

**[Begin Lisa Wong Rosario's Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Amy Evans:** Okay; this is Amy Evans in San Antonio, Texas for Foodways Texas at Rosario's Restaurant with Miss Lisa Wong on Tuesday, April 28, 2015. And we just enjoyed a little lunch out in the dining room and we're sitting here in an adjacent private dining room. And Lisa, if I could get you please to state your name and your occupation for the record--?

**00:00:28**

**Lisa Wong:** My name is Lisa Wong or Elizabeth Wong. I'm a restaurateur, owner, and operator of Rosario's Mexican Café and Cantina or this particular location is Rosario's--uh-oh; I forgot my own name, Rosario's Bar and Lounge.

**00:00:51**

**AE:** Okay and if we could get a little bit of your background. You were raised in San Antonio is that right?

**00:00:56**

**LW:** I was born and raised in San Antonio and lived here all my life. I went to Thomas Jefferson High School, go mighty mustangs; graduated the Class of '81, opened up my first Mexican restaurant shortly after in '81, 1981.

**00:01:12**

**AE:** And what told you at the age of 18 that you wanted and could open a restaurant?

**00:01:18**

**LW:** Well I had worked in a small little Mexican restaurant all through junior high and high school; also worked at Frost Brothers. I want to add that 'cause that was my only other job I've ever had. While I was working in the restaurant business or restaurant all through junior high and high school I really enjoyed it. I started off in the back of the house where--otherwise known as the kitchen and I learned the basics from washing dishes to doing some cooking. And through the process I was promoted to front of the house and did some waitressing and cashiering and hosting and did some private parties for catering events.

**00:02:08**

And I felt that I really enjoyed it and it was something that I wanted to do long-term.

**00:02:16**

**AE:** And had you excuse me, heard growing up about your grandfather's restaurant?

**00:02:20**

**LW:** I had heard a little bit about it. You know my paternal grandfather was Asian and he had migrated to the US and opened a small American/Chinese café downtown San Antonio on East Commerce. And I had heard many stories of my--my grandfather and how hardworking he was and how much he enjoyed what he did. I'd like to think that possibly he rubbed off on me. I also just think that it's just something that came natural to me. I had a very good mentor early on. His name is Nick Garza and he was the owner/proprietor of the little Mexican restaurant that I originally worked at all through junior high. I fibbed to him when I applied; I told him I was 16

when I was only I think 12 and I worked there for a few years and I really enjoyed the business.  
And he likes to think that he's the reason why I'm in the Mexican restaurant business.

**00:03:33**

**AE:** So take me back to that day when you were 12 applying for this job.

**00:03:38**

**LW:** You know I--I think I always had the entrepreneurial spirit in me. As a very young girl I remember running my own little ice-cream and snow cone stand. I used to make cream puffs and lemon bars, you know by the dozens for my neighbors and--and they really enjoyed my--I guess my baking so I would always get hired for birthday parties and stuff to--to bake for other neighbors and friends in the neighborhood at a very, very young age.

**00:04:20**

I remember my father giving me a--I don't know what you'd call them, one of those little change banks that the--the bus drivers used to carry on them to make change. And my goal was to fill that little **[Laughs]** change maker up as often as I could. So I always found little odd jobs around my neighborhood whether it was selling you know snow cones and lemonade or mowing a lawn or cleaning a fish pond out that my neighbor down the street had, and/or pet sitting or baby sitting and I always had an entrepreneurial spirit.

**00:05:12**

So I knew early on that it was something that I wanted to do. I loved managing tasks and--and systems at a very young age.

**00:05:23**

**AE:** So what was your intention in applying for a job at this restaurant and what--what job did you want to get?

**00:05:28**

**LW:** I remember that it was--school was going to be let out probably within a week or two and I always enjoyed working. I did enjoy working. And I--it was a little Mexican restaurant that was probably three minutes from my house, four minutes from my house and I used to stop by there on the way home to buy a can of Big Red and a half order of bean and cheese nachos. And I saw a sign on the window that said *Help Wanted*. So I had nothing better to do. I asked for an application and I filled it out and it said age and I couldn't put 12, so I put 16. [*Laughs*] I was always the tallest girl in my class, so I guess I got away with it.

**00:06:23**

They hired me on the spot and I remember going home and telling my parents that I had a job for the summer. Both my parents looked at me like I was a little crazy. They didn't quite believe me. But I--you know I told them that it was a little Mexican restaurant right down the street and you know--and they happened to know the--the owner. So I guess they let me. They weren't crazy about it but you know they let me work there and I enjoyed it. And I worked there all through junior high and high school and I learned a lot.

**00:07:02**

**AE:** Did you wait tables the whole time?

**00:07:04**

**LW:** Well like I said, I started out in the kitchen and I worked my way to the front of the house and I waited tables. And I even cooked in the back. I did a little bit of everything and I really enjoyed it. Even in the regular school year I had a part-time job there; I would work a couple--a couple shifts a week and then I would work on weekends, so--.

**00:07:31**

You know some things come natural and that was something that came very natural to me.

**00:07:36**

**AE:** So you have two brothers; would you mind stating their names?

**00:07:40**

**LW:** One is Sammy Wong, Jr. or Samuel Wong, Jr. and my other brother is Richard Wong.

**00:07:50**

**AE:** Now did they grow up with the same kind of drive as you did?

**00:07:53**

**LW:** Very different [*Laughs*]; my brothers um--we're very different. I--I--my--one of my brothers works at Civil Service and my other brother bless his heart, you know he's no longer with us or with me anymore. He's--he passed July 4, 2014 from a long-term illness, but he always kind of chose the easier path in life and no, so we're very different, you know. And--and I kind of reflect on that a lot of times because we had the same upbringing and had the same

parents and same household and same opportunities or same lack of opportunity, I don't know you know and we all came out very differently, so--.

**00:08:54**

**AE:** Where do you fall within the lineage as far as age is--?

**00:08:58**

**LW:** I'm the youngest; I'm the youngest by 10 years.

**00:09:05**

**AE:** So that surprises me that (a) you're a woman, (b) you have this entrepreneurial spirit, and your--the rest of your siblings do not, and--and where that comes from. Have you tapped into anything that--from where that might originate?

**00:09:18**

**LW:** Hmm; I've thought about it and I think I know why. You know different things obviously drive different people for different reasons. And like I said, at a very young age and I will say that at a very young age I had a very happy childhood. I came from a loving home, two parents that you know loved their children, and were very loving parents. So I had a very happy childhood early on.

**00:10:05**

And as I said, I always had that little entrepreneurial spirit. I enjoyed--my--both my parents, especially my father always taught me the importance of working and the importance of saving and the importance of an education and the importance of planning for a rainy day and

not living beyond your means and all those basic things. And my dad was a very strict person, very loving, but still strict, so a lot of the things--a lot of those advices stuck with me at a very young age.

**00:10:51**

As I grew older, maybe 12--10, 12, 13 years old, my father was a very strict man and he didn't understand that his little girl was growing up. And so he had a hard time letting me grow up. I--I did well in school and I was always very involved with school activities, predominantly sports, and he never really promoted or understood that. He wanted me to be a total book worm. So at a later age we kind of had some difficulties. My parents started to have problems and then my happy home became a very unhappy home.

**00:11:46**

My brothers were 10 and 11 years older than I was and they were out of the house. And I was the only one left and I think at a very young age I realized that to a certain extent my mom stuck around because of me and--and things were tough you know 'cause my parents didn't get along at all. And I saw how unhappy she was and I told myself at a very young age that I would never put myself in that position. I would never be in an unhappy place out of necessity or because maybe my mom maybe felt she didn't have an option.

**00:12:42**

So back to your question; I think that's really what has always driven me is I've been always very perceptive you know very young and I always understood what was going on. And I always told myself that I was going to have options in this life and I could either make my options more available to me or I could you know--and this is the way I--I found an outlet, in--in being responsible. So when I opened up my first little restaurant, I gave it 100-percent, you know. A lot of my friends were going to school, you know going to college or working for

someone else or you know and partying and having a good time. And you know I just had to button down at a very, very young age and say you know this is what I want to do and this is the reason I want to do it and this is the reason why I need to succeed at it.

00:13:56

And I've been very blessed.

00:14:01

**AE:** So you feel like it's paid off?

00:14:03

**LW:** I think it has; I think it has. I mean it's--I mean it's paid off for a multitude of reasons. I think that my initial reason for having the drive that I have has enabled me to have choices and options that I would otherwise not have. It's been a very rewarding journey. I will say that you know probably for the first 25 years of my career I never kind of stopped to think about where I was when I was 18 and fast-forward you know when I was 40--45 years old and how far my career had taken me 'cause I was too busy just working.

00:15:06

But in--in hindsight or when I reflect I think it's--it's been a--it's been a great path. I enjoy working with people. I enjoy working with my employees. I have several family members that work with me that I've tried to instill the same core values. And a few of them I think have caught on. There's a few others that I'm still working with. You know my mom recently moved in with me. I'm very happy that I could--that I'm able to take care of her. I lost--I lost my brother last year so she took it really, really hard and I didn't want her to be by herself anymore. And I don't know what else to say. *[Laughs]*



00:16:07

**AE:** Well take me back to 1981 when you opened Lisa's and--and tell me how you worked with your mother then and how that first business was.

00:16:17

**LW:** I had just graduated from high school and it was--it was kind of funny how it all came full circle and how I opened up my first restaurant. You know I always--I always knew or--in high school I always knew I wanted to open up my own little restaurant. I was very fortunate; my--my high school crush, he loved restaurants as well. And believe it or not, you know back in the '80s there was--there were individuals that you would you know coin as foodies. And my boyfriend in high school you know was a foodie. He loved great food. And he took me to every nice restaurant in San Antonio from [Shay Arde] to La Province to back then [Pisano's] was a tiny little restaurant on--on Locust Street that was very quaint. [Shay Arde] was a--an incredibly delicious French restaurant. And I remember on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday or--yeah my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he flew me to Houston to eat at Tony's where you'd have like four or five waiters to a table.

00:17:50

And he had me home by midnight which was my curfew. Keep in mind, you know he saved like you know half a year's pay to get all that done. But he kind of influenced me on the restaurant scene at a very, very young age and his aspirations were to open up a restaurant one day.

00:18:15

And it kind of rubbed off on me. And I had a different--I had a different plan on how I was going to go about it. I was going to go to college and get a business degree and kind of put

my ducks in order and make sure I had the wherewithal to open up my own place. But kind of fast-forward, it was my last year in high school and things at home weren't getting any better with my parents. And I used to play softball. And I was on the softball team. And one of my coaches was going to go open up a little Mexican restaurant. He was a policeman and for some reason policemen, firemen, they had all these little taco places in San Antonio. And he was a fireman and he wanted to open up a little Mexican restaurant.

**00:19:21**

And he mentioned it to me, and I said oh, you know I have a lot of experience in Mexican restaurants. I said I know how to do just about anything; you know if you need any help you know call me and I'll go work for you.

**00:19:35**

Well he kind of took it one step further and he says really? You have all that experience? And I said yes. And--and he says well how about if I put up the money and you put up sweat equity and we're partners? Keep in mind I'm 18 years old. I'm getting ready to--to graduate. And you know things aren't looking great at home and you know I said wow; you know it might be my ticket out quickly, you know.

**00:20:06**

So I didn't think too hard and too long and I said great; I'll be your business partner. And my next steps were I started--I got in my car and I started driving all over San Antonio looking for the perfect location. And I ended up also taking like a crash course with the Small Business Administration to get some basics in accounting. And I looked at all these different locations and finally found what I believed was the right location and started negotiating the lease. Keep in mind, that I keep on saying I because he never--my softball coach after that first initial

conversation we really didn't talk about it too much. I just you know I took it as his word and that's what we were going to do, so I started doing what I thought I needed to be doing.

**00:21:16**

And I remember finding this restaurant that was being operated as a little taco place. And the people there were wanting out and they weren't doing very well. And they wanted out. And I remember taking my current--my employer that I had worked for that had a little Mexican restaurant and I remember taking him over there to tell him and show him the place to see what his opinion was on it.

**00:21:45**

And I remember his--his famous last words were *why would you want to come to this side of town*, which was the west side of town, *and open up another Mexican restaurant when there's a Mexican restaurant at every corner? Why; do you think that's a smart thing to do?* And I remember telling him, well I think so because obviously there's a market for Mexican restaurants and I think I can do better than most of them.

**00:22:19**

So anyway I negotiated the contract and then I--the day we're supposed to sign and of course I had--had a couple of conversations with my baseball coach and so I remember it's the day we're supposed to sign the contract and the day we're supposed to come up with the money and he tells me that he had a change of heart; that he was sorry that he couldn't do it.

**00:22:51**

Well you know I'm 18 years old. I just spend every waking moment for probably the last three or four months, you know trying to make this dream of mine come true. And I went home very disappointed. My mom--I got home and my mom was there and I told her what happened and she could see the tears rolling down my cheeks. And--and both my parents kind of knew I

was doing but they thought I was crazy and they also thought I wouldn't follow-through with it, it would never happen, you know and I guess in a sense in that point in time it wasn't going to happen. But she knew that I was really disappointed. And she said well wait 'til your father gets home, you know and ask him you know and I'll tell him that he needs to help support your dream.

**00:23:42**

So my father got home and of course he wasn't very supportive initially and he said I was crazy; that was I 18 years old and I didn't know what I was doing and he called me a quitter. And I to this day I think it's kind of funny 'cause I was 18 years old. I don't know what I had quit that I had disappointed him so badly but anyway he called me a quitter and says you know how can I trust you to open up this Mexican restaurant when you know I don't think you're going to be able to do it?

**00:24:11**

So anyway I begged and--and he finally came around. He--him and my mom had put away I don't know about \$8,000 to help me with my education. I told him you'll never have to help me again. I'll never ask you for anything. And they ended up giving it to me and very fortunate; the first day we opened up we opened up with a line out the restaurant. And I'm happy to say that--that was in '81 and we're at 2015 and the restaurant is still open today. It's still up and running.

**00:24:53**

**AE:** So what do you attribute to having a line out the door? And how did--how did people know to come to you?

**00:25:00**

**LW:** Oh you know I think--I think it's some of the same attributes that--that I still hold true today. You know I--you know at a very young age different things were instilled in me by both my parents. You know if you're going to do something do it right; you know don't do it halfway. Do it the very best you can. And you know a lot of those different things, attributes I meshed into how I ran my businesses, you know. When I--simple as making a breakfast taco; you know I make the breakfast taco the way I wanted a breakfast taco made for me if someone was making it for myself or I was making it for myself.

**00:25:50**

You know I put a lot of love into it, a lot of time into it, and I knew the importance of simple--simple as that you know, freshness, the temperature of food. There's nothing worse than you can make the best meal in the--you know on earth but if it's not the right temperature, if it's cold and it's been sitting there too long, it--you know all the effort and love that you put into it will never shine through.

**00:26:19**

I knew how to treat customers. I knew how to greet people with a smile. I knew that it was not something that was going to happen overnight. I knew that it was every day making an effort in the positive direction to--to either attract more customers into my restaurant, to make sure I was taking care of their expectations, um; you know it was doing the same thing over and over again, insuring that--that you know I put smiles on--on people's faces and they came back and they told their friends about it.

**00:27:15**

You know some of the things today that I still truly believe in are the reasons why my business has been successful. You know I sent out an email to my employees today and you

know we're very fortunate that we always get voted you know if not the best Mexican restaurant in San Antonio, you know I'm always in the top two or three and when you have 1,000 other Mexican restaurants to compete with you know it's--it gets tough and you always have to be on top of your game. But you know some of the things that like I said, I sent an email to my employees today and I said you know don't ever forget the reason or the--or the details that--that separate us from everyone else. It's the little details that sometimes people don't put enough emphasis on. You know we do a silly thing here like on our nachos or chalupas or say crispy tacos, anything that is a corn tortilla that should be eaten crisp you know. When someone orders a--an order of nachos, I will have them take those 12 nachos and stick them in the oven for about five--six seconds and then take them out and then build them with whatever goes on top of them whether it's beans and cheese and meat and then put them back in the oven and bake them.

**00:28:55**

Why? It's because you know naturally there's humidity in the air and the humidity gets into your tacos and chalupas and your nachos and they're not as crisp as they could be if you don't take that little extra step. A lot of employees that come work for me that maybe worked in another Mexican restaurant, they look at me like I'm crazy, like why would--that just seems so like unnecessary. They're going to get crisp once you put them back, once you put them in the oven but my--my thinking is--is that you got to pull out the moisture first because you're going to put cheese and beans that have moisture in them already. So you have to put it on the correct base. It's those little things like that--that make it a different experience for our customers.

**00:29:48**

It's things like you know we have a whole oven that's dedicated to putting bowls for our beans, bowls for our soups; why? It's because you know you can have the most delicious soup but you put it into a cold bowl and then it becomes cold soup. And my restaurants are very large

so by the time it travels you know 60-feet, 70-feet from one side of the restaurant to the other the customer finishes their conversation, decides to take that first spoonful. If you don't take that extra little step then you know the customers aren't going to experience what you really wanted them to experience.

**00:30:35**

How you roll an enchilada; you know I'm very crazy the way I expect our--our--our employees to roll enchiladas. You know I tell them to roll small batches, maybe 20 enchiladas at a time. You roll them with the cheese and then you--you put a cellophane over them to make sure the moisture stays intact in the tortilla and then I have them put a warm towel over that just to keep the tortillas nice and--and supple. So when you come into my restaurant they take those three enchiladas or two enchiladas and they put them on a plate. They sauce them with your--whatever sauce the--you know if it's a mole enchilada or a--or a green enchilada, I know that--that enchilada, the tortilla is going to be nice and supple. It's not going to be hard and dried out once I put it into the oven.

**00:31:36**

It's those little things that some people don't think twice about but it's stuff like that--that I've been thinking about since my first restaurant when I was 18 and it's still that same little detail that's just important today. You know it's--it's the email that I sent out to my employees today just emphasizing the same things that--that brought us to this spot and that are going to take us to the next--you know our next milestone. Some things never change. And I don't know if I answered your question or not but it's--.

**00:32:12**

**AE:** Yeah; you did. And you've offered a lot of insight to you as a businesswoman and reasons for your success. Tell me how and when you learned about food.

**00:32:22**

**LW:** How did I learn about food? You know--you know I wish I had said I'd gone to a culinary institute or I've been--I'm self-taught you know. My first restaurant on Commerce Street, you know I was the first one in the restaurant. I was one putting the pot of beans on at 4 o'clock in the morning or 5 o'clock in the morning, so we could have fresh beans when we opened up at 7 o'clock. You know I was the one that was there, you know--you know making the [inaudible] or you know langue or rice or whatever; you know I've done all that.

**00:33:10**

And I know all the proper steps but I think more importantly that when you enjoy something that you do, you try not only to do it the very best you can but always be looking for better ways to improve it. You know I have a saying that you know as much as consistency is important which I think is huge--any restaurant to be successful consistency is very, very important but you also have to be open to understanding that if you want to stay in this business that you have to have an open mind and--and know that there's always a better way to improve. There's always room for improvement.

**00:34:04**

I want to say time out; I just kind of lost my train of thought. You know the question is how--how did I learn about food? I--it's just something that comes natural to me. I mean I'm a very--I've always told people that I'm not a chef. I'm more of a restaurateur that has an incredible palate. I know what people like. I understand the importance of putting recipes and putting food on a menu that is not so pigeon-holed or so micro-appealing because my restaurants



are big. If I had a 20-seat restaurant well then I could stuff like that, but my restaurants are big so I understand the importance of appealing to a larger demographic and understanding that when I put something on my menu it has to have a mass appeal.

**00:35:15**

I've always prided myself on my palate; now you know 30 years later you know I do a little bit of cooking--not as much as I used to do. I do spend a lot in the kitchen directing and correcting and I'm very good at working with my cooks and telling them if they're missing something or they didn't put enough of something of you know a particular chili or--or needed more spice or the recipe wasn't right, I can--I can--I can look at my food and just know by the color and texture is something is right on or something is off and needs some help.

**00:35:55**

I'm good about stuff like that and it's--it's about the detail.

**00:36:03**

**AE:** You mentioned that earlier that both of your parents were really good cooks. Tell me about that.

**00:36:07**

**LW:** Well both my parents were excellent cooks. You know my mom was a great homemaker and you know we always had three hot meals a day. My father especially, he didn't believe in eating out. Every once in a great moon, you know we--we'd eat out. So my mom cooked three, you know balanced meals every day. And she was very good at it.

**00:36:36**

My father was--he worked Civil Service, blue collar, but he was also in the Reserves and he was a cook in the Reserves. So he used to have to cook for you know hundreds of people at one time. And he was excellent at what he did. My dad always told me that anyone could be a great cook; all they needed was imagination. You could make a gourmet meal with just about anything in your refrigerator; you just needed to have imagination.

**00:37:14**

You know my parents had this friendly I don't want to say competition but you know they--you know my mom always strived to put the best thing on the table because they didn't want to hear my mom--my dad comment on something. And--and my dad would do the same thing. I remember later on in years I had a surgery. I had surgery and I was out of commission for a couple weeks and both my parents were just worried sick that you know I wasn't going to be fine, but you know I was--you know I was out of--I was down for a few weeks. And both my parents waited on me hand and foot. They could not cook; they couldn't--I mean they had to compete who was going to cook the next meal for me. Needless to say I probably gained 10 pounds during those two weeks just because you know I--I had a full meal in front of me all the time 'cause my parents, they loved to cook and they loved cooking for me.

**00:38:24**

**AE:** If you had to pick for each of them kind of their signature dish that they were really proud of, or was their favorite that they each made, can you think of something?

**00:38:32**

**LW:** Um, my dad, you know he--he--he could do just about everything and anything but you know what I think of--if I have to think about some of--maybe the meal that I miss most, 'cause

my dad is not here anymore, he really--he knew how to work with fish. You know he knew how to fillet a fish and you know he--he loved to fish first of all. He'd go fishing and he'd come home and he'd fillet it. He'd gut it, fillet it; you know and he'd just make the most delicious fried fish. He'd bake fish. He loved the--I don't if any of y'all have ever had fish gills, but you know or the cheeks; they're the tastiest part of the fish. And he used to do kind of this Chinese version. He would get hot oil and well first of all, he would bake the gills. He would bake the cheeks in the oven and he would season it with a little bit of garlic and I don't know what else he'd put on there. But then he would get hot oil and when it was already done he'd put--he'd pull out the hot oil with a little bit of soy sauce and he'd drizzle the hot oil and soy sauce over the fish cheeks and then he'd sprinkle really thinly sliced scallions and cilantro over that. And--and then with a bowl of--of white rice, it was just delicious. You know I don't know if it was just 'cause my dad made it or just he made it look delicious.

**00:40:22**

My mom, some of my favorite meals of my mom's, I loved her stew. She made an incredible beef stew. She loved soups; you know she did delicious soups as well. Fortunately I still have my mom so every once in a while she still cooks for me, so--.

**00:40:47**

**AE:** And where is your mother from originally?

**00:40:50**

**LW:** My mom, both my mom and dad were born and raised in San Antonio and they were high school sweethearts and they both went to Fox Tech, and I'm born and raised in San Antonio.

**00:41:04**

**AE:** I don't think we've heard their names yet for the record. Would you say that?

**00:41:07**

**LW:** My father, Samuel Wong, Sr. and my mom is Isabelle Wong. And her maiden name is Sanchez.

**00:41:18**

**AE:** And her mother was influential to you growing up; yeah?

**00:41:22**

**LW:** My grandmother--my grandmother Louisa Sanchez, I have very fond memories of my grandmother growing up. Never could I ever visit my grandmother with her not having something on the stove cooking. My grand--my grandparents came from a very humble lifestyle and but there was always a lot of love and warmth in their home. And I mean the simplest thing like fideo which is a Mexican pasta vermicelli; it's a very what would you call it--comfort food, you know. She just made the most delicious fideo; you'd walk into her house on Sunday and she'd have a little pot going, a little pot of beans and her Spanish rice and her homemade flour tortillas. You could never walk into her home and her home was always filled with these beautiful aromas. A lot of my original recipes were--were recipes that my grandmother handed down to my mom and my mom handed down to me, so--.

**00:42:46**

**AE:** So how far back does your mother's family go in San Antonio or in Texas?

**00:42:51**

**LW:** Um, they are probably four generation-Texans; San Antonio, my grandparents were from Forestville on my maternal side--were from Forestville. And my grandfather was from China and his wife, my grandmother was [Inaudible], Mexico. So on my mother's side you know it's four generations deep in Texas. But on my dad's side, yeah it's not.

**00:43:44**

**AE:** Well I wonder if--and for your mother's side, I'm trying to keep the limbs on the family tree straight; from your mother's side have they always been in Texas? I mean this is like--?

**00:43:56**

**LW:** Well you know you're probably right. You're probably right. My--my mother's--not my mother's--okay, my grandmother's mother was from Texas but her mother was from Mexico, yeah. So you are right.

**00:44:12**

**AE:** Do you know where in Mexico?

**00:44:18**

**LW:** If you give me a few minutes, oh San Luis Potosi, San Luis.

**00:44:23**

**AE:** And what--what did your mother's side of the family do in Texas? What was their occupation?

**00:44:31**

**LW:** My grand--my grandfather worked for CPS and his grand--and his father was a farmer; yeah.

**00:44:42**

**AE:** Okay and then let's look at your father's side of the family tree and can you talk more about your grandfather Wong and how he ended up in Guanajuato to begin with?

**00:44:54**

**LW:** Yeah; my--my grandfather, my father's father was from China and he migrated on the--he was working on the railroad and ended up in Mexico in Guanajuato and he was working on the railroad and he met my grandmother there. And she was a widow with three children and he married her and he brought her to San Antonio where they had four of the children. And my--and he also brought along with his wife, my grandmother, and her three children also brought her invalid sister and her brother to San Antonio. And he took care of them all. He was an incredible man.

**00:45:55**

**AE:** Do you know how he chose San Antonio?

**00:45:57**

**LW:** I have no idea. That's a good question. I mean my father is not around anymore and my--I have one uncle left but that is a very, very good question. I don't know how they ended up in San Antonio. I have no idea.

**00:46:11**

**AE:** Because they would have arrived here then--just from our conversation earlier, I'm putting this early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**00:46:19**

**LW:** Correct; yeah. I have no idea, no idea.

**00:46:23**

**AE:** All right. Can you share what you know about his restaurant that he opened and kind of when that would have been in operation?

**00:46:28**

**LW:** I--I know very little. He--you know he passed away about 10 years before I was even born. He had an American Chinese restaurant downtown by Market Square on Commerce, by the produce market. And the only really thing that I know about my grandfather, my dad never really talked too much about him; I don't know why. Well I think I do know why and I'll get into that.

**00:47:05**

But my mom always talked about my grandfather and she had really, really fond memories of him. My dad was the youngest of them all--of his stepbrothers and sisters and of his siblings, you know the children that my grandparents had together. And he was the youngest.

When my grandfather ended up in--in San Antonio, he opened up a little restaurant as I mentioned and--and he did not have a lot of money but he--he was comfortable. He was comfortable. And he sent my dad's brother which was my brother--my dad's oldest brother to China, so he could know where his father came from and to get some education over there.

**00:48:14**

So--and my aunts that were from my grandmother's first marriage 'cause she was widowed were all very educated, PhDs, one of them went to Berkeley. My dad used to call one of his sisters just a professional student 'cause I think she went to school forever and ever. They ended up all moving to California where they all married Asian men, you know and all his brothers stayed in San Antonio and all married Latin women. *[Laughs]* So when my--I'm kind of getting off on a tangent but when my cousins come to visit me from California it's kind of funny 'cause they come into the restaurant and they'll ask for me. So one of my--my employees will come up and say Lisa those Chinese over there, they--they said they're your cousins and they want to talk to you. *[Laughs]* And I'll you know--and they are; they're my cousins. They're Oriental. They're very Asian-looking and I'm--if you know what I look like, I'm not Asian at all but that's kind of how this family is split.

**00:49:40**

But I think never really spoke of my grandfather too much. He loved him a lot and respected him immensely 'cause he was an incredible man. But by the time my grand--but by the time my dad kind of came of age my grandfather kind of had depleted whatever savings he had, sending my uncle to China, sending his daughters to California, putting them through some school, and so my dad basically after he graduated from high school helped my grandfather in the restaurant business, because my grandfather was up in age. He was a lot older than my



grandmother. And I think my dad kind of felt like he got short-changed and couldn't really live his life. And I think he had--you know he had some issues with that.

**00:50:42**

But from you know everything that my mom told me, my grandfather was an incredible man, very giving. I mentioned earlier that he--he didn't drive. He would take a bus to work but he would come home in a cab and the reason he would come home in a cab is 'cause he would never come home empty-handed. He'd come home with like a case of chicken that was iced down in--in ice. You'd buy it from the produce company and you would get I don't know 20 chickens in a case and on ice, and he would bring the whole case home, not so the family could eat 20 chickens but so he could share it with all his neighbors.

**00:51:27**

He would--my mom would tell me these stories that he would share it with the neighbors that lived behind us and in front of us. My mom's own parents you know came from a very humble background and he shared everything even with my mom's parents. My mom told me that when my--my grandfather passed away that even the dogs in the neighborhood cried--cried for him.

**00:51:54**

**AE:** What neighborhood was it that they grew up?

**00:51:58**

**LW:** We lived in the west side of town, Lee Isle Street; it wasn't too far from Christ the King Catholic Church. And that's--that was the house that I kind of grew up in was the house that

belonged to my grandfather and he ended up giving it to my parents and--and that's where we were brought up, so--.

**00:52:21**

**AE:** Was there much of an Asian community here when your father was young?

**00:52:24**

**LW:** No, not really; not really. Well I take that back. I say not really because I've never been part of that. You know I passed away--my grandfather passed away you know like 10 years before I was ever born and he was a lot older. My mom has shown me pictures and I've seen pictures; my grandfather used to belong to a very close, tightknit, Chinese community here in San Antonio. There's a name for them. I--I forget the name. But I've seen these beautiful pictures of these entire--these dinners that they would put on, these Chinese dinners that only Chinese people could attend. But my grandfather was kind of the head of the society. When Chinese people would come to San Antonio he would help acclimate them; he would introduce them to other people in San Antonio, other Asians, and kind of get them settled. You know Asian people are very--I don't know what they word is--they're very giving, they're very hospitable. They--they welcome and try to get--they take care of their own.

**00:53:55**

And my grandfather did that every time we had--there was new Asians that would come to San Antonio and he was kind of the head of the society. And I have pictures where there's you know maybe 50 people at these--sit at this--sat at this long, long table and they're--you can tell that they're dressed nicely in suits and kind of--not formal attire but nice attire. And the only non-Asian in the whole group is my mother because he loved my mom. He--he said that you

know my mom was his daughter 'cause my mother just took care of him like--you know she was--he was her dad, you know and he felt the love.

**00:54:42**

So they couldn't--no one could ever tell my grandfather no; you know so he would take her to these dinners and my mom has--has you know told me stories of what an incredible experience that was and how delicious the Chinese food was. And she met a lot of great friends and people and there's a couple of them that she still keeps in touch with.

**00:55:05**

**AE:** Did your grandmother ever get to go with him to the dinners?

**00:55:08**

**LW:** You know my grandma when my aunts and uncle--when my aunts took off to California to go to school, she took off with them. And she left my grandfather alone. And again, my--my father and my mother took care of him. And so they were very, very tight; they had a special bond. My mom says that you know every once in a while she would come to San Antonio to visit, you know and my grandfather spoke very little English. And she would come and he would tell my grandmother this is not your home no more. *[Laughs]* This is not your home no more. This is La Mama's home and she used to call my mom La Mama you know because you know my--I mean my grandmother left him and--and took off with her daughters and left--left him here. He was probably 20 years older than she was, you know. And if there was ever a time that he needed her, she left.

**00:56:21**

**AE:** So you said I think earlier he died in about 1952? Do you know how old--?

**00:56:26**

**LW:** I was born in '52. I mean I was born in '62 and he died--my brother Richard is 10 years older than I am and he died on my brother's, I think second birthday. So I that would have been eight years before I was born; so that would have been '58, no '56, '54--'54. I can't do my math right now.

**00:57:00**

**AE:** Do you know how old he was when he died?

**00:57:02**

**LW:** I should know that because I went to his gravesite not too long ago. He was close to 90 when he passed away; yeah he was close to 90.

**00:57:15**

**AE:** And what was his first name? I don't know if we said that.

**00:57:17**

**LW:** Gal Wong; it's a whole long name like, it's--Chin Gal Wong and there's another Chinese name in there.

**00:57:39**

**AE:** So I'm wondering; you said he sent your uncle, his oldest son to China. Did he ever get to go back to China? Did he ever visit?

**00:57:46**

**LW:** No; he never went back. He never went back. He never went back; uh-um.

**00:57:54**

**AE:** So your father must speak some Chinese then? Did he grow up speaking Chinese in the house?

**00:58:00**

**LW:** Yeah; my dad did not speak any Chinese. The one who spoke Chinese was my mom. A couple reasons, she was very close to my grandfather and I mean I think it was something she wanted to do to be able to communicate better with him, but also growing up as a very young child, she worked for a few of--Chinese grocery stores that was here in San Antonio. And there was a few of them. A few of them were--they weren't too far from where she lived and she worked--she worked at a few of them at the grocery store and also taking care of their kids. And in the process she learned some Chinese.

**00:58:45**

**AE:** Wow; so then that begs the question for me how your parents met?

**00:58:49**

**LW:** In high school.

**00:58:50**

**AE:** You said that; they were sweethearts that's right, okay. Wow; what a history.

**00:58:55**

**LW:** Yeah in high school; in high school.

**00:58:56**

**AE:** Okay; so let's go back to your grandfather's restaurant quickly. The name of it and what type of food he--he served there?

**00:59:03**

**LW:** Song Le and it was an American Chinese café.

**00:59:08**

**AE:** Do you know some of the Chinese dishes that he made 'cause he did all the cooking, right?

**00:59:12**

**LW:** He did a lot of the cooking and it was some of the--the Americanized like you know egg foo yung and chop suey and the reason I say that is 'cause I know my--my dad used to make egg foo yung and chop suey for us all the time and he used to say it was recipes from his grandfather.

**00:59:29**

Another dish that I really remember, too, from my--from my grandfather because it was something my dad and mom used to make for me all the time, the black mushrooms from China, the big black ones. I think they're the shitake mushrooms if I'm not mistaken. They just have so-

much flavor, and my parents used to make this delicious soup with the shitake mushrooms and with the--that real thin Chinese vermicelli. And they also used to make an egg drop soup. My grandmother used to come from California visit and she would bring some of these things from Chinatown there in California and so you know we--we got treated to some of those niceties you know that we didn't get here all that often.

**01:00:25**

**AE:** Tell me about what I think is your third restaurant that you opened if I have that correct that was a melding of your Mexican and Chinese heritage.

**01:00:34**

**LW:** I opened up that--I have lost track of how long ago I opened up that restaurant but that was a joint partnership. It was a partnership. I opened that up with--in the original Rosario's location. When I moved Rosario's to--from 2,500 square feet to 12,000 square feet, I had an empty building and I wanted to do something different. And I had some good friends here in San Antonio that had a chain of restaurants. They owned Thai Pei, [Mancha's] Chinese--Chinese Food and then I forgot what the other--Szechuan or they had like three different restaurants here in town.

**01:01:23**

And I--I got to know them through a mutual friend. And they approached me on doing a--kind of a--a blended restaurant and not necessarily Mexican Chinese, but more Chinese with a twist I guess, kind of contemporized--the Chinese offerings because I mean there's a lot of Chinese restaurants here in San Antonio and--and back in the day when I opened up this restaurant there wasn't a PF Chang, you know and kind of the PF Chang is kind of a cool version

of--grown up version of what we were trying to do, kind of contemporize the service with bar and wine and--and kind of make it kind of a cool hip place to hang out.

**01:02:25**

And it kind of started off that way and did actually very, very well but my Chinese partners were very, very conservative, extremely conservative and it was very hard for them to let go of their traditional ways, traditional ways of doing things, and service, and they didn't understand the bar business. And it--it wasn't really working out the way I thought it was going to work out. You know we kept that restaurant open I forgot how many years and you know it did okay but it could have done better. And when the lease was over we just didn't--we knew it.

**01:03:21**

**AE:** And may notes say that it was opened from 2000 to 2010--or 2002 sorry, until 2002.

**01:03:28**

**LW:** That's about right; that's about--the name of it was China [Cheena] Latina and we thought it was a cute name. We had some really--we had you know--we hired a really cool graphic artist that did some really cool graphics for our menu and for the artwork inside the restaurant and it--and it, you know we had a really nice bar scene and great drinks to go with it. And but this is--it was just very hard; you know my partners, we're still friends and I still eat at their other restaurants but we just you know--we just couldn't make that particular concept work.

**01:04:05**

**AE:** Tell me about some of the food that you had on the menu there.



**01:04:08**

**LW:** It's been so long. I mean we had you know some of the traditional stuff. You know like the egg foo yung and chop suey but you know we had--we had--we served it like in really cool serving platters. We had a--some salads that typically you don't you know find in a Chinese menu. We had some really nice noodle bowls, you know like you would find you know like in Chinatown that were really, really popular. The food was good and it was interesting and we served it up in a very interesting way that you know it's kind of a place that you'd want to go if you were like on a date or hanging out with some friends and you wanted kind of a cool vibe and still really wanted great Chinese food.

**01:05:07**

But like I said, it was, you know it was too comfortable for them to like forget the bar scene, forget the cool vessels to make it look you know that much more appealing. The music wasn't really that important. We had some really cool music that we had hired someone to put some really cool mixes together that had a contemporary kind of Asian twang to it. I think in theory the idea was really, really good, but it was just too hard keeping it going.

**01:05:46**

**AE:** Do you think it may have been just a little bit before its time?

**01:05:50**

**LW:** No; I think it was my partners. I think they were just you know kind of set in their ways. They were just very--they're traditionalists and there's nothing wrong with that. You know they wanted--they wanted to be that cool hip place, but didn't realize that they had--in order to do that you have to commit to certain things you know and--. Like one of the biggest days in that

particular area it's called the King William area; one of the biggest days of the year is when we have our King William Fair. I mean I don't know how many--like a hundred thousand people show up to this fair. And if you have a restaurant on the strip it is--you are guaranteed to have the busiest day of the year that day.

**01:06:37**

They would close. *[Laughs]* They just didn't get it. You know they just--they didn't get it so they would just close. And so again, it was just--it was just--it wasn't--it was, we were better off being friends than being business partners, so--.

**01:06:58**

**AE:** Now then were you the only Latino part of China **[Cheena]** Latina?

**01:07:02**

**LW:** Yeah; I was the only Latino part and--and I had three Asian partners that I was always having to you know--even though I do have some Asian in my blood I was just--it was just--it was too much work. *[Laughs]*

**01:07:19**

**AE:** And you said earlier though you identify as Mexican.

**01:07:21**

**LW:** I do; I do because you know my--I'm a quarter Chinese and three-quarters Latino and my grandmother was from Guanajuato and my mother is you know--her descents are from Mexico. I do not look Asian at all; you know I get criticized sometimes for having a Mexican restaurant

and having a last name Wong. *[Laughs]* Yeah; sometimes people don't believe that I own the restaurant.

**01:07:55**

**AE:** Well and having such a long--a far-reaching lineage in Texas, do you consider yourself Texan? Where does that fit into your identity?

**01:08:04**

**LW:** No, no, I do; well I--yeah. Of course I am Texan but you know I do have a strong Latin you know root that you know I do identify with. You know I enjoy going to Mexico. I feel at home there. I think I mentioned that you know I visited San Miguel years ago and I truly--I have never gone anywhere where I feel like--and I always feel like I have to get home, I have to get back to work, I have to get back to you know everything that I have to do; the first time I visited San Miguel I just felt like this was--it was home. And you know a few years later I went back and I bought a place you know. And it turns out that my paternal grandmother was born you know probably I don't know 50 miles from there, so--.

**01:09:05**

**AE:** Do you get to go down there very often?

**01:09:06**

**LW:** When I had just one restaurant I went pretty often. You know I probably make it twice a year now, yeah twice a year, and I'd go more often 'cause I really enjoy going down there. I

love--I mean the people are great. The climate is beautiful. I love the restaurant scene down there and it's just--it's just a place to relax.

**01:09:31**

**AE:** Well you've been so generous with your time and I know your phone has been vibrating but if I could hog a few more minutes and ask now kind of--get back from your personal story which is fascinating and talk about the bigger picture of kind of the Mexican influence on Texas foodways and how we're kind of this umbrella that we have over this project and why I'm visiting with you now--what do you see as the Mexican influence on San Antonio foodways and your role within that?

**01:10:01**

**LW:** That's a hard question. I mean that's a very hard question. I think I mentioned earlier that this is all I've ever done. You know I enjoy what I do. I feel very blessed and sometimes I have to pinch myself because I--I know that in the Mexican food arena, I know that my restaurants are very well-respected.

**01:10:37**

How I did that I wish I had--I wish--I wish I could articulate how that all came to be. You know I think Mexican food has always been a cuisine to--that could match up with the best of cuisines out there.

**01:11:19**

**AE:** Would you argue at all that Mexican cuisine is Texas cuisine?

**01:11:33**

**LW:** I think it--I think when people say--when people talk of Texas I think it's kind of one in the same. I mean it's kind of like barbecue and I think a lot of that has to do with the close proximity of our border to Mexico. I don't--you know I don't care if you talk to people in Dallas or Houston, they're very, very loyal to their Mexican food. Do they call it Tex-Mex, do they call it Mex; you know everyone has their favorite version of what they envision of what is their--what is Mexican food.

**01:12:12**

I will say that Texas Mexican food I think is--is--has its own specific umbrella of--of taste and--and uniqueness. The only reason I say that is you know I have traveled and I've had Texas--I've had Mexican food in other parts of our you know beautiful country. And it's different; it's very different. I don't know if it's because of again the close proximity to our border that I think Texas Mexican food is predominantly maybe a little spicier, maybe a little more authentic to what you would get across the border. But I know that especially for San Antonio you can't come to San Antonio and not want to get your fix on--on Mexican food.

**01:13:16**

I don't know how to answer that question. That's an excellent question.

**01:13:23**

**AE:** Well but you said people--if you come to San Antonio people want to get their fill of Mexican food. So what do you think of when people say Tex-Mex?

**01:13:32**

**LW:** It's hard asking me that question because first of all I don't identify with Tex-Mex, even though my menu is a combination of both. I think we spoke about that earlier, like you know Tex-Mex, cheese enchiladas, you know I think that's--if I had to pick one item I think it would be the cheese enchilada that people most identify with Tex-Mex. It's not a [inaudible]; it's not [inaudible], you know. It's the cheese enchiladas. I mean it was called--you know on Wednesdays in high school we'd have cheese enchiladas every day you know, every Wednesday. It was called Tex-Mex Day.

**01:14:34**

That--that's a hard question because I think it's unfair because I'm--I was born and raised in San Antonio and you know being here you know as long as I have, if I think of San Antonio I'm going to think of barbecue and I'm going to think of Mexican food and you know and maybe it's Mexican food and then barbecue. I don't think I'm going to be very helpful in your [Laughs]--you know 'cause that's a hard question. I--I need to think about that one a little bit more.

**01:15:17**

**AE:** Yeah; well and people are saying now that maybe you know it started out Mexican food in Texas and then Tex-Mex in the '70s and '80s and then now it's getting more Mex-Tex, like traditional Mexico is spinning back towards--.

**01:15:32**

**LW:** Yeah; well you know if you put it in that--I think you probably are right. You probably are right, you know. It--it's gone through an evolution and where we did start off as--as Mexican food and then transitioned into Tex-Mex. And I guess Tex-Mex I think is probably the--the

period in our time when maybe we didn't get the respect that we thought we deserved and I think for various reasons. I think you know historically people have thought maybe it was unhealthy, it didn't take much talent to do it right, you get--could get most of it out of a can or a jar and just be equally satisfied, but I think we've come to a point in time and--and you probably said it best that yeah we're--it's more Mex-Tex than anything else, where we've kind of come full circle in trying to be complementary to Texas and complementary to San Antonio. And I keep on saying San Antonio because that's where I live and play and going to die.

**01:16:50**

But at the end of the day if you look at my menu for example, the pieces on my menu that I'm most proud of are--are the components that are definitely unique to my restaurant, but definitely lean towards more authentic.

**01:17:17**

**AE:** So when you think about Texas as a whole where does San Antonio fit in--in that kind of culinary speaking?

**01:17:29**

**LW:** Well we have--we have been coined the--the Mexican Food Capital of the World and with 1,000--I don't know I think the last one was 1,200 Mexican restaurants in San Antonio. I mean how can you have 1,200 Mexican restaurants in one city and not influence the cuisine? And--and you know I have--I almost have to believe it's the Capital of Mexican Food in the World.

**01:18:02**

**AE:** Did you grow up eating puffy tacos?

**01:18:03**

**LW:** Believe it or not, the first little Mexican restaurant that I worked at that I told you, they made puffy tacos and I learned how to make puffy tacos. I like puffy tacos. I don't love them just because I made them for so many years and see them through the oil and I just--. [*Laughs*]

**01:18:24**

**AE:** That's so San Antonio to me because that's like San Antonio's claim--yeah and then fajitas?

**01:18:31**

**LW:** Oh fajitas and gorditas.

**01:18:33**

**AE:** Fajitas I grew up eating at [Nimfa's] in Houston, so that's my Houston association and I mean I feel like there are different claims now that we have two generations of you know restaurant owners/families who have been in the business and have you know established themselves in those culinary traditions.

**01:18:50**

**LW:** You know I guess I do like puffy tacos a lot; I do. And probably every once in a while I will order a puffy taco or I'll make a puffy taco here or whatever. But it's not something I identify with. You know but I can see where you know--you know maybe you know 10, 15 years from now we'll be talking about my tacos callejeros, you know that--see now that's a taco that I



identify with. Why? Because it's you know unique to my restaurant and I think it's extra-special. But I can definitely see how you could see how the puffy taco or you know the fajita you know could--could be specific to this region of the country; yeah, yeah.

**01:19:51**

**AE:** Well what is your sentimental kind of food from your youth? Would it be the bean and cheese nachos and a Big Red which I love by the way? *[Laughs]*

**01:20:03**

**LW:** *[Laughs]* Oh, are--are you talking like in the Mexican food arena, right, probably? Yeah; I would--I would have to say it was either the bean and cheese nachos and a Big Red or cheese enchiladas and a Big Red, you know. Yeah; it brings back happy times, you know and it's comfort food. And King William was last Saturday for example. Super-busy; it's probably the busiest day of the year for us at--at the restaurant downtown. And we're getting ready to go to the parade; tradition, my whole family gathers at about 5:30--6 o'clock over there after the--after King William is kind of dying down. And then we all walk over to the parade as a family. And right before we left there's two or three family members. What did they do? They order an order of bean and cheese tacos. They didn't order a Big Red, but--no, not bean and cheese tacos, bean and cheese nachos, you know with jalapenos right before we took off.

**01:21:26**

So I would say that. And I think for--maybe for--not that I identified with it but I know another one is the bean and cheese taco. You know our--our--you know who our Mayor is, right, our ex-Mayor Castro, right, Julian? I have a really fond memory of him and his brother. He used to--they used to eat at my original restaurant on Commerce, the original I opened when I was 18.

They're a lot younger than I am and I remember them walking into the restaurant in their Catholic School uniforms. They're twins keep in mind and their mom would walk in with them and hold one by the hand and the other and they'd come up to the counter and they could barely reach up to the counter.

**01:22:15**

And they'd order their bean and cheese tacos. And they did that for years and years and years and years. And bean and cheese are pretty popular with a lot of folks around here.

**01:22:29**

**AE:** Well let me ask you this. You continue to have a super-successful career, but if you could go back and tell your 18 year-old-self something, your young restaurant owner some advice what would it be?

**01:22:46**

**LW:** Oh, you don't want to say 19; you want to say like 25, you want to say go back to 18? Yeah; that's a hard question and I'm going to tell you why. You didn't know me when I was 18 but I was extremely--I was extremely disciplined. So I don't know if I would have done anything different at 18, maybe when I was 25 [*Laughs*].

**01:23:30**

**AE:** Fair enough; fair enough. Well this will be my final question and that is--what is the future of Lisa Wong and her restaurant--I mean empire and foodways?

**01:23:43**

**LW:** Well I think I'm going to continue to do what I love doing. I don't know how many more restaurants I have under my belt. I might have one left in me. This last one almost kicked--almost put me under. You know 52, I've been doing this since I was 18; yeah. Like I said, I might have one other restaurant behind me. I think for the future I--I don't have a crystal ball but I think that I want to--you know I want to do this for as long as I can do it and do it comfortably and still feel good about what I'm doing and feel that I'm still I guess contributing and--and not being stagnant. I hope that in the process of all that I find a successor for my restaurants. I think Rosario's has--has built up a--a very good name for itself and reputation and I hope in the next 10 years to identify what those next steps for me will be.

**01:25:14**

I think that as those 10 years begin to dwindle down 'cause I know it's going to happen very quickly, you know I have thought about this a little bit and I do want to stay engaged from the perspective of I know that there's a lot of young women that will always be in the same position I was in 30-some years ago. And I think I have a--a pretty good message that you know as--as you know dark and cloudy as it may seem at times, this beautiful country that we live in does have opportunity. And I think I'd like to spread that word and--and give other not necessarily just women, young women, young folks--give them that hope and--and also be able to do some mentoring in the process because I think that a lot is possible. You just have to--you know you just have to--you have to stay focused. You have to stay focused and--and be true to your dreams.

**01:26:58**

And you might stumble a few times, and the nice thing about--the nice thing, I will say the nice thing about when you--when you start young is that you have time to stumble a few times and pick yourself up and dust yourself off and--and--and move ahead, so--anyway.

01:27:15

**AE:** Do you have children of your own?

01:27:18

**LW:** I've never been blessed. I was married and that was probably one of my biggest regrets is not having any children. It wasn't the right time at the--and now I'm getting too old. I have a lot of nieces and great-nieces and nephews that I spend a lot of time with and love me dearly. And to be quite honest with you are quite happy I don't have children of my own--they are. **[Laughs]**

01:27:46

**AE:** Well and I thought of one last question again. But we didn't talk about the woman at the drive-thru. I want you to share that story quickly.

01:27:54

**LW:** I know; it's a great story. It really is a great story. I think the woman at the drive-thru, I have to--well I attribute all my success because of that woman in the drive-thru. And that woman in the drive-thru that I'm talking about is my mother. I mentioned earlier that when I opened up my restaurant my mother agreed to come work for me for three months, six months, to kind of help me you know fine-tune my recipes and everything. And long story short, those--those three months or six months turned into I think like 12 years.

01:28:39

When I opened up my first restaurant at 18 she came over to help me for--for a short time. When I turned 21 I decided to move out of the house 'cause it was time for me to move

out. And she told me you can't move out. And I said why not mom? She said well you're too young and you know you're my only daughter and you know you can't move out. And I said well mom I have my own restaurant; I'm going to move out.

**01:29:05**

She says well if you move out I'm going to quit on you. And I said well then I'm going to miss you. You know that lasted for two or three weeks and she called me and--and she wanted to know if she could come back. And of course I said yes, because I missed her and she missed me. But I do--I want to say something; you know I--I know I said earlier that she worked for me. You know my mother never worked for me; she helped me. She never--you know I used to write checks, payroll checks to all my employees and I would write a check to my mother and she never took a dime from me. She told me that she did this because she wanted to help me. She had lived her life and she was just happy to be there for me.

**01:29:48**

My mom has always been my biggest fan and she's always told me that I can do anything that I set my mind to. She's been my biggest cheerleader. Last year I moved her in with me. I lost my brother--I lost my brother to cancer and she took it very hard and I had been trying to move her in with me for years and I guess last year when I lost my brother it took a toll on her and--and she moved in. And--and I'm very happy to say that you know she's back with me; it's come full circle. She still tells me--she still tries to tell me what to do.

**01:30:28**

But I want to tell you the story about the lady in the drive-thru. That's what a lot of people referred to my mom; no one knew that my mother--a lot of I guess customers never knew that my mother was my mother. And--and I think the biggest reason is--is because my mother never had or never took like the easy job in the restaurant. She--you know she always seemed to

gravitate towards doing the most difficult thing in the restaurant whether it be washing dishes or making flour tortillas by hand. You know back in the day we would make you know 150-pounds of flour a day and roll out flour tortillas because back in the day we didn't have a machine.

**01:31:16**

She'd be the first one at work with me at 4 o'clock in the morning and she'd be the last one to leave with me at 4:30--5 o'clock in the evening after we cleaned up. So not a lot of people never knew she was my mom.

**01:31:32**

And you know I would be in the kitchen a lot and then a lot of times I would also work in the front in the dining room. And my mother would stay in the kitchen and a lot of times she would oversee the drive-thru. And so a lot of the people knew her as the lady in the drive-thru. Why is this story--what am I getting at or what do I want to share with you? It's a very cute story.

**01:32:02**

Years have passed since my mom has been at that drive-thru but to this day people stop me all the time and ask me how I'm doing. And then just out of the blue they'll say and whatever happened to the lady in the drive-thru? And I'll go my mom? And they'll go--and they'll--they'll look at me with surprise and say that was your mom? And I go yes; I go why? She says well there was times when I would go through the drive-thru and I didn't have enough money and she'd give me a taco or I'd go through the drive-thru and I'd order one and she says no, you need two, and she'd give me another one. Other people would have told me the same story that they would go through the drive-thru and they had four kids and they would order four tacos and my mom would say kids need more than one taco. And she'd give them four extra tacos.

**01:32:53**

I'm not exaggerating when I say this; there's been countless, countless people that--that refer to the lady in the drive-thru, and when they find out it's my mom they tell me these beautiful stories about how giving my mother was.

**01:33:10**

About six, seven years ago, eight years ago when Facebook got really big, my niece is a big Facebook person and whenever it's my mother's birthday which is her grandmother she'll put a picture of her and my mother on Facebook. Well the first couple of years that she did that she was shocked that all these people would Facebook her and say that's the lady in the drive-thru. And they would all respond oh, she gave me tacos; oh, she was so nice. I've always said that those blessings that my mother bestowed on people back in the day when they didn't have you know an extra dollar or two or whatever has blessed me a million times over. And I'm glad that I--I know these stories about my mom now but you know I never knew it back then.

**01:34:06**

I think even if I had known it I probably would have kept her in the drive-thru. It gave her too much joy to put a smile on someone else's face, so--.

**01:34:17**

**AE:** That's a love note to end on. Thank you Lisa so much for your time.

**01:34:21**

**LW:** Thank you.

**01:34:21**

**AE:** Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to mention or a final thought or anything?

**01:34:26**

**LW:** Hmm; I think the only other thing I didn't mention is that I think the success of any businessperson and it doesn't have to be a restaurateur is its employees and its people. I have a lot of employees that have been with me; I mean I even have a few that have been with me since my very first restaurant on Commerce Street. You know my core of employees which is pretty significant have all been with me for 20-years plus. And none of this could be possible had it not been for their dedication. A lot of my employees have--we've grown up together and we're growing old together. I used to be you know 10 years older than them and telling them what to do when I was 18 and now you know the gap doesn't seem quite as big anymore. But I guess the point I want to make is that for every accolade or every praise that my restaurant gets it's a beautiful feeling to know that your employees live in that same joy. They--they are--they don't own the restaurant like I do, but they are so committed and so devoted and they love what they do that it gives them a huge sense of pride that they're a part of--. And they know that they are part of the success and--and--and I know it's true because it shows with their commitment that they give each and every day. And I just want to say that employees to any business I mean are the most important to any successful business and--and I'm very blessed 'cause I have a huge, huge core of very dedicated and giving employees, so--.

**01:36:38**

**AE:** Okay; well here's to them. Thank you again Lisa.



**01:36:41**

**LW:** Thank you; thank you.

**01:36:42**

**[End Lisa Wong Rosario's Interview]**