

**Star City Treasures
AmeriCorps Oral History Project
Transcript**

**Interview with Isaí Flores
Star City Treasures AmeriCorps Oral History Project
Lincoln Literacy Council, 745 S 9th St. 68508
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Interviewed by Kaitlyn Koenigsman
AmeriCorps Member**

KK: The following interview was conducted with Isaí Flores for the Star City Treasures AmeriCorps History Project. It took place on July 1st at—2007—at Lincoln Literacy Council. The interviewer is Kaitlyn Koenigsman. Hello Isaí, how are you?

IF: Very good, thanks. And how are you?

KK: Good, thanks. Tell about where you were born.

IF: I was born in San Salvador, El Salvador. I was born on January 4th 1978.

KK: And is San Salvador a big or small city?

IF: I don't know the exact facts but it's comparable to Omaha—Omaha, Nebraska.

KK: And are there many people in San Salvador? More than in Omaha?

IF: I think that there are approximately four million people in the capital. It's over-populated.

KK: So, Lincoln is a much smaller city than San Salvador.

IF: Yes, of course.

KK: Yes? Do you like the size of Lincoln, or do you prefer the size of San Salvador?

IF: As far as what I'm used to, I think that I would have liked a city the same size or bigger than mine but, now that I have been here almost four years, I think I'm adapting to new things.

KK: Tell me about your family. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

IF: My family is big. I have—we're nine altogether—I have four sisters, three brothers and me—we're nine.

KK: And did you guys have family traditions?

IF: Um, I don't know how to say this but I don't think so. We were always different because my dad was in the military and we were almost never with him. He left for a time because of the war that we had in El Salvador and, unfortunately, we didn't have him in the house until I was like sixteen years old and we didn't grow up with him and we never had any traditions. We did, not whatever we wanted, but we never had big traditions especially like, no birthdays, no hugs, something very simple.

KK: And for holidays—did you guys celebrate like holidays together?

IF: Never, never. In fact, the most special days were December 24th and New Year's but on December 24th the only thing that we did was—we didn't even eat together but—yeah, we got together but everyone would eat when they wanted to and we never had a family dinner even when my dad came back—he never ate with us—he was always separate and—yeah.

KK: What did your parents do when you were a kid?

IF: Like I told you, my dad was in the military and he was almost never with us because at that time it was really dangerous. He never wanted to risk us because if the guerillas found out that he—that we were children of someone in the military—they could kill us. So, because of that, my dad didn't want to risk our lives.

KK: And your mom?

IF: My mom was always a housewife. She was always with us and thanks to God, she never needed to work and my dad supported all of us.

KK: Can you tell me some of your memories that you have from the war—the time where—during the war?

IF: Um, I don't remember it well but around 1984, 83, when I started to notice many things—there was an offensive—we call them offensives when, it's like when the guerillas make a big plan to attack. So, we always lived close to military barracks and, like it or not, we were always surrounded by the military on all sides. They even stayed in people's houses, not to take care of us personally but because they were looking for the best zones to—or the highest—and we lived like, on high ground and so they took advantage of that to be hidden.

KK: Um, and in what year did the war end?

IF: I don't know if I remember well if it was en 2001 or 1991. I don't remember well or—I don't know—I think it was in 1991, 1992 that they signed the peace agreements. But, in 1989 there was the biggest offensive that El Salvador has had. They took almost all of San Salvador. There were parts that were completely occupied by guerillas and they were helped by foreign countries like Cuba, Russia and, I think, Ireland and various other countries. So they had a lot of strength as far as weapons, people and everything and that I think was the most, the most memorable because where we lived, like I said, we lived on high ground and we lived close to the military barracks and they—we even lived close to the president's house in El Salvador. So,

that was what they wanted—to take the president’s house. So, my country eh, where we lived—we lived in a building and from that building you could see clearly the president’s house and you could even get the president’s helicopter and so, because of that, that area was surrounded by military officers all the time—twenty-four hours a day they lived there. But, thank God, nothing happened there, just around it. We only heard on the news that they killed a lot of people—there were millions of people that died and other barracks that I think they took.

KK: What changed for your family after the war? What things changed?

IF: Well before, my country was governed by the military so, like it or not, the military had the power. They had so much power, money and everything. But, due to the peace agreements, there wasn’t the necessity of having so many barracks, so much military. So, they began to cut personnel and, in fact, they reinstated, I don’t know if I can say it like that, the new national police. So, in fact, many guerillas, started to become part of the military and there began a lot of—maybe the war ended but corruption began between the PNC—the national police—and all of that because they were people, like it or not, crazy in the aspect of—not crazy but rather it would be like they had a war mentality and all of that so they weren’t very prepared to confront different things. They were used to fighting and killing and so that caused a big problem because they wanted to use the example of the military forces again that killed people on the streets and all of that. But personally, my dad was older and it was time for him to retire from the military. He had completed many years being there and, I don’t know, like I told you, we are a big family and I think that we had fallen into bad habits—my dad had a lot of money and everything but he didn’t know how to think about it and we spent everything all of us and after that came, I don’t know, we were a little poor and, yeah.

KK: And how did it affect you then, personally, the poverty of your family?

IF: The truth is I didn’t enjoy the wealth so much, to say it like that, because I was little and I didn’t analyze how they dressed me, what I ate. But, when I was—when I was about fourteen, thirteen years old, it was then that I began to see the difference, that the money didn’t abound—big family and we had bad habits in the way we ate and dressed and it began to affect us psychologically since everyone was little and nobody could work and, I don’t know, it affected a lot of things because we went to good schools and, like it or not, a school there, in my country, private schools, they give you a good, like it or not, more opportunity. It isn’t like when you go to public school. They don’t teach you much and you’re prone to get into gangs or something could happen. There are exceptions, there are people who always become someone, but these exceptions are few.

KK: Um, tell me about your education then.

IF: Like I told you, well, we went to Catholic school, my whole family—all of my brothers and I went there. In fact, my older brothers and sisters like the four, five older ones, graduated from that school. We were always with pastors, no with priests, with, with...

KK: Nuns?

IF: ...nuns. And, I don't know. I think that we apparently led a good Catholic life. But, in fact, I changed when I was in seventh, eighth grade. At that time, we were beginning to reason more and, like it or not, we had to see through our own lives because before, we depended a lot on our parents but around eighth, ninth grade, we began to like, we had to work and take temporary jobs that—in El Salvador, the vacations are different. They're like, you begin to study in February and you end in October, we used to end before. You have like, three, four months to work and, I don't know, the majority of my brothers and I did it.

KK: Tell me about your job then. What was your first job?

IF: My first job was like—it was something very strange because I had never been used—I had never worked in anything and, in fact, now I remember that my first job was with the father of a friend of mine that welded beams and rafters and that made, like, metallic things and I remember that it was like, the first—my first vacation that I worked and that, in fact, we worked like two, three months—hard work and they paid us really bad. They exploited us and everything but my dream was to pay for my school from the ninth grade. It was to pay it. So, I don't know, it was hard because we were young and not used to it. But, it gave me the value of—of seeing the rest—the following jobs as easier.

KK: Was it hard to work and go to school at the same time or—?

IF: In fact in eighth—nin—seventh, eighth, and ninth, I only worked—eighth and ninth in fact, I only worked during vacation like I told you. But, after middle school, I did both at the same time. I was older then and I had had about three temporary jobs before but, I don't know, I was better prepared. In fact, I worked for a phone company that was, in fact, the first foreign company to come to El Salvador and, I don't know, it felt really easy what we did and it paid well and, I don't know, I liked it. It's good and bad at the same time because you get used to making money and if you aren't mature, you prefer—you begin to prefer money and so it's dangerous because you want to quit studying because you can already make money.

KK: But are there free schools in El Salvador or do you have to pay for all of them?

IF: There are free ones but, like I told you, you aren't going to get a very good education. I don't know, the teachers—no, I'm not going to generalize but, the majority don't care so much, you know? Because they aren't paid well and, I don't know, you could say that there are many things. I wouldn't know how to say it, I never studied there but, I found out through other people—their education was different. People fought there and got into gangs and everything and so, I'm not saying that all of them are bad but the majority of people who go there just fight.

KK: Tell me about your teachers and classmates in El Salvador. What was the environment like in your school there?

IF: Starting from elementary school, like I told you, it was a Catholic environment. You couldn't do many things. You couldn't, I don't know, the nuns were always walking around the school and it was very strict but maybe good for giving you good character but, then when it was the last years in sixth, seventh, uh, you began, people begin to become little devils and all that.

But, the punishments yeah are more, I don't know, they are a lot stronger than public schools. The Catholic schools always have that, I don't know, people always think that about them.

KK: Did you have many friends at school?

IF: Yeah because, in fact, I don't know, I played soccer and if you play soccer, I don't know, it was, it is the most popular sport and, I don't know, I think that we had a lot of luck when we played and that makes you more popular and especially also because of my brothers, my older brothers were really popular because they played basketball which is the second most popular sport and they were really good at soccer and—both of those sports—because of that.

KK: Do you play a lot?

IF: I like—before I played a lot but now I have two legs that were broken and so I am always afraid depending on, like it or not, people are a little selfish in my country compared to the United States. I have noticed that and I've played, in fact, with Americans and it's, the game is very clean. Unlike over there where the people are very bad and sometimes want to break your feet and all that so it's a little dangerous to play. You have to know who you're playing with because people get angry really easily and they don't like to lose—they can hurt you. I'm scared of that.

KK: How did you break you break your legs?

IF: When I was little, always, in fact, my three brothers, my other three brothers that I have are older and so they always hung out with their older friends but they always took me with them. Like it or not, I grew up with the same, like, their behaviors and we were playing in a very big part like a hill and we played throwing mud or, I don't know, mud balls that we made with water. We took dirt and we made balls and we threw them at each other. In fact, to climb up the hill, like the hill, we had to create a path and it was like, a little high and we carried water, we took water there on the path. The climb was a little wet and very—you could slip easily. On one of those I slipped and grabbed my brother, the one that was behind me, and he fell on top of me. I fell first and he fell sitting on my legs and he broke them.

KK: Oh, ouch. Um, going back to the topic of education, have you attended classes here in Lincoln?

IF: Um, yes and no. I've gone—I've taken English classes but, like what I've been used to—classes, classes or, what I think other people are used to, I don't think so. I've only gone to what you could call courses that are but, for, I don't know if I'm wrong but, these aren't real classes. They're like free courses that—we call them free courses and I've only gone to English classes and things like that.

KK: Can you compare the education in El Salvador with the education here a little?

IF: It's hard because I've never gone to a university here or even to school or anything. I've heard a lot of stories from other people and yes it's different of course but—because there a

professor has more rights, there is more respect and, I don't know, there is more pressure, there are more classes and you spend more time studying than here but, I don't know, I think that I came used to that but here it's different. But, like I told you, I can't have an opinion because I've never been in school here and I don't know if I ever will.

KK: You told me that you studied in a university in El Salvador?

IF: Yeah, in fact—

KK: What did you study?

IF: I was getting a degree in business administration. At that time it was the major most, I don't know, it was offered the most and it paid the best. That's another big difference between here and El Salvador. There you have to study what they offer the most so there are times—it can't matter to you if you like it or not. You have to study what will give you the most money to live because seriously I would have liked psychology or something but you aren't going to survive with psychology. In my country nobody—nobody cares about that, nobody's going to waste money on a psychologist, that's not important. So, but, I feel that I'm somebody that likes a variety of things. I didn't know anything about business or anything but when I was studying it, I don't know, I started to like it and my last job helped me a lot with that because it was, I don't know, a really big business and really structured and so I learned that business is really good.

KK: Do you have goals for the future? What do you want to do in the future?

IF: Ah...

KK: ...like, professionally.

IF: Yeah, I think everybody has goals and I have them but, there is something that many people say that when you come to this country, especially in our situation here, it's like, I might be wrong and negative but, you have to put them to the side a bit because you can't pursue them here so, if you are fighting and thinking that you can, you can but the truth is that you can't, that frustrates you a lot and you have a lot of pressure—there is a lot of pressure here. So, you put all of this pressure in your head that sometimes makes you—can make you go crazy here because, I don't know, you don't know how much time you are going to be here. You come with a motive, well, many people come and say, they think that they can study, that they can take good classes, that they can have access to good—good studies or something. I thought that in fact, that I could study and, in fact, my first year I worked hard to save money and pay for it but, when they told me that no, I couldn't study, that was a really big disappointment and I think that that was something that changed my way of thinking a lot and I think that, I don't know, there are times that I can't control my mind and—because I feel that I just work and work and I can't get out of the hole and I'm always going farther in. I've always thought that education—yeah, it makes you a little smarter but, it helps you find good jobs, you're in a better environment and, I don't know, you develop better and so many things but, I won't discriminate against those in my job, thank God, but, I don't know, I brought so many dreams, many goals to accomplish but, the truth is, I see them as so far away and, like I told you, I don't want to be negative but, it's the truth.

You have to stop thinking about your country because—that's another problem, that you compare your life here with what it's like over there—you start to compare and you find out that people are graduating over there, maybe not making a lot of money but they get experience—one level of education that's higher and here you can't—you can make a lot of money but you can't study. The most that you can do is learn English and, I don't know, many times you don't even have contact with Americans so, it sounds stupid again but, I don't know, it's frustrating.

KK: Explain to me your situation here.

IF: Well, I'm like—I'm illegal, undocumented. It's hard to get good jobs, it's hard, I don't know, everything. I don't know if you guys will have any idea but it's like you can't do anything—absolutely nothing. I am simply a machine that works, that makes money and that spends it maybe on—in my way of thinking—on stupid material things that, in the end, never stop being material things. It's good, it makes you a little happy and many Americans criticize us because of that because we only buy material things—we always want to have the best—but they don't realize that that's the only thing we can do. Maybe it's easy for you guys to say, get a book and learn—read it. But yeah it helps you but, it's not the same because you don't have a motive—you only read it and nothing happens. It's like a book that you take to the university and you study it and discuss it with your professor, with your classmates, I don't know. Sometimes it's frustrating but, like my brother says, you have to get used to it here. It's the price to pay for being here—the money and nothing else. But, like other friends say, you never end up being anybody—a man with money but nothing in his brain. I don't know if it's true but, I don't know. You get used to it here and that's it. You have to turn your head around because, if you don't, it's going to frustrate you a lot.

KK: But what is your motive for earning money? Why do you need to earn money? Do you have a future goal?

IF: Like I told you at the beginning, it was to study. When they told me that I couldn't, I don't know, unfortunately then it was to buy a car or, I don't know, it doesn't make me happy or anything but I think that I'm going to start investing in my country or, I don't know, to invest in my—because I think that that is the only thing that I can do here—I can't invest here for the same reason that I told you—I'm illegal. You don't have the right to do many things. You don't know if they are going to catch you and send you back to your country so it's stupid to invest here or waste your money here because you don't know if at some moment you are going to go back and, in fact, I have been here four years and I've made money but educationally I haven't grown at all. So, if I go back, you could say that I would go back educationally more stupid than I was. But, it's never too late, I'm young and, I don't know, but I have to invest in a business which is what a lot of people do. In fact, in my country you don't live off of a profession unless you're rich and it's always the same chain—the rich continue being rich and, that's it.

KK: You have one brother here. Where is the rest of your family?

IF: I have only one brother here. He has been here for almost eleven years. He has helped me a lot in many ways. He has explained how it is here, he's opened up my eyes a lot, he's grounded me because, like it or not, I came thinking—not dumb but I had dreams of studying and

everything but he made me see reason. I fell into a deep depression that was, in fact, because I couldn't continue studying. He told me that I had to change my way of thinking and that here this country is a material country. I don't know if it is for Americans but for a Latino that's how it is—an illegal. But, he has helped me a lot. My other family, my other brothers and sisters are in El Salvador and, in fact, two—three—of my siblings—two of them have come here but they don't like the rhythm of life here. Thank God they have opportunities there and, like I've always said, somebody who has opportunities in their country—I don't think they'd like life here. I'm not saying that the United States is bad, simply that it's different. You aren't used to the hard work, the solitude to, I don't know, a lot of things but a lot of my friends don't like it a lot here. They only come to visit and go back and they don't think or dream about coming here.

KK: Where do you work here?

IF: I'm working on roofs. I work as a roofer and, I don't know, it's really good money but hard at the same time. In fact, it doesn't make you, um, especially in the summer, it doesn't leave you with much opportunity for taking English classes. You get off of work really tired and, like what I told you, sometimes you go to classes and sometimes you say, why? if I don't even have contact with Americans. I work only with Latinos so, it's negative but it's because of that because you get off of work very tired and sometimes you say, I would prefer to take this hour or hour and a half of classes, I'd prefer to sleep because I have to work the next day or to relax because these jobs are physically hard and, at least in my case, I, when I get back, I get off very, I don't know, frustrated thinking, when will this end? the same thing every day and, I don't know, it's easy to say, why don't you go back to your country? but, like it or not, people adapt to the money—you know that if you go back, there are less opportunities over there. Like I told you, you can study and everything but you don't earn a lot like here so, again what my brother said—it's the price to pay for being here.

KK: Tell me when you decided to come to the United States.

IF: Well, I decided—that was like three and a half years ago and I was working for a good company. It was one of the companies that paid the best. Uh, I don't know, I had a lot of opportunities to move up there but, sadly my parents started to have some very big economic and health problems. We have public hospitals but, like I told you, the public in my country isn't very good. So, they really needed a private hospital but you can't afford most of them. My dad had an accident, he was hit by a car but, in fact, he had very good insurance there—he was in the military and they have a military hospital that is one of the best in El Salvador. But, one of my nephews was born with problems with his anus—it was clogged. I don't remember the sickness but he had—he was born that way and he had a drain we called it but he couldn't, I don't know, sometimes he couldn't even walk. I don't know, it was weird because it was one of my sisters who had left my house when she was eighteen. She had recently graduated from high school and was starting the university. She got a boyfriend and they had this son and I think—I'm not sure and I don't want to talk bad about her ex-husband but I think he used drugs and things like that and something happened with this child. I don't know, but they needed the operation for him because it was like 6,000 dollars and it's very hard to come up with 6,000 dollars there but, I don't know, I thought about coming here and, like many people say, I'll come, I'll take—I'll take what's needed for the operation, make a little of my own money, and come back fast. But people

think that here, in a year, you're going to make a lot of money, but it's not true. When you are here you realize that it's another reality and, I don't know, you change your way of thinking.

KK: So, you came here also for your family. Do you still send money to them?

IF: Yes, yes and, God willing, I always will because, I don't know, they always instilled in me that helping your parents is a blessing for you and it is a blessing because I was in their shoes for a time when they didn't have anything. I'm not saying that now I'm rich but, thanks to God, I have, I don't know, the opportunity to work and make a little more money than them. So it isn't a burden to send it to them. I don't know, two hundred dollars that here isn't anything and that there is something—it helps a lot over there. So, I don't know. It makes me happy to send them money and they're happy so I think that's the most important.

KK: You came here four years ago?

IF: Three and a half almost.

KK: And how did you come to the United States?

IF: Actually, I came, I came, as a wetback—an illegal. I tried to get—to obtain a visa and it was strange because everyone in my job—again, my job was really good and when you work for a good company in El Salvador obviously they give you better benefits and they give visas to everyone who applies. But, it was strange with me because they never gave me one and I tried three times in fact, and it was weird because only one friend and I were the only ones that they didn't grant visas to. It was weird and everybody was surprised too because I had been working there for many years and they gave me good recommendations and everything should have been easy. But, I don't know, at that time I was mad but I think that it was in God's plan and I see it from that point of view because, risking your life for your family I think was something that, I don't know, now I realize that I actually did it and I was always someone that didn't take a lot of risks in many things but, I showed myself that I am able to do many things because it's not so easy to come here. You hear on the news that people die, that they walk a lot and, like it or not, I because I had that job I was a little frail because in it you worked in an office and you didn't lift anything, it makes you, I don't know how to say it but someone really frail when it comes to working. So coming over here is really difficult—walking a lot and doing so many things that you have to on the way and, I don't know, I think that whatever person—many friends said that I wasn't going to make it, that I wasn't going to do it and that I didn't have a reason to come because I was doing well there and it would get better but, I don't know, I always thought about my parents and, in fact, whenever I got off of work I didn't feel happy spending my money and knowing that they were having problems and, because of that, I'm here and I'm still here, and I don't know how long I'll make it.

KK: Tell me about your trip to the United States. How did you cross the border and do you have stories from that time?

IF: Uh,...After the third time that they denied my American visa, it was disappointing and I said, no more, I know that God doesn't want me to go, I'll stay here in El Salvador and, I don't

know, something—he had something planned for me. I saw afterwards, like I told you, my parents' situation which was getting worse all the time. I don't know, I said, I have to do something for them. They have done so much for me, why not do something? Somebody told me about the Mexican visa and that it's very easy for someone—again, my job—that had a good job in my country, it was very easy for us to obtain that visa because you only needed an international card, your work permit and there, I don't know, with recommendations from your job it was, like, easy. I went, so traumatized with the consuls that, I don't know, I said, I don't think they'll give it to me. I went and, I don't know, it was so easy, like, easy. They gave it to me and I said, I'm going. Yes, now is the time. God, I don't know, I know that he is making me understand that now is the time to go and, that was a Friday, no, I'm lying, a Thursday not yet Friday and that same Thursday I talked with the coyote that was going to take me. I said I'll come as fast as I can and he told me to come Monday. We left on Sunday and it was all so fast. I talked to my boss and they had my vacation saved—fifteen days. They also say that it takes fifteen days to come and that is one of the biggest lies too and that you are going to come by yourself. But, at that time I think that the desperation is so great for helping that it doesn't matter how much time and all of the things that you're going to suffer because it's not the same to say, I'm going to suffer and actually suffering. But, when I talked to my bosses, they gave me my fifteen days which is an obligation, a law, a right. I left on Sunday and, like I said, I had a visa to go to Acapulco but Acapulco is like—like, you're going to, how to tell you, you're entering Mexico on the left side, I don't know if it's north, south, east, west...

KK: Me neither. I don't know.

IF: One of those sides. But, Mexico is very specific when they give you your visa. You can—they ask you where you're going and you tell them and then you can't leave that route because if you do, they can catch you and take you back. It's not like here where they give you a visa and you can travel in all of the United States. But before Acapulco, right when you enter is Pachula, the first Mexican town. You go from there and right away I had to grab the first bus direct to Acapulco but I caught the bus directly to Mexico City. Obviously if they stopped me, anybody from Mexican immigration, automatically, they could arrest me because they would ask me where I was going and, in fact, they give you a paper and there it says that you're going to Acapulco and, if they saw me, they would send me back but, thank God, we stopped like twenty-five times in the first town and never did anybody get on at any moment. Never did anyone ask me where I was going and...never—until I arrived at Mexico City. Everything was OK and there my visa expired and I was officially another illegal—or even then I could lie and say that I was lost, I wasn't illegal—sometimes you have to lie in that situation. You can't be very leg—I don't know—you have to lie in fact. But, thanks to God, everything was okay when I arrived and it took about one day and a half because I came by bus and I talked with the coyote, he called me—er—we talked in fact, and he was drunk. I had gotten there at two in the afternoon and I called him and called him and he never answered and like at five in the afternoon, he answered me and, I don't know, he told me that he was a little drunk and that he was going to send someone for me. But, it helped me because, I don't know, I've always been trusting, I don't know, and I started to walk around Mexico. I went to beautiful plazas, I don't know, I got on the metro and met people. I talked with frien—not friends, but with people that I found in Mexico and, I don't know, and I talked with a good, not friendship, but I had good conversations with people that sold things on the streets and they were really friendly. In fact that confirmed

for me that—not confirmed, but made me think because many of my friends think that Mexicans are really bad and all that but, thank God, I only met nice people and, I don't know, and now I can say that they, I don't know, are really great people. But, many of my friends say that all Mexicans are bad—all, all and, I don't know, I can say that they're not.

KK: So, after Mexico...so...

IF: After Mexico City when I arrived in Mexico City, I was the first from the group because they create groups of fifteen, sixteen people. I had left early—the others left on Sunday but I alone—I came like on a private bus you could say and they came illegal from my country so obviously they were going to take longer. I was in Mexico City and I stayed alone in a lady's house and I waited one week, just waiting for my group, for them to come so we could begin the second part which is to go to the border. But, the first that came was a Guatemalan in fact, and he told me that they had caught a group in a certain area of Mexico and that they were going to take longer because they were delayed because they had to pay off the police to get out of jail. But, I don't know, after twelve, thirteen days, more and more people began to arrive that had gotten lost. The group had dispersed but they began to arrive and arrive until we had all sixteen and from there we left for another state, Pachuca like an hour from Mexico City and we did the same thing going out in groups of three or four people of four and four and then waited for each other. I don't know, we were getting to know each other and I have always been a person who talks a lot and, I don't know, even the conversations with the coyotes, I don't know, I talked a lot, I learned a lot, they told me things, I don't know, I learned a lot and from there, in fact, I was the last to go out. I believe that was exactly after fifteen days after which I supposedly was going to be here in the United States. I was barely in Pachuco and that's an hour from Mexico City and I had, I don't know, maybe one more week or, it would depend. They left me alone and I went to the border that is Tamaulipas a town on the border of the United States and, I don't know, I got there and waited some more days and after that, they sent me to another place because they said that it was a little dangerous, supposedly to cross there and, I don't know, it was an adventure that, at the time you're really scared but, when it's over, I don't know, it's really, it's, I don't know, I realized that I could do a risky thing.

KK: And so, you crossed the border with other people, or in a big group, or...?

IF: After, like I said, they sent us to another house that was a very poor house—very poor—exaggeratingly poor that was on the border but it was two hours from where we had arrived at first. There were sixteen of us and they put all of us in a normal car—a four-door car and we all had to ride for two hours. It was, I think, like I told you at the beginning I had—I have problems with my legs and from the moment you sit down you get into your—into the car and you have to ride with your head down, everything down, they can't find out that—they have to think that there is only one person—the driver and nobody else. So, it's like, everyone had their heads down and you can imagine—sixteen people crouched down, three people in the front seat—the passenger seat—and in the back there were sixteen—eh—thirteen more people in the backseat. You can imagine—for two hours. It was like you felt that your body was going to break. But we got there and, I don't know, it was, again, I think that the house was broken down and the water was dirty and it stank and the guy at the house smelled—he smoked marijuana and, in fact, some of my friends smoked with him. I don't know, we played soccer and it was relaxing at the same

time because, I don't know, he said, no, relax, we can play soccer here. I don't know, it was the most relaxing time that we had the whole time. But, we waited two days there and, afterwards, we were ready for the next step—to go one more hour from his house. They threw us into what we called the woods and—or the forest. No, not forest, not the woods but a lot of trees and such. And so I began to cross and enter the United States but, I don't know, it was nice because when crossing the Río Bravo as they call it, it was so easy and, I don't know, it was so fast, like two or three hours, four hours, three hours, and we were inside the United States and it was it was exciting because, I don't know, someone who doesn't know what's coming is like, well, I made it through everything and that was so hard. I've heard that a lot of people die and such but we were in Broxville that is the first or second town after you enter the United States from that side but no, I began to realize that this was the biggest walk and that for almost two days you walk – in the United States! So, I don't know, many people get scared because the people that are here, like the coyotes are stricter because the laws here in the United States are stricter. In Mexico, if they catch you, you pay and they let you go right away or it depends how much you pay and they let you go. But, in the United States, you can't pay and so you know that you have walked so much, you have done so much for them to just come and catch you and send you back and—you are so nervous but, thanks to God, everything went well. But, I remember that some people came—some Chinese—some Asians—or, they were from China and it was a group of all Chinese that came here before our group. So, not to specify hours but they have specific times for getting the people through the last step which is the longest. So, they have a specific time so there is a difference of one day between the groups. At the same hour for example, if they enter at one and begin to walk in the morning—an example—the following group, the following day starts at one so there is one day's difference walking. So, the group before us, that was the Chinese, got caught. So, automatically they had to change the route. So, the coyote had to improvise because, supposedly they have the route ready—they know the route and prepare it days before so they know it but, he had it in his memory but automatically he had to change it and that made our walk longer. We walked about thirty hours each—that much or more, I don't remember—I think that it was thirty hours or more and we walked a lot but, thank God that was in March and so it wasn't very hot and, in fact, you walk at night and sleep during the day and—I liked it because you develop a very profound friendship with the people that come with you because, seriously, they are great people, very, I don't know, you become like brothers, you protect yourself with them, you take care of each other, you give each other warmth because the mornings are very cold and, I don't know, you hug someone without any malice—you hug a woman and it's like—you don't think about that, you just protect her—you aren't thinking about stupid things just protecting her or another friend—you aren't thinking about stupid things, just helping each other. I liked that experience and when, thank God, we got in, we walked and they didn't catch us. It was very good because we arrived at another—well, this was in Houston and it was good and you see—because, when you get to the house there are many groups, like fifteen or sixteen people and you always see that everyone is united, these groups, they take care of each other at night. Because they say that sometimes these people rob each other but my group, or I saw in other groups that they took care of each other so much and, like I told you, I don't know, they tell you about their experiences and they tell you, I don't know so, so many things that they have left behind that they have sold to come and, I don't know, it was funny that one of them said that he had even sold his cow to come and, I don't know, it's funny but, I don't know, for him it was, I don't know, like we say it was his work material that he sold to come here.

KK: So, you arrived in Texas. Why did you come to Lincoln?

IF: Um, some days before I left, I forgot to tell you, a friend had come and he hadn't been to El Sa—to my country in like, twelve years and he is an American citizen. He always was. And, I don't know, I think that like all American citizens—they don't know what's happening, they don't know about the trip, they don't understand the rules or the laws here. They think that it's easy to come and they ignore many things and he told me, go to Mexico and I, I don't know, I will come get you and take you to the United States, like it was nothing. But he thought that because he, actually he had gone, had left the United States, because he lived for a long time on the border, and he would go out and go to Mexican bars but for them it was easy to go back like [pff] they came and went and there were times when they didn't even ask them anything and they thought that it was easy like, [hmm]. So, he thought that but when I arrived, I think that he realized or asked something and I think actually, that he didn't even really think I was coming. He thought I was kidding because I told him, I'll be at your house in fifteen days and when I called and was in the United States it was like wo—I think it scared him and I think that that would happen to me now because if someone were to call me and say, I'm coming, I would say, ah, okay, but when you're here, I don't know, he was scared, especially because for them, because when you're a citizen it's very risky to have someone illegal and more if you help them to cross the border. He could lose—well, he would go to jail, you can't lose your citizenship but he would go to jail. So, I think that he had all that fear and, I don't know, I had—one of my brothers, like I told you about that's here. But, I hadn't had any contact with him. In fact, I hadn't even told him that I was coming here. I don't know who talked to him to tell him that uh—actually in fact, I didn't have anybody to get me because my friend—I think I arrived there on a Friday—Thursday or Friday—I don't remember very well and when I called him to tell him, he told me that he had a test that day and the next day and wanted to know if I could wait until the next week. That was like, I don't know, I think that he ignored the situation. He had come and everything and he probably thought that I had come on a plane. He even said, why don't they bring you here to my house? So, I don't know, obviously he didn't know anything that was happening but I said, no, I can't. I want to leave now. I want to get out of this now. I'm scared. It's going to be so stupid if they catch me here because it was risky being there because there were so many people there—approximately, you could say, seventy people in the same room waiting for someone to come and make the second payment to set you free and, well, we left it like that. He was going to take his tests on Thursday and Friday and on Saturday I don't know what but I think on Sunday he was going to come get me. But, for me that was too much. I wanted to get out because all of my friends almost the day we got there began to leave—the same day. It was sad because it was just me with like three others and everyone was leaving fast and it was only us. And on one of these days my brother called me and I didn't recognize his voice because I had only talked to him like twice the whole time that he had been here, so I didn't recognize his voice. He just told me that it's me, your brother and he asked me, do you want to come? I can—he talked to me about my friend and he told me that he couldn't get me and he talked with me and I talked with him and he said, you are going to come with me and so, I don't know, I was never close to my brother and, in fact, I thought that he lived in Alaska because—he said Nebraska but I had never heard of that state but when he asked me he said, well, I'll be there on Monday and it surprised me because I thought, Alaska is farther than—but he told me, I don't know, I'll come on such and such a day and well, yeah it wasn't like that exactly but my, he, a friend of his and his family took me into her house for a week in

Houston and then they came—it seems that I could be outside and it was less dangerous but this way, he worried less. I think he had to ask off of work and within the week he came and brought me here and I'm here because of that. But, it wasn't in my plans to come here.

KK: What did you think of Lincoln when you came here?

IF: Um, actually, when I came, I don't know, it seemed good, quiet—actually I don't think I noticed much. It was—I think there were a lot of bad experiences in my head. I was scared of everything—the police—everything. I don't think I enjoyed anything. I couldn't sleep at night because during the trip here you only sleep on the ground, you sleep in the cold—many things and so, I don't know, I think that I was worried more about other things. But after three or four days I got my first job here and so—to work—you come with so much desire to take advantage right away of working and doing everything and, I don't know, I started my—my goal was to work. I think that all of the people come with that mentality—to work, to work, to make money and pay your debts or—the reason you came—and everything. I don't know, time passed, a year passed and I didn't see many things here. I went out with my brother—he took me to many restaurants, to buy thing but, I didn't have much contact with Americans, only friends of theirs. I don't know, everything was fine but my mentality was to work and not go out much or anything.

KK: Now do you have many friends here?

IF: Um, I think so, yes—I have a lot of acquaintances—acquaintances. I think that it's very easy to make them because it's a small town. I think that everybody knows each other. If you don't know someone a friend does so, I don't know, everybody has the same, the same problem that, sometimes I think we feel alone even if you have—you know many people—you feel alone. It's different but the people are very friendly and quickly you, I don't know, you can have a bond with someone for the same—the same solitude—for the same, I don't know but yes, I have many acquaintances and, I don't know, many good acquaintances, in fact, many friends.

KK: What do you think about the resources that we have or don't have here in Lincoln to help Latinos—especially Latinos in your situation?

IF: Um, I can't blame people here because this isn't our country. I think that I can only thank them because honestly, I think that in my country or in many Latin American countries, I think that they would be stronger with the laws and all of that because, like it or not, many people here that want to help do give us resources to help us. Someone that, I don't know, that isn't from this country—the truth is we aren't from this country and, I don't know, I just want to say thanks and I know that behind it is a welcome even though sometimes we want more, understand? But it's stupid to say that because it's easy for someone to say, you aren't from here, you can't demand a lot of things and they are right, understand? And, I don't know, what comes from you guys I think is good.

KK: Now that you're here, you're in this situation, do you have plans for the future?

IF: Um, I think that many people and I were hopeful for this that didn't pass—the immigration reform. So, it's like, it's like the same thing that I told you. In my case I was hopeful. You put

so much hope in something and nothing happens like when I wanted to study and they told me no and it's such a huge frustration when they tell you no and that's what happened with that reform that everyone—I think everyone was hoping for—to begin to do new thing that you want like getting a new job, studying—even something that you like, but—everyone has plans but, with, when they say no, you have to change your mentality again and it's like, I don't know, like my brother says, you have—you can't dream so much because here it hurts to dream because you're bad off if you dream and you fail. It's like you have another disappointment even bigger and that—it's dangerous because you can fall into trouble or in, I don't know, in things that many people fall into here like—I have heard of many people who have committed suicide and I have heard of three or four people who have committed suicide not only in Lincoln—not in Lincoln actually but in almost all of the United States it happens because of the same situation because, I don't know, sometimes you say, why is life—or why can't my situation—why can't I have with the money here, the happiness that I had there? You can't but you have to get used to it and, like many people say, the first years are the hardest. Afterwards, I don't know, you start to change your way of thinking. But as for my plans, mmm, I don't know, I don't know, I see them as so far away and farther every day. Like I said, to study...I think that it sounds negative but I think I'm going to throw that to the side as they say, and get into business.

KK: So, if somebody like a friend or someone in your family wanted to come here from El Salvador, what would you say to that person o what, I don't know...?

IF: Eh...

KK: Would you give advise, or...?

IF: Actually, when I talk to my friends I tell them the truth which is another one of the big problems because many people when they go back over there tell a lot of lies about here like the money is easy to make and all of the jobs are easy, that you can study, you can do supposedly anything but no, I tell them that—actually, many of them laugh like they don't believe it when I tell them that I work in construction and, obviously hearing their reactions I realize that when people go back they're saying that here everyone is managers, supervisors, people are doctors, nurses, everything. Nobody here works in construction, nobody cleans bathrooms, nobody cleans houses, it's like, I don't know, to begin with, I tell them that—what they're getting into, what awaits them because many people think that just by coming here to the United States your life is solved but no, I have come to the conclusion that when you come here the hardest part begins—for everything—the trauma that you have. Here you begin to confront—not racism but maybe, the anger of the citizens here at seeing that so many people are coming and, I don't know, because there are many people that look at me bad sometimes and maybe we shouldn't call it racism seriously, if you think about it, it's not racism but, I think that anybody would be troubled by the fact that so many people are invading their country and that, I don't know, more especially in this country that is like that—that likes to preserve its rules, its laws. So, it's complicated because they don't understand many things. They—it's easy for them to say, why don't you stay in your country? or, why do you come here to do this or that? It's easy but, like I told you, you have so many problems in your head and, I don't know, I think that everything is offensive to you especially the foo—from the food to the culture—everything. Everything is hard. Everything is hard but you can do it.

KK: What have you learned from your situation or from your experience?

IF: I think that the most important is that money is not happiness. I think that one of things I thought was that and, actually, after I came here, with my parents, thank God, my nephew could have the operation free in my country and my dad, like I told you was in the military and has good benefits so there wasn't the need to send a lot of money, simply a little money. So, I don't know, I can say that I have money—I'm not rich but, I don't know, I can buy myself material things that I want but, not everything, but something but, it doesn't give me happiness—it doesn't give happiness and that is something very difficult because here your worries are different. You bring your worries from your country and here—it's different here what you worry about. There you have to worry sometimes that you won't have a job that pays well or, if you have a job that pays well, an extra job to make extra money—you can almost never get them but here you can do—but suppose the rent there isn't very expensive, the things aren't expensive but here, everything is more expensive so you have other problems here and, I don't know.

KK: Well, is there anything else you would like to say about your experience, your life in El Salvador, your life here?

IF: That, I don't know, I am so happy to have been born in my country and to be here and to be learning that I am in a place where—I am living it and what I hear and learn from other people like, what I told you, who want everything easy—at the same time, I can tell my friends or whoever that they need to think it over well before they come here. If they have a small, small possibility of doing something there, they should do it that—that they shouldn't risk their lives because the situation is worse every day and, I don't know, that they need to try in our countries that they need to try to do something and that money isn't everything. It isn't everything but, I don't know, and I believe that the major—the biggest problem that we have is that we like to have the best material things, so, I think that that makes us make stupid decisions like coming here, risking our lives, and, maybe when you have it, you realize that it's not worth anything. That.

KK: You said that—that you believe that God had a motive for bringing you here. Do you find some hope in that or, what do think was his motive—the reason that you're here?

IF: One maybe is to realize for myself what I can do for my family. Two, like I told you, to realize that material possessions aren't everything. Three, I don't know, to help people, not just help but tell them the truth which is what a lot of people don't do. I think that later on I will find out the motive and everything—he—why he wanted me to come here. Because everything has a motive and everything has a reason and, I don't know, I don't think I know it yet.

KK: Yeah, well, I hope that you find, I don't know, the reason that you're here. And, and, well, thanks a lot for doing the interview, yeah?

IF: Mmm hmm.

KK: Okay, goodnight.

IF: Goodnight.