UNC Story Archive recording with Ron Bilbao

Contributor: Ron Bilbao

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Recorder: Lolita Rowe

Lolita [00:00:00]: Hi. Can you introduce yourself your role in the creation of the Latinx Center?

Ron [00:00:05]: My name is Ron Bilbao. I was a co-founder of the original Carolina Latina/Latino Collaborative, the CLC, now the Carolina Latinx Center when I was a student, an undergraduate student at UNC Chapel Hill.

Lolita [00:00:22]: And can you share a bit about your background? What led you to Carolina? Was your journey like?

Ron [00:00:28]: My journey to Carolina started when I was a junior in high school in Miami. My brother who was and is a person that I look up to very much was accepted to UNC, was a high achieving student and it was his dream to go to UNC. For several factors, he wasn't able to attend his dream school, so he ended up having to stay home for a few years and go elsewhere.

[00:00:58] So when it was my turn to apply and choose the schools that I wanted to focus on, UNC Chapel Hill was at the top of my list. When I came to visit the campus as a senior, I actually went and visited both UNC and Duke, had a friend at Duke that I wanted to go visit. And then I took the Robertson bus over to UNC and fell in love with Carolina. And that's the moment that I chose it. I was fortunate enough to not only be accepted, but to be a recipient of one of the first Carolina Covenant scholarships that allowed me to attend the university free of charge. And that's really what made it possible. Otherwise, it would have been very difficult for my family to help me get to Carolina just on the regular, out-of-state tuition. It was really a godsend, that program, and I didn't even really know that I was eligible for it until I got the letter in the mail telling me that I had the scholarship and that I could attend free of charge.

Lolita [00:02:04]: And when you came on campus, what organizations were you involved in?

Ron [00:02:11]: When I first came to Carolina, there wasn't a lot of organizations for out-of-state students or, you know, Hispanic/Latino students that I knew about. Later, I came to find some of them. But I recall there was about 2.5 percent Hispanic students on campus when I came in 2006. That about doubled by the time I graduated in 2010. So it was really important for me to kind of find some other students like me, whether they were out of state, or whether they were from

Miami or from Hispanic backgrounds.

[00:02:57] Carolina Covenant, I recall, had a lot of events and gatherings that were really good to get me going and get to meet people and kind of understand a little bit more of the university, so that was very helpful.

[00:03:13] Another organization that was incredibly helpful was Campus Y. I really got into the programming there, and met a lot of students, and really tried to get involved in a lot of their activities. And there is where I met some of the folks from the Carolina Hispanic Association, CHISPA, and meeting them was really a changing point for me at the university. I started to understand a little bit more of North Carolina, the culture there, and what was going on with Hispanic students. I started to understand better, sort of, the out-of-state student situation, and a little bit more about the culture at the university. Overall, I feel like it was a very welcoming culture, more so than I expected, frankly, and some of the students that I met at the CHISPA and other Hispanic organizations that I was getting to know were really friendly, really welcoming. And most of them were from in-state, frankly, which was a surprise to me. I'm out of-state, Hispanic student in Miami. We're certainly the majority. It was an interesting change to go from the majority in Miami to minority at UNC and at North Carolina.

Lolita [00:04:31]: Can you talk a little bit about that cultural difference of coming from a space where you're not the minority into a space where you're 2.5 percent of the student body, and how much support did you feel as well?

Ron [00:04:49]: Frankly for me, I didn't feel that much of an outsider. I can't speak for everyone. I think it was a shock, certainly, that there weren't a lot of folks that were speaking Spanish. Everywhere that I've been growing up in Miami has mostly been bilingual. So you're talking to, you know, you're going through drive-throughs and people are speaking to you in Spanish, and you're in school and teachers are bilingual, and Miami-Dade County has three official languages. [1] Everything from the county government is printed in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole. So, you know, I'm used to that, and I was used to seeing that. Certainly it wasn't the case on campus, but I did meet wonderful professors and other students that were very welcoming and wanted to know more about Miami and sort of the culture, and were curious, frankly. I don't ever think there was a time where I didn't feel like I didn't belong, necessarily.

[00:05:59] I do think there was more work to be done, and I think that it was sort of our job to give everyone an opportunity to understand our culture and learn a little bit more about our culture if they were interested. I think a lot of people were interested. And I think we had a role to play, and we still have a role to play, in educating people about the differences from where we come from.

[00:06:27] I'm from Miami, born and raised. My family is from Venezuela and Columbia. My

[1] Correction: English is technically the official language in Miami. "...where government services are commonly offered in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole."

dad moved from Colombia to Venezuela when he was eighteen. They both came here in the seventies. My brother was born in Venezuela, and I am still the first person in my family-the only person so far-born in the United States. So that experience, I think, of being a Latino-which is a person that is of Latin American descent, either born or raised or both in the United States-living, working, going to school here in the United States is a very unique experience in this country and in others. So learning that experience is different than growing up in Latin America and Venezuela specifically, but growing up of that descent in the United States, then going to an American school-an American public school-with American students-[laughter]-in the South, of all places, on top. It was a very, very unique experience.

[00:07:42] I think it was all-- I kept an open mind, certainly, because I also wanted to learn about the culture. I wanted to learn about the South. A lot of people ask me why I left Miami to go to school in North Carolina so far away, what seems far away, certainly culturally, further away than Miami. But it was because I wanted to learn. It was because I wanted to experience what America was really about, because Miami is not your typical American city, is what we come to expect from a typical American city. I was excited to learn, and I think the people I came in in touch with were also excited to learn.

Lolita [00:08:23]: And thinking about that excitement to learn, like being on a college campus, how were people learning? How were people engaging? Because before there was a center, there was a collaborative. Can you tell us a little bit more about the collaborative?

Ron [00:08:37]: Sure. I'll tell you about the founding of it. You know, before there was a center or collaborative, there were organizations and there was people interested in the experience of being Hispanic or Latina/Latino in the United States and in North Carolina. North Carolina had the fastest growing Latino population at the time. People from all over the United States that were Hispanic, arriving recently or not so recently, were coming to the state, raising kids in the state, and that was creating an influx of students at the university as well, for different reasons. People would come to North Carolina to work, to start businesses, to join a university and as faculty and do research in the Triangle.

[00:09:30] For a myriad of reasons, Hispanics were moving to North Carolina. A lot of it is agriculture. Some of it is related to working in factories, but not always, and I think that's another misconception. But when people move, they either have kids or they bring their young children, they're growing up in the state. They want to go to the best state school that there is. The best school, period, in the state, in my opinion. So a lot of them came to UNC. And through that process, I think we learned some of the difficulties that people all over have with going to the university. Finances, in a lot of cases. Immigration status. Language barriers. A lot of people were-- they were the first in their family to go to college, just like me.

[00:10:21] So at UNC, being this great public university with this great history of serving the people of North Carolina, I think the university took it upon itself to try and figure out how to welcome as many of these students as possible. I think that's why you see such an explosive

population growth at the university during this time, and I think it's continued to grow of Hispanic students finding ways to attend UNC. When that happens, people look for ways to collaborate and to find community. And so I think the organizations like the Hispanic Association and Latino Fraternity all forming for ways to be inclusive of everyone who's interested in learning about our culture.

[00:11:14] In that work, we realized that there needs to be a gathering place for-a central hub-for all this work, and for all these students and for all these initiatives, as there have been for other places. The university, as a whole, is a gathering place for the people of North Carolina and the people of the United States to come and collaborate on ideas. Within that university there are individual schools that collaborate on research and collaborate on academic ideas that are more specific to programming. There's a Latina/Latino Studies minor that, again, is very specific. And then within that, there are student groups and student programs and resources to help students feel at home and become part of the community. There has been, for many years, a rich and booming center for Black culture and history, the Sonja Haynes Center, which is really a model for all the other centers on campus. I, myself, worked at the Carolina Center for Public Service, is a center that's dedicated to serving the people of North Carolina. And there was an Asian American Center, I believe is still expanding and growing, and what we didn't have at the time was a Latino center.

[00:12:43] And so the idea had been floated around, talked about for a little while. When I arrived, I took it upon myself with others to take this idea and run with it. So, through different student organizations coming together, faculty, staff, administrators-- This really started as a student-led initiative, but there were so many others that were part of it and were supportive of it. We wrote a letter and asked the provost at the time, Provost Bernadette Gray-Little-I'll never forget, she was so supportive as well-brought together a group of folks to try and think through what this center would do, what its purpose would be, how it would work with other centers and other initiatives on campus. And out of that committee of students, faculty, staff, administrators, came the Carolina Latina/Latino Collaborative, which is what was the first iteration of the center, which is today the center. Really, very similar in its mission and its purpose, housed at Craige North, down south, on south campus.

[00:14:00] And we had, the first year we moved in there, we had Latino art from North Carolina. We had Latino journalists and authors and writers come and speak. We had our first Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations. I remember we took over Lenoir and had different stations with different countries, Latin American countries and different food from each of those countries at Lenoir so people can explore. It's always been about collaborating, not just with the Hispanic community, but with the greater North Carolina community as a whole, and the students at the university that were interested, and frankly, were curious about our culture.

[00:14:46] So it's always been inclusive. It’s always been trying to weave itself into the university fabric and the community. And it's always been very welcoming of everyone, which is really the principal part of why it exists and still exists in the first place. To welcome, to educate,

to collaborate with everyone. I love that the first iteration was called collaborative. Because that's what it was, and that's what it is, and that's what it will continue to be.

Lolita [00:15:16]: I love that you're talking more about like that sense of community collaboration. This is not a center that's just for one group of people. It's a center that's for the students of UNC Chapel Hill. How did that, then, shape more of your campus experience?
Ron [00:15:33]: I think one of the most important things about this whole idea is recognition. A lot of these centers are just about the university committing to recognizing this idea, the importance of this idea, the importance of this mission, whether it's public service or whether it's Black culture and history. I think all of that is why these centers exist in the first place, is the university committing itself to these issues and these principles. I think the collaborative and the center, when it comes to this issue of this community, is just that. It's recognition that the students, the parents, the faculty, the staff that are of Latina/Latino descent, that they matter too, and that their experiences matter and that they are not only welcome, but highlighted, lifted up. I don't think it's ever been a place to exclude. I think it's always been a place to highlight and uplift. So it made the university experience better because it gave us all something to work on. You know, who doesn't love to show off a little bit of where they came from, a little bit of their culture, a little bit of their food, a little bit of our music.

[00:16:58] We had in the Pit, I'll never forget, salsa dancing one time during lunch, and a lot of people came up and said, hey, I want to learn how to do that. So we started salsa classes for everybody. At Lenoir, when we did the food for Hispanic Heritage Month, and everybody had a taste of food from Venezuela or Colombia. It's not just all, you know, tacos and quesadillas. Sometimes it's arepas, and sometimes it's mofongo if you're Puerto Rican, and I think that's great, I think it's wonderful. And I think a lot of people liked that too. I never heard otherwise. I never have heard anybody feel excluded or feeling like they weren't part of it. All the programming that we do, or that we did when I was there-and I believe is what they still do-is to educate and to include everyone who wants to be a part of it. So it makes the experience, certainly for the Latino students, better, because they feel like they have a place to go, a place where they can collaborate and feel a little bit more at home, away from home. But it also makes the university experience for everyone a little bit better because you're going to leave educated, you're going to leave that cultural hub, the University of North Carolina, a better person, a more educated person, a more worldly person. You're going to go back home to wherever you came from, either in North Carolina or elsewhere, and you're going to have learned a little bit more about the country and the essence of the country that you are living in.

[00:18:40] Because I think that's really the key here, is that a lot of folks, even my people that I was roommates with, had never even left the state of North Carolina. For me, coming from Miami, that's a little bit shocking because I grew up with people from all over the world that would either be in my school, or that would be working in my neighborhood. And now I'm at a place where, folks have lived in the state their whole lives. So I think that is the essence of why we go to university: to be educated in the classroom, but to be educated outside of it as well. And

what better way to do that than right on campus, with the center for as many cultures and as many collaborations as we can come up with.

Lolita [00:19:32]: And what were some of the main factors that influenced the decision to transition from a collaborative to a fully-fledged center?

Ron [00:19:41]: I think that was the formalization of it. I think when the provost created this collaborative, I think it was sort of like a pilot project, if you will. Let's see what this looks like.
Let's see how it fits into the fabric of the university community. Let's see if this thing really works. I think we proved that it did. And, you know, becoming a center at the university is not an easy process. Those of you that know the process, and the way that the approvals work, and the funding structure and approval from not just the university administration, but I believe the Board of Governors. A lot of folks are involved in it, and it has to have a real formalized structure. That process is a longer process, and it took a little bit longer. When I was gone from the university, that process began and was approved and became a full-fledged center with several full-time staff members and a faculty board and alumni as well that are involved and getting a little bit bigger by the year in terms of the programming that they do.

[00:20:52] When I was at the university and we first started it, there was no permanent full-time staff. It was borrowed staff from different departments, and I remember we went out and tried to raise some money to hire a part-time undergraduate assistant, which was me. I was the first employee at the CLC, and I was very proud of that, because it was something that we had dreamed up in our minds and then put it on paper and then took it to the community and then made it happen. Next thing you know, we're sitting in a building with Latino art and having these amazing speakers come to campus too, like Julian Castro and so many others that came to speak and just be part of this incredible initiative. It's something we're really proud of, and we were talking about earlier, how it's been fifteen years since we started the CLC-it's still the CLC, it's just "center" now instead of collaborative-and how many students it's impacted. So much so that even I don't know so many of the things that it's done over the years, and so many of the students that it's impacted.

[00:22:01] Now, as I chair the board-I just became the chairman of the CLC Board a couple months back-now I'm hearing some of these stories and some of these programming successes that they've had since I've been gone. It's remarkable and really heartwarming to hear that the purpose has still continued, which is to create community, be inclusive, have an impact and better the university experience for everyone.

Lolita [00:22:28]: Graduating and coming back, what was that feeling like? Of seeing what you started? Did you realize the impact that you had?

Ron [00:22:41]: I still don't think I do. It makes me so happy to be involved and be on the board and chair the board and kind of lead it again. But no, I mean, I think the university experience of being there four years, for better or worse, puts you just kind of day-in day-out

working on whatever it is you're working on. And then you just kind of leave, and it just goes away. I think for me, I definitely could have walked away and just never participated again, and never gone back, never done anything with it, donated or talked to students. But I didn't do that. I've been back several times. We inaugurated the actual collaborative, I think the year, maybe, I left. So I had to come back, and we did this wonderful ceremony. There's videos of it. The chancellor was there, and there was a special designation.

[00:23:34] And I've been back several years since then, and I love going back, and I love seeing it. The new building, I was there when they inaugurated it as an actual center. And I'll tell you the truth. Some of the best parts is keeping up with my good friends that were there when we started it and that are still there. Josmell, who I know you spoke to, Paul Cuadros. Ron Strauss is on our board, who was in the provost's office at the time, who also helped us start the center. All these folks that were part of it when I was an undergraduate in college, I have no idea why they were listening to me or talking to me or anything like that. They have become such close friends, and really, family. I know all of Josmell's kids. I know Paul Cuadros and his family, and I'm involved with him and Ron Strauss and him. So again, I think it's such an important takeaway here that the purpose was to create community collaboration for everyone. And I think we're the perfect example of that, because even in creating it we created community through collaboration for all of us, and fifteen years later, we're still collaborating every day.

Transcribed by Camilla Crane

Carolina Academic Library Associate

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