

MA: The following interview was conducted with Joel Gajardo for the start city treasures Americorps Oral History Project. Good Afternoon Joel.

JG: Good Afternoon Marcelo.

MA: Well, tell me where you grew up.

JG: I grew up in central south of Chile, in the--kind of a the west side of South America uh, in a relatively small city call Chillan, city that has very traditional history. The hero of our independence Bernardo O'Higgins was born there. We also have some renowned artist like Claudio Arrau, Ramon Vinay and others, so is a very nice place to live in.

MA: Can you tell about your family?

JG: humm yea. I was the youngest child of the family with four siblings. My father and my mother were in business. My father has a jewelry store and my mother has a grocery store -and we studied in Chillan, my older brother went to study in Santiago in the boarding school and also my older sister. But my youngest sister and I stay in Chillan and we had a very pleasant living. Ahhh my father unfortunately died relative early when I was 14 years old, so our financial situation change a little bit, but still my memories of my childhood and adolescent are very pleasant.

MA: What is your family tradition?

JG: I think that mmm, as in most places, family traditions around-were around birthdays and celebrations like that. In Latin America we celebrate what is called the Saint day sometime like that, so my father's name was Enrique so for Saint Enrique we did have a big festivity. My mother name was Marta like my sister and also Santa Marta was another big festivity and then birthday and of course the celebration of Christmas and when I was growing up also we had the King's Day or the visitor Day wise men you know in January 6th so I was extremely Lucky that I got present for Christmas and also for January 6th. So those were some of our traditions besides going on vacation trips together. My great grandfather owned some land to in the mountains in Chillan and I spend sometime there and I like to climb mountains and try to feel that I am really an explorer when I was a kid.

MA: Tell me about your education.

JG: I- I've been extremely lucky to receive an education that has been very solid. I studied in public school in my hometown, Chillan, uh, I did my elementary studies in a wonderful elementary school that was donated by the Mexican government, because the city where I was living, Chillan, was completely destroyed by the big earthquake in 1939, and so the international solidarity helped us to rebuild the city and one of the present that we received was this school that was named after Mexico, so this elementary school "Mexico Republic" and I learned from then on, you know, about other people not only the Chilean, but also I learned a lot about the history of Mexico and I learned the national anthem of Mexico and I got the idea that we were really one kind of people, the Chileans and Mexican and everybody in between we are part of the Latin American uh, people, so uh, that was very very important for me. When I graduated from elementary school, I went into the uh, secondary school in Chile, that is call Liceo, after the French word lycée and uh, what is high school here in--in the States and uh, I studied in Liceo de Hombres- the boys uh, high school in Chillan. In those days schools were segregated in-in-in Chile, now they are integrated like here in the states, and uh, I finish my studies there and uh, after graduation I went to the Chilean University and studied mathematics and uh, then I change career in a certain sense, I was born and raised in a Presbyterian home, that is uh, kind of rarity in Chile. The majority of people in those days and still I think uh, were Catholics, so we were maybe 2000 Presbyterians in the whole country and I was one of them and my family. And uh, after I work in the summer with my

church, in a kind of summer program, I decided uh, that I would like to be a minister, so I decided to go and the only a--a--a accredited uh, school for theology for Presbyterian was in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, so I moved to Buenos Aires and study there. And after four years I received my degree on theology and I was ordained a Presbyterian minister. Went back to Chile and I work in a local church and also I work as a principal in a church related school that was from K to 12 so it was quite a bit of work. I enjoyed that work, particularly my connection with children and staff, but I did have too many other responsibilities—taking care the building and dealing with things that I was not very fond of, so I decided that maybe it was about time for me after five years of doing that to go in a study something else, something more. And I came to USA and I was lucky to receive a scholarship for going to Princeton in New Jersey and I studied theology in Princeton graduate work and also I studied political science in Princeton University and after four years doing that I graduated and I went back to Chile and that is my education because with that I started teaching in the catholic University in Santiago and in other places.

MA: Great. Can you tell a little more about your teacher and your classmates?

JG: humm- we- particularly in the high school, I do have good memories in the high school you are in that age where you are- you think you are really mature but you are not and you are very playful, you know, you make jokes that you think are funny but they are not funny sometimes, you know, we um, kind of, you know did things to one and other, but also sometimes to our teachers and to our “general inspector” as we call it in Chile. And we were really uh, kind of, um, not very uh, well behaved group of people, but uh, interestingly enough we were, academically speaking, we were very good students, so the administration of the school, was very patient with us- uh, sometimes our parents were called, you know, to tell that we have been misbehaving, but most of the time they would just look in the other direction because we were very good students. In--in Chile in those days, they have several uh, uh, courses, you know, several groups in the same level so, uh, let’s say, I was in um, second uh, high school level, but there was: A-B-C, and normally A we are kind of the—the—the youngest and quote unquote brightest and we happen to be all the time in the A group because we are relatively young and good student. But um, so that- those were very creative days and we supported each other in the school, we studied in group and it has been extremely helpful. And uh, the an other time that I also remember well, is my time in seminary in Buenos Aires was probably because I was out of context so to speak. Uh, I was in other country. Uh, they speak Spanish, and I could understand but with a different tone, you know, and a different way, so you need to use that. And uh, with uh, uh, the seminary was an international group, so we did have people from Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, even some people from the United States, that want to study to Latin America, so those were creative years and gave me again, you know, a reinforcement of my idea in elementary school when I studied Mexico that was way up north from the Chilean perspective. And Chile, now I was put some meet in between , meeting people from different countries, so that was uh, a great opportunity for me as part of my education.

MA: How-how this help to prepare to your profession?

JG: I think that, that was extremely helpful, you know, particularly the international dimension, because I been very fortunate to work internationally most of my life. As I mention before, after I finished my-my term in the school in Valparaiso, I never mention that, but in Valparaiso I was the principal of that school and went to study to Princeton and went back to Chile I was lucky to get involved in some international organizations, like the world council of churches in Geneva and Switzerland, and also with the

Christian Peace conference in Prague in those day the country was Czechoslovakia now it's Czech Republic and I was the Latin American secretary for one of these organizations and I will go back and forth to Europe every six weeks, you know, I stayed in Chile and I go for a week or two weeks to Europe, but from Europe I will go to India, to Africa, to Asia, and other places, so I've been around the world a lot, and, so my education in an international, ecumenical, community has been very part of my work in the future.

MA: Tell me about you and your family custom relating with to marriage.

JG: Uh, uh I married relative young, that was maybe the norm-in those day in the fifties and I met a young woman in--when I was in seminary, she was Argentinean from um, uh British background and we got married and uh, she moved with me to Chile and out of that marriage we did have three children; two boys and a girl, and we lived in Chile for several years until I moved with them to Princeton for my education. Marriage is a very serious business, and I think that uh, being a religious person myself, I enter into marriage with what I thought were uh, open eyes and uh, it's a serious commitment, nevertheless, uh we were here in the states maybe out of the traumatic experience in Chile or something, our marriage did not work very well. My wife in those day being from British did have a perfect English, maybe with the British accent, I was struggling up to now with my Latin American accent and maybe there was more opportunity for her than for me in that point although that was no the real issue but for some reason we were drifting apart and uh, that marriage ended in kind of divorce. Uh, still we maintain our connection because we do have three children in common and we have very important common history and we respect each other even if we cannot live uh, together in--as a couple. I remain single for several years until I met a younger woman uh, from Nebraska and uh, we started a relationship a year later and eventually I married her and um, this has been a very good experience for me. I learned from my mistakes in the previous marriage and I'm not recommending this to anybody--don't—don't do that but uh, [laughs] at least if you make a mistake I hope that you learn from it. I learned—I'm very committed to my to my wife. I'm very committed to two very darling daughters that we had late in our marriage and uh, we have been blessed with them and I think that we have been blessed to be a father and a husband and I hope that life is going to be really good for all of us as a family.

MA: How you, uh, how did you meet your spouse?

JG: I—I met her here in Lincoln. I came to deliver a lecture at the University. Uh, there was a conference on hunger and justice in the world and I was a keynote speaker and she was a graduate student and uh, we did have dinner at some point with the professor that was the advisor to my former wife—fu—future wife and I met her and we click in conversation but that was uh, just the first encounter and I came back to visit her and to visit Lincoln and I was being a visiting professor in many places at that point in my life after my divorce and so I—I liked her and I liked Lincoln and when I finished my commitment in the different places where uh, I was teaching, I decided to kind of move to Lincoln to see if things were going to move forward and they did so, I met my wife right here in Lincoln.

MA: When and why did you decide to come to U—United States?

JG: Uh, my decision was kind of forced in a certain sense. I—I been here in the sixties when I did my graduate work so I did have a degree from a North American university and it was possible for me to find a job here and, but I was uh, pushed out of the uh, Chilean country by the military regime that took power in the 1973 and they uh intervened all the higher education organization, therefore it was difficult to teach

anything with relative freedom so after some kind of bad experience there I thought it was time to look for a better place and I came here with the hope that I would be able to go back to Chile so I stay in the university context, that was Cornell university for four years and then I did have the opportunity to move for a nice job in—in New York City and I liked that because there I could have some contacts with, uh, other Chileans that were also in exile like myself and we would dream uh, when we would be back—what we would be doing and how history evolved, that was not really possible. Uh, military regime stayed in power for seventeen years and uh, after that, you develop new roots, and new connections and a new way of looking at life and I still love my country and I go there as often as I can but uh, I know I'm not going to be live there particularly having younger children in this country.

MA: How do you come to United States?

JG: As I said before, I came, um, not as a refugee ,because the United States was not receiving refugees in those days, but uh, I came with a special VISA that was obtained through my, uh, church connection. As I mentioned before in my narration, I am a Presbyterian minister and, although, most of my life has been involved in academic work, still I maintain my connections and I have done some work with the Presbyterians worldwide and uh, so I received a VISA in order to come at Cornell and then in the university I regularized my situation as a visiting professor and uh, I came again you know because Cornell did have an opening and I was able to teach Latin American Science.

MA: What is was like to first come to America?

JG: It was an interesting experience because I—I was here before as a student and, when you are a student, people respect you and even admire you because that's good, you're coming here to this country to be enlightened and to go back you know and be a star in your country so you receive a lot of positive strokes when you are a student. And uh, when I came back to work this time, I found some resistant, some prejudice, that uh, because we speak English with some accent as you should be washing dishes or doing some other job what are you doing in the university setting? More than once, I was asked you know, if I was a new helper you know, in the kitchen and I said, no, I wish that I will know how to do that, but I am teaching political science and it was—what? You know so, it was a little bit of prejudice against Latin Americans coming here and uh, beside that, I--I didn't experience very much trauma because I left one university setting and I came to another university setting. I—I—I suffer vicariously through our—through some of my friends because some of the people I knew in Chile that were very respected with high positions in the government or even in the university as administrators but that didn't have a degree in American--North American university—they need to start from scratch almost and uh, particularly people with law degrees because the laws are different in every country and even, uh, physicians, to renew your medical record here is very difficult so some uh doctors, you know physicians need to start doing something that was not related to their real profession so, I didn't have any traumatic periods like that.

MA: When and why did you decide to live in Lincoln, Nebraska?

JG: Well, again, you know I think that I'm um, I respect other people's opinion and um, my wife, being a Nebraska all her life and she was born and raised in a small, little place in western Nebraska about nine hundred people only there so for her to come to Lincoln was kind of a big adventure. The university was here and she went to study but, I think that Lincoln was the biggest city that she can take. When we were uh, kind of uh, dating, uh, uh, we went together to New York a couple of times. She was scared all the

time in New York and uh, that was clearly a message that she would not live in New York and I would need to look for another place where we can live and after awhile Lincoln, uh, came to grow into me and uh, I like Lincoln, really, Lincoln is a really nice place and particularly when my first daughter was born, uh, this was a kind of ideal place to raise children so, I like Lincoln.

MA: What is was like to first come to this place?

JG: To...what?

MA: What is was like to first come to this place?

JG: Oh, well, uh, coming from New York where you have, during the day, eleven million people and during the night, eight million people, [laughs] and uh, you have uh, thousands of different restaurants and all this activity, coming to Lincoln was kind of a cultural shock. I—I thought that—wow. What am I going to do in this place [laughs]

MA: [laughs]

JG: And uh, it—it was tough but, in those days I was lucky because I was still working as a consultant for two organizations in New York. So, I would travel every two weeks, you know for a couple of days to New York so I came—the—the transition, you know, was a slow process. It wasn't that I moved to Lincoln, I never went back to New York but I keep going back and forth and traveling to Latin America and travel all over the United States with this consulting uh, business and um, so, it—but it was—it was shocking, you know, and uh, to read the newspaper you know, with very--no news that were appealing to me for instance, I look for some news of Latin America. Unless there is an earthquake or a revolution, you know, or some communist doing something there, there is nothing toward Latin America in the paper so I miss the paper and I go to the library in order to get something, you know, from Mexico or other places, so it—it—it took a time but now I am very much uh, acculturated here.

MA: Tell me about what do you think about Lincoln now.

JG: I think that Lincoln is a—is a wonderful, uh small city and I know that it is growing faster than some people would like to and maybe that is inevitable because, if you have a good life, people will gravitate toward a good life and uh, i--as a city, uh, well, Lincoln has a lot of space, you know it is kind of uh, flat, therefore you can keep expanding—you don't need to fight with mountains or with something, you know, that is there, you just keep building around, but I think that uh, the authorities, you know the political leaders in Lincoln have been wise enough to keep a lot of uh, open space. I admire Lincoln for the number of parks, you know, it's uh, tremendous green areas—uh, Pioneer Park and Woods Park and uh, Holmes Park, and you name it. There is so many parks and very well kept and uh, with playful children to play and to enjoy life and uh, I think that uh, still, Lincoln is a fairly safe place to live. You don't need to go around scared or if you--oh! I don't remember if I locked my door um, wich probably the door is never locked that—that says uh, security, you know, peace of mind is—is very, very good in Lincoln.

MA: Can you tell me about your citizenship?

JG: My citizenship? I'm still a Chilean citizenship. I—I don't see why I need to change it and I—sometime I try to rationalize I say maybe some economic issues. I still own some properties in Chile and if I become a U.S. citizen I have to pay very high taxes there and I don't have much here so [laughs] so, I—I rather pay more taxes in Chile at this point but um, I—I—I don't have anything against becoming a U.S. citizen but I—I haven't done it.

MA: Cual--What recommendation uh, would you give other who are following behind you?

JG: I think—I think that obviously, you know, I think that a very important that people get an education in any way that is possible. If they didn't get an education in the country of origin, take advantage of the opportunities that are here in this country. You can finish your GED if you never finished high school, you can start with a community college if you don't have a degree, if you don't have the means, community colleges are more affordable than a regular college or university but, by all means, you know, take advantage of educating yourself—education is something that nobody can take away from you, you know. At the beginning, you know, I didn't know, why in the world I'm spending so many hours at the library studying here and there when, in Chile, it will not make that much difference. I would never dream that I will be forced to be back here and then I appreciate, you know, having an education and being able to communicate and that take me to the second point, you know. I think it doesn't matter how much you love your language—I love Spanish, you know, if you live in this country, you need to do your utmost in order to learn the language of the land; you know—don't postpone that. That goes together with education because if you're going to study you need the language and uh, don't forget—I'm not saying—don't forget Spanish, no. Learn English and learn French and learn German, you know, we don't need to be monolingual we can learn a lot of languages but, at this moment, your number one priority should be to learn the language of the land be able to study, be able to find a job that will satisfy you. I know we all need to do some job sometimes we don't like but those are entering jobs you know, but if you are going to be stuck with a job that you don't like, I can assure you that you're not going to be very happy. So, try to find your niche and pursue that until you feel really comfortable.

MA: What do you want your children to learn and remember from this?

JG: Well, I hope that my—my younger children now—my two daughters, will really appreciate education and I do my best to be a better father, as I mentioned before, to help them to do their tasks—your—your homework but, at the same time, to enjoy reading, to enjoy solving problems in math or something like that so they really pick up the importance of education. At the same time, I hope that being a kind of bi-national, bicultural home that they will appreciate, you know the Spanish world and learn to speak Spanish well and learn other languages and I hope that of my own personal experience that they will be able to travel when they grow up. I am very grateful for my formal education but I need to recognize that I learned more maybe, out of my traveling and meeting people in different contexts, in different parts of the world that I've learned from the academic world, uh, living in kind of like, two worlds, you know, my daughters need to learn that one is not better than the other—that there is good people and bad people in all the different worlds, that English is a good language as Spanish is a good language, there is not one language that is more important than another. What is important is that you learn the language that is required to live well. If you live in France, you need to learn French, if you move to Japan, you need to speak Japanese and this is something that they are very clear. We just visited Chile recently again with my daughter and they a little bit bigger and now they realize the importance of language and the oldest one is nine years old, she is talk—is talking to me in Spanish that's very good and I encourage that so I hope that they—they learn out of this experience—a father that came from far away, a mother that is very local—that this world has space for everybody regardless of where they were really born.

MA: Well, thank you so much Joel for joining us in this interview.

JG: You're very welcome Marcelo, and good luck to you.

MA: Thank you.

This interview was by: Marcelo Arévalo