-to-day operation of the police department.

BAUMGARTNER: And some of that knowledge you were picking up when you were a dispatcher.



*Front row l-r: Dave Morgan and Jeff Johnson.*

*Back row l-r: Jeff Tucker and Willie McQueen, Sonny Colunga, Robert Gracia, and Kenny Seymour.*

GRACIA: Yes, dispatch is the nerve center of the department. Every call for assistance goes through dispatch. The information gathered from the initial call by dispatch allowed the officer a better understanding of issues needing to be dealt with.

### ROSENBERG CHIEF OF POLICE

BAUMGARTNER: And you became Chief when you were like 30 or 32. You were young.

GRACIA: In 1988 I was 32. I had just completed the FBI Academy in March 1988 and shortly thereafter I was appointed police chief on November 2, 1988.

BAUMGARTNER: 32. That seems to me to be real young for police chief. Was it young or was it just the way it worked out?

GRACIA: At the time I did not feel like I was young, but today in retrospect, yes, I was. I ask myself now, how did I survive through those early years? Usually, one gets promoted to chief later in their careers. I was fortunate that city council gave me the opportunity and had the confidence in me to manage and lead the police department.

BAUMGARTNER: This is off the subject a little, but regarding the FBI Academy, I know that you were honored by attending and graduating from the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. What is going on with the FBI? Why are they getting criticized so much today? Does the organization really have a such a leadership issue?

GRACIA: It's my opinion that the Director of the FBI has politicalized the agency.

BAUMGARTNER: What do you mean?

GRACIA: Well, the Director is pressured by elected officials to deal with political issues when the FBI is there to investigate crime.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah. I mean, it's terrible, really, when you look at how their image has



radically deteriorated over a certain period of years.

You know, the thing that comes to mind most about your career, and this is a compliment, is that I hardly ever heard anything about the Rosenberg police department. I mean, to me, it always was “no news is good news,” and that's the way it seemed like it was when you were chief. There weren't any big scandals. There weren't any major issues; no doubt some things took place that I wasn't aware of, but it just seemed like everything worked the way it was supposed to, and it wasn't a source of problems.

GRACIA: I learned that politics do not belong in the police department. I had to learn the politics of the day to be able to navigate through the system.

BAUMGARTNER: When you say politics, do you mean within the department or City Council politics?

GRACIA: Both internal and external.

BAUMGARTNER: Both. That's the way of the world.

GRACIA: Yes, I reported directly to city council which consisted of seven members. Each member had a different expectation on how the police department should operate making it difficult but not impossible to manage the day-to-day operation. I was the buffer between council and the police department.

Externally, my responsibility was to protect the citizens from police abuse and protect officers from false allegations. Once an investigation was completed and if the outcome was not favorable to the citizen or officer, at times this would become political. If the investigation revealed the officer was in violation of policy, then it was time for the officer to go.

BAUMGARTNER: Needed to go? You mean needed to be moved out?

GRACIA: I mean it was time to terminate the officer.

## SELECTION OF POLICE OFFICERS

BAUMGARTNER: How are police officers recruited? Is it just a certain flow of volunteers that emerge?

GRACIA: Police officers are recruited at police academies, universities and through different social media platforms.

BAUMGARTNER: So, applicants can receive academic exposure to the experience.

GRACIA: Yes. And one of the challenges that the city had was not being able to compete with other agencies that were paying better than the City of Rosenberg and offering benefits that the City of Rosenberg was not offering. So, I had to work with city council to convince council that in order to hire quality people we need to be able to provide benefits that will attract quality people for the city.

BAUMGARTNER: How did City Council respond?

GRACIA: Favorably. However, it was a long-term process to get council to make salary adjustments. My goal was to hire the most qualified person that was trainable and had an understanding of the different needs in the community. So, it was critical to make the necessary salary adjustment to be able to hire the most qualified police officer.

BAUMGARTNER: To utilize your staff, how did you establish different geographical areas of town?

GRACIA: Districts are set up according to the number of calls and population of a particular geographical area. Officers were assigned to districts primarily for 2 reasons: 1) to build a better relationship with the people and/or business owners and 2) to be able to respond within a reasonable time to a call.

BAUMGARTNER: What are the criteria for your officers? What would you look for?

GRACIA: The officers must be mentally and physically fit with no criminal history and must be a licensed police officer.

BAUMGARTNER: When you're looking for a fit with the applicant, what kinds of things do you look for?

GRACIA: We are looking for characteristic traits such as, Strong Initiatives, Sense of Ethics, Proficiency at Communication, Even Tempered, Common Sense, the Desire to Learn and Driven to Serve. Every recruit must pass a physical fitness test and be evaluated by the department's psychologist.

BAUMGARTNER: Is it reasonably accurate?

GRACIA: Yes, absolutely. Occasionally one might slip through the crack, but generally they're on point.

BAUMGARTNER: So that was an important part of your screening process?

GRACIA: The psychological evaluation is the most important part of the screening process.

BAUMGARTNER: What's the difference between Rosenberg PD and Sugar Land or Houston?

GRACIA: I don't think there is much of a difference. The only difference that I see is that the City of Sugar Land might allocate more funding to the police department. As far as Houston, the only difference is size.

BAUMGARTNER: What's some examples of the personality characteristics that you think are important for a police officer, just in general, some features that you like to see in an applicant.

GRACIA: As I stated earlier, police officers must possess traits such as good communication skills, critical thinking, sound judgement, and problem-solving skills.

BAUMGARTNER: But as far as his relationship with fellow officers or with the public?

GRACIA: You must be able to work with fellow officers and citizens.

BAUMGARTNER: How has Rosenberg done with the black community? It seems to me like relationships are pretty good.

GRACIA: I had an excellent relationship with all members of the community. Our objective was to continue to work in improving relationships. I solicited the assistance of the NAACP, LULAC and the local clergy to assist in building stronger relationships with our citizens. We did not have any major issues with members of the black or Hispanic community like major cities along the east and west coast do.

BAUMGARTNER: How big is the police department now versus when you were becoming chief?

GRACIA: Well, I can tell you, back when I started on patrol, I was working graveyards, there were two police officers and one sergeant. One police officer patrolled the east end of the city, and the other officer patrolled the west end of the city, and the sergeant would rotate. It was a small department. Officers were hired as the city grew. During my tenure as Police Chief the need to increase the number of officers on patrol became necessary. For example, fourteen officers would be assigned to patrol during peak hours, between 9:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m.

BAUMGARTNER: That would be at two shifts?

GRACIA: Yes, two overlapping shifts.

BAUMGARTNER: What would be a crisis situation?

GRACIA: A crisis can be a natural disaster, or could be a human related crisis such as robberies, riots, fatal accidents and shootings.

To share an example of a human crisis: An incident happened at a high school in 1996

involving a student with a gun creating ultimate danger. The police department was mobilized to find that an individual had been shot and fortunately did survive. The incident stemmed as a result of an immigrant from Mexico, living here legally, was being bullied. He got to the point of being very scared and on that day, he brought a gun to school. He was being bullied, there was a fight, and he shot the aggressor. He then left back to Mexico. It was never covered by national news or Houston news.

BAUMGARTNER: I don't remember anything like that.

GRACIA: This shooting incident occurred in the spring of 1996.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah, hardly anybody knew about it. Today it's become a terrible problem nationally. Horrible.

GRACIA: I guess it was not in the Houston media's priority at the time. However, it was covered by the local newspaper.

### ADDRESSING CRIME IN ROSENBERG

When I started with Rosenberg, we were a small police department. Today, the department is 103 strong.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? Wow. That's spread out over multiple departments.

GRACIA: Yes, patrol, detectives, dispatch, identification, and support staff.

BAUMGARTNER: What's the difference between a detective and patrol officer?

GRACIA: Patrol officers perform law enforcement and crime prevention for the protection of life and property. Detectives investigate and solve crimes.

BAUMGARTNER: How did you avoid bad publicity? There had to be personnel arguments

and complaints within the department.

GRACIA: I wouldn't say we "avoided bad publicity." We dealt with the same issues large cities deal with but in a smaller scale. The crime rate was high for a city our size. When you moved here in 1973, the police department was dealing with a high crime rate north of the tracks and in the downtown area. And I am sure you remember that downtown and the north of the railroad tracks was inundated with bars that attracted the criminals.

BAUMGARTNER: You know, that's interesting because by coincidence I was driving in today crossing the bridge, coming into town, and you've got that big convenience store/service station on the left there at Avenue D, and I started thinking of the old days. There used to be that big bar there, the Tropicana. It was across the street from Willie and Sue Brown's gas station. Today it's a new modern business facility but it used to be a rowdy bar. And there were plenty of problems at that bar.

GRACIA: Yeah, that's what I was getting to. The crime rate then was out of control. We had to figure out what was the contributing factor. There were numerous bars in the downtown area and north of the tracks. But, when the bar, Tropicana, on Avenue D and Houston Street opened, the crime rate heavily increased in that area and it became a public safety issue and a nuisance. We were having more dope deals, assaults, robberies, and auto pedestrians accidents. We were having all these crimes.

In determining the contributing factor when responding to calls in these areas and the victims were intoxicated, the officer would ask them where they consumed their beverages. A list of establishments serving alcohol was made. There were a bunch of bars. There were bars on Avenue D, Second Street, Mulcahy Street, the 400 block of Second Street. And also, we had downtown Rosenberg with the City Club. The bars were a constant problem, with stabbings, fights, and shootings.

So, once we identified the contributing factor, I met with bar owners and asked the bar owners to work with us to minimize crime in that area. Well, of course they're all going to say yes, but the dollar is what motivates them. And of course, they didn't cooperate. The next thing we did was partnering with the city attorney to inform the bar owners and aggressively enforce the Nuisance Abatement Statute and the bars were all put on notice. Either you work with us to minimize the crime or we're going to ask the court to suspend your license. And that's what I did aggressively, I believe starting in 1992. Within a 2-year period the bars were denied their request to renew their licenses with the exception of the



Tropicana challenging the city through litigation. During those years of going through the court proceedings, I was attacked personally and professionally with all kinds of criticisms and allegations. But every night the question I would ask myself was, "Were we doing the right thing?" I knew there was going to be turbulence but I wasn't going to let up or let anyone intimidate me. I took the lead and was on the stand for 5 days in county court. Finally on July 3, 2002, the Texas Supreme Court ruled in our favor to deny the Tropicana's application to renew a beer and wine retailer's on-premise license and after-hours permit.

BAUMGARTNER: Didn't you deal quite a bit with the District Attorney in trying to coordinate some stuff with them?

GRACIA: Yes, Victim Assistance Coordinators. Actually, Rosenberg was one of the first agencies in the state to have a Victim Assistance Coordinator to help crime victims get assistance and get their life back to normal. Carol Reese was the coordinator, the advocate for victims.

BAUMGARTNER: Her name is still real familiar to me. And she was effective, correct?

GRACIA: Very effective. The program is still being utilized throughout the State of Texas.

BAUMGARTNER: And weren't you guys ahead of the crowd relative to other departments?

GRACIA: We were the only Victim Assistance Unit locally. Austin Police Department was the only other department with a Victim Assistance Unit. As a matter of fact, we received the Governor's Award for the Victim Assistance Unit.

Carol Reese worked diligently on behalf of the victims. She was the first Crime Victims Coordinator for our department and one of the few throughout the state of Texas. She was also active in MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

BAUMGARTNER: It doesn't seem to me that the department, or you in particular, got fair recognition for your contribution. Like I said initially, the way I remember the department is "No news is good news." Getting more into it, it seems like the Rosenberg force actually was pretty stellar compared to the norm.

GRACIA: We had our share of issues that I had to deal with.

### COMMUNITY CHANGES

BAUMGARTNER: So, you worked with the DA's office and some of the others. Somehow it still seems to me that there could have been more acknowledgment for you and the department.

And of course, over the years you were also called upon to serve as City Manager.

GRACIA: Three different times as interim city manager before I was appointed City Manager.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you want to get out at that point?

GRACIA: It got to the point that I wasn't having fun anymore. So, I woke up one morning in December 2015 and decided it was time for me to retire. I'm very fortunate and blessed that the city council through the years allowed me to serve the people as Police Chief and city manager. It was a great experience for me.

BAUMGARTNER: Thirty-five years as a city official. That is a remarkable record. The city has changed tremendously during this period. City management has undergone changes. Does it seem that City Council seemed to be stronger some years back than it was in the time frame more recently?

GRACIA: What do you mean, stronger?

BAUMGARTNER: Better perspective, better cooperation, more focused on the interests of the city rather than personal interests.

GRACIA: During my tenure city council was made up of people, professional and otherwise, caring for the City of Rosenberg. They were experience business people and understood private public partnerships. They aggressively recruited businesses to come to

Rosenberg thereby generating tax revenue to continue providing citizens quality and improved services. We had qualified city council leaders. I had the privilege to work under the supervision of six mayors, Dr. Larry Wilkinson, Lupe Uresti, Dorothy Ryan, Joe Gurecky, Vicente Morales, and Billy Benton. They were strong council members.

BAUMGARTNER: Dorothy Ryan was in that mix.



*Former Rosenberg Mayors Vicente Morales and Joe Gurecky beside Robert Gracia.*

GRACIA: Dorothy Ryan and I disagreed on many issues, but we respected one another. She was one of the biggest police supporters. Joe Gurecky and Vincent Morales were outstanding. Joe and Vincent are good businessmen.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah, they were both great mayors and just solid, good guys.

You were of course employed by Rosenberg, but the City of Richmond was like a sister city with a lot of overlap. Did you have much dealing with Richmond's current administration?

GRACIA: We worked closely with the police department. Also, as Rosenberg's City manager we worked with Richmond's City Manager, Terri Vela. She's been there a long time and doing an outstanding job for Richmond.

BAUMGARTNER: She is very capable. I think she's done a good job and is a straight shooter. I've dealt with her on a number of projects, she is good to work with. She's another example of "No news is good news."

So, when you retired, did you miss it? Did you continue to have much relationship with current management?

GRACIA: It took me about a month to transition to civilian status. I was accustomed to working long hours and receiving numerous phone calls throughout the day and night from citizens, officers and council. The phone calls came to a halt the day I retired.

BAUMGARTNER: Well, the city is certainly in your debt for your dedication and leadership. I think that what is clear is that your performance was not a matter of just doing a job; it was due to your commitment to be of service to the community. In your personal background growing up, what made you so conscientious and capable?

GRACIA: My parents.

BAUMGARTNER: Robert, thank you for your time. I learned a lot and enjoyed talking to you.

Gracia: I appreciate it.