

Interview with Luis Garcia

Kathy Hersh: Today is the 5th of May 2012. We're at the Headquarters of the Miami Design Preservation League. My name is Kathy Hersh. I'm interviewing Luis Garcia, for the Miami Beach Visuals Memoirs Project. We're going to start by talking about your earliest days on the Beach. You weren't born here? Tell us when you were born, and when you came to the Beach.

Luis Garcia: Well, actually, I was born in Cuba. The first time I came to the Miami Beach, I came as a tourist. That was in 1956. We came for the Orange Ball, and I was fascinated by the place. At that time, I was 11 years old and I remember going back to Cuba, and shortly afterwards, there was a movie called "A Hole in the Head" with Frank Sinatra. And, I was saying to my friends, 'look! I was here!' That was the Cardozo Hotel. Little did I know, four years later I would come back, and it would be my hometown for the rest of my life.

Kathy: So, you were 15 then?

Luis Garcia: I turned 15 two weeks after I got to the United States.

Kathy: What were the circumstances that brought you here?

Luis Garcia: Well, my father was a prominent lawyer in Cuba. He had been against the Batista government, and within eight days of Castro's taking over, he was against Castro. Within a year and half, he has been arrested three times. Finally, the last time they released him, there was no government – you gotta leave, next time you aren't coming out. So, in November 1960 we came with a tourist visa, in a Cuban Air airliner. "Cubana de Aviacion" that was the Cuban Airlines. My father came on November 12th, I came on November 16th with my mother. We figured out we would be in Miami for a year, it was going to be like an extended vacation, and then everything would go back to normal – we were going to go back to Cuba and continue our lives.

Well, fast forward 52 years later, I'm a grandfather, and I consider myself a native in Miami Beach. So, I've got sand in my shoes. That's really the direst version of what I am right now.

Kathy: Did you live on the Beach when you came here in 1960?

Luis Garcia: When we first came, like every "refuge", we would try to get the cheapest product you can get, the best for our money. My first home was in the Shenandoah area of Miami. Within eight months we got to the Miami Beach, the summer of '61. I didn't leave till I got married in '66, but then I came back as a firefighter in '73, and, the rest is history. I was a firefighter for 26 years, I retired as Fire Chief. By then, I was living in Miami Beach again and after my retirement I continued a public service office. I was elected to the Commission, I served seven years.

Kathy: On the Miami Beach Commission?

Luis Garcia: Yes. I was a Vice Mayor a couple of times, you know it's rotating. Then, I was sort of drafted to Room 40 tele leisure by Danny Gilbert. I won't forget you, Danny... Or, I won't forgive you, I should say. Anyway, presently I represent all of South Beach in Townhouse.

Kathy: And, you actually live, then, on the Beach?

Luis Garcia: I moved out of the Beach within the last couple of years. Right now, I live in the Miami South, because my district goes down, all the way to Little Havana, La Para, all the way down to Pinecrest. It's the largest district, that's why I try to live centrally.

Kathy: You probably are representative, because we live in Pinecrest. I think we discussed this?

Luis Garcia: Yes. I got the very tip of Pinecrest, in the North End.

Kathy: The North End?

Luis Garcia: The North End. I hope you voted on district 107, or you voted for the Democrat Garcia.

Kathy: Describe what it was like when you first came as a tourist. You said you were very impressed, what impressed you? What do you remember seeing that was a bit different then?

Luis Garcia: It was very different. It was still the Hay Days. I remember Lincoln Road was still an open thoroughfare, you could drive through Lincoln Road. I remember going to a movie theatre on 41st Street, called the Shereen, and they had at that time something brand new, called "This is Cinerama". To me it was, you know they had these semi-circular screens, it was a limited engagement. I remember going there and thinking that I was impressed.

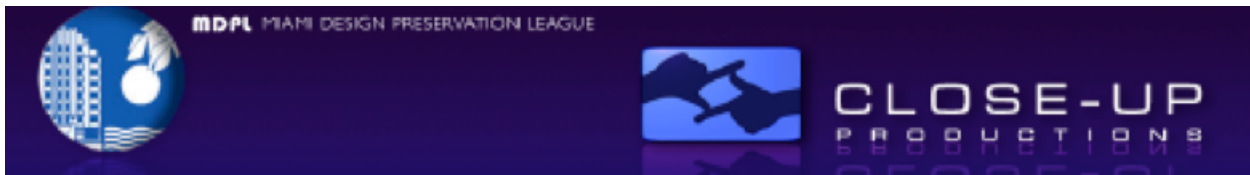
Then, on the weekend we came to the Beach, and the beach was fantastic. Again, you drive up Collins Avenue, to the big Hotels. Phantom Blue was brand new. They still had some estates on Collins Avenue that weren't any condominiums at that time.

Kathy: Did you have a job as a boy, doing anything on the Beach?

Luis Garcia: I will tell you, my first job – if I had any money from it, I would still be doing it. I was a poor boy, I did DiLido Hotel. I was rough at high school. After school – I'm a high tide. After school, I would go for two or three hours on the pool, helping out cleaning and they would pay me a \$1 an hour. Back then it wasn't going great. I was working seven days a week and I was making almost as much money as my dad. Believe it or not.

Kathy: What was your dad doing?

Luis Garcia: My dad... That's another story. He went from being an attorney, and the



first job that he could be out of Miami was, being a boss boy at the playboy club. At that time Miami was another town, discrimination was on a rampant. The economy in the summer was totally dead. Most of the hotels in the South Beach was closed down.

There was nothing going on. So, for somebody who wasn't going to living there all year round, without being able to practice law and other skills, he had to take what other people did. He delivered milk, he worked in factories, he worked in the playboy club, like I said. Then, he worked in a cafeteria. It took him a couple of years to be able to get his full hull, and try to get somewhere in the line of work.

Kathy: Did he eventually do that?

Luis Garcia: Eventually, he never got to be an attorney again, but he was a para-legal, later in life. He was very happy. He was a man of great integrity, that was born to be an attorney. His career was dropped at 40. 40 years go on, and you never see anything, so... But anyway, he passed away twelve years ago, and I still miss him.

Kathy: His story is very typical of the people who came at their mid-life, and had to start over again.

Luis Garcia: Well, look at my mother. My mother's another interesting story. My mother was a housewife in Cuba. She never worked a day in her life. She was 39 at that time. And, she went to wash dishes at St. Peter's and Paul school. She was working five days a week, making \$23 a week. What she would do for her family to have more food was, she would eat in the cafeteria whenever she could, so there would be more food on the table for me and my brother, and my dad. That builds character, let me tell you. That builds character.

Kathy: And, when you see your parents sacrificing like that, you don't squander the family assets, do you? Because, there aren't any, right? You tried to help? That's the story.

Luis Garcia: It builds a lot of character, let me tell you that. I remember since I started working, half, to three-quarters of my salary went to the house. I would take money just to be able to live, and the rest was for supporting the house. I remember in the summer of '62 I got a job at the Lanforg building, in downtown Miami. It was a great job, I was working six and half days a week, 52 hours. And, I was making \$52, I was making more money than my dad. That was a big boost that summer.

Kathy: What did you do, you probably didn't have a lot of time for leisure back then, to come over to the beach, swim, or fish, or whatever?

Luis Garcia: Well, it's funny. Back then we were poor, but we didn't know we were poor. Growing up in Miami Beach was simple. We had paradise out there. All we had to do was walk, and we would walk everywhere, in South Beach we would walk everywhere. Whenever I had time I would hang out around 14th Street, Beach. There was a bunch of... I want to call It a gang,

but... it was a gang in a good sense. It was a bunch of Cuban kids, that would get together and, some of them had guitar to play. Whatever time off, I would spend out there.

It was very innocent at that time, drugs were something that you wouldn't think of. Heck, if somebody smoked a cigarette, that would be a... you know. Alcohol? Maybe a beer once in a while. At that time, we were 15-16 years old. Then, every Friday night, there used to be a teen dance in this building that we are standing right now. It was great. It would start at seven o' clock, and would end up by ten. There were boys and girls from everywhere. It was funny, because the dividing line was at the Boulevard. If you lived north of the Boulevard, you were a little bit more affluent. If you lived in South Beach – I mean, you walked everywhere, we didn't have cars. Actually, parking was not a problem in those days.

You have to remember South Beach was created as a bedroom community for the workers of the hotels. And in the summertime, they were all away, you could park anywhere. But anyway, we went on a date, we didn't need the car. We would come to the teen dance, and then we would go to the Wolff's, walked to Wolff's, and go over to Pickles for fresh pizza. Sometimes, we would stroll down the sand. A lot of first kisses took place in there.

Kathy: It's a pretty romantic place to have a date, isn't it?

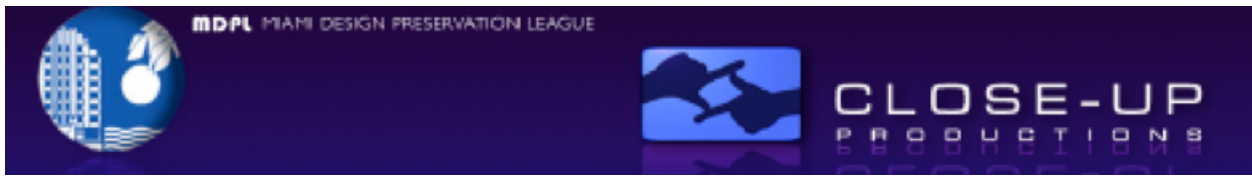
Luis Garcia: Are you kidding? What could be better than the moonlight, or Miami Beach?

Kathy: You said that there was a lot of discrimination that your father experienced. Socially, you went to Beach High, did you encounter any discrimination there from your peers?

Luis Garcia: Actually, I love Beach High, I want to tell you why. When we first arrived, I went to Miami High. Miami High was definitely a redneck saw in town. Now, keep in mind, those were the days that when you were looking for an apartment, you would see a sign "no pets, no kids, no Cubans". If you went to the workers downtown, they had a cafeteria, that they had a bathroom for "color" only, at that time.

At that time, African-American were "colors", I don't even think they were called blacks. To some of the arrivals that were of those of darker skin, they would get chased out, at the courthouse. They had the same type of a setup. So, Miami High was a great school, I had a lot of friends. Back then, we Cubans would hang around together, just for protection. Then, after the summer, I came to Beach High, and I went from being what they called us PIC, to be an oddity. I was welcomed with open arms.

The friends at that time, half the kids that were here were Jewish, and also, they would call us "Jewans". But, we were friends and I have friends that I made back then, 52 years ago that I still keep. For instance, Josh Joe Brown. Josh Brown and I would play football together, he was a star, I was a third-team fullback. Up until now we're friends. Dan Allister Deena, whose wife just passed away. He would translate for me. And, Beach High



was wonderful. We were embraced, we were totally welcome. I have a lot of fondness for my Alma Mater.

Kathy: That's a big difference between, just crossing the water there – Miami Central, and Miami Beach High.

Luis Garcia: But, that went for the Cubans, and... At that time, the first wave of immigrants were usually the higher classes in Cuba. We could blend better, we had a better location, and you know... However, it wasn't so for African-Americans. You have to remember, back in those days, to work in Miami Beach, you needed a police car.

Kathy: Everybody needed it.

Luis Garcia: Everybody needed it, however, if you were a person of color walking down the street at night, they would pick you up and they would drive you down to Watson Island. That happened well into the 60s. It wasn't a friendly place. The thing about this city is, the evolution that it had – first, came the white Anglo-Saxon protestants. Then, the Jewish immigration came, and they were segregated. Back then, I call it paraphernalia from history. I love history. I have brochures back from the 30s, and 40s, were it would say "for entails only". And, then we came. I guess because, the Jews are, sort of segregated, they, sort of embraced us better. Now look what we have. Now we have a hotchpotch of cultures, colors, societies, languages. I would really call it an international city right now.

Kathy: It's noted for its tolerance. Anything goes.

Luis Garcia: Yes. Sometimes even, maybe a little bit too much, but, yes. This is a tolerant city.

Kathy: Tell us about, you graduated from the Beach High, how soon did you get involved with the Fire Department? How did that happen?

Luis Garcia: When I graduated, and keep in mind, I had to finish high school in Lindsey Hopkins, because I had lots of year coming from Cuba, and all I needed were two more credit hours, so my high school wasn't for Beach High, even though I went there for most of my high school career. Afterwards, I got married pretty young. I got married when I was 20. But, at that time I thought I was going to be an architect so, I was taking architecture in Miami Day. At that time, I had a deforming, I was getting started since '64. I had my deforming for a couple of years and in '66, when I got married, I just could keep up school full-time and I had to go work full-time, I had a wife to take care of.

So, I left school, I went to work full-time. At that time, I used to work for Foot fur. I was a trainee making a total of about 80-something dollars a week. That wasn't enough. By that time, my wife was pregnant. Our first child came after about a year and half we were married. By that time, I quit. I couldn't afford living on \$80, you know. Back then, the ladies didn't work. So, I went off to work in public. At that time, I was making \$103 a week. \$20 a week was a big difference. Of course, by that time, I wasn't

allowed to school anymore. I went off to work for Pepsi Cola. I drove a truck for five years. It was hard work, long hours, but I was making a couple of hundred dollars a week. And, at that time, a couple of hundred dollars a week wasn't a bad salary at all. On good weeks, we would make \$300.

By that time, I had three kids. My first five years of marriage, I had three kids. I'm 66, my oldest son is 44. My sons are 44, 42, and 40. I get busy. At that time, I was spending a lot of time away from the house. I would go to work at six in the morning and get back at eight. My kids were in bed. AT that time, for you to be a firefighter, you had to be a US citizen, you just couldn't do without work permit. When we came from Cuba, our status for many years was, what was they called a parolee. It was like a TPS.

I didn't get the residency until late in the 60s, then I applied for my citizenship and I took fire department test. I took all of them. I took metro, I took Miami, I took Miami shores, at that time, and Miami Beach. In Miami Beach, I had an excellent exam – out of about 600 applicants, I was number eight. So, I became the very first minority in the Miami Beach Fire Department. Up to that time, the Fire Department was mainly Italian, Irish, with a few Jews.

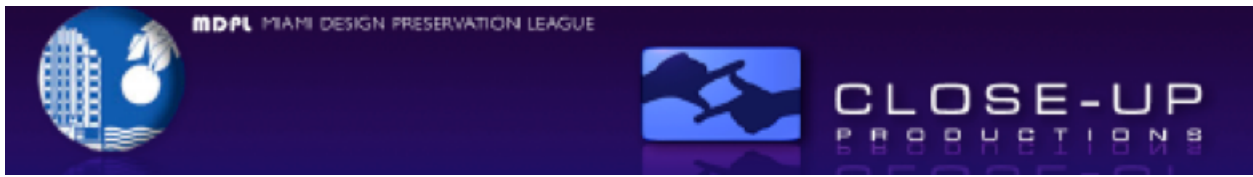
Kathy: So, how were you accepted?

Luis Garcia: Again, there were people who didn't care for me too much. So, I figured out it was very hard for me to get here, so I'm going to try harder than anybody else. After I went to the Academy, in my class I was third. I developed a reputation for being goal-hold, for being dedicated, and went here for rescue. I was on of the first paramedics in the state! I got my training in '74. My philosophy was, if you gave me a chance to go to school, to better myself, I will take it. I ended up going to the National Fire Academy. I was the first member in Miami Beach Fire Department to graduate from the National Fire Academy, with a certificate. That was quite an accomplishment.

So, I tried very hard, tried harder than anybody else. Every time when I was promoted – you get promoted by competitive exams, they would have a list, according to your grade – every time I was promoted, I was number one, two, or three. So, nobody can say that I was given anything. Ultimately, in 1996... First of all, in '94 they did an assessment for an Assistant Chief and I'd beat everybody. Out of maximum of 800 points, I'd be better by 200 points. I became the Assistant Chief, two years later, I became the Fire Chief, and I was the Fire Chief for three years.

I see many changes in my Fire career. Keep in mind, when I started writing Rescue, and I was a Paramedic, South Beach was what Don Rickles used to call them holding pants, for funeral homes. Because, you would drive to the Ocean, 44 miles an hour on a Saturday night, and you'll only had to slow down. he was totally dead.

I remember, I was involved with a Union in a contract, and the Police was going for a new contract. When they went to the city commission, one of



the commissioner said, "why do you guys want a pay rise? The only thing you can't have is to be hit over the head with a salami by an old lady." That was there.

Of course, a couple of years later the Mateo came about, and we lost a couple of policemen.

Kathy: How did that happen?

Luis Garcia: One was the drugs thing. The other one... I was a paramedic in charge of working, this guy, his name was Donald Cramer he came to the Police Department late in life... You have to remember, at the beginning for you to be a Firefighter, or a Policeman, you'd have to be certain height, certain weight, certain age. Then, they opened equal opportunity employment.

Donald was in his 40s, so old for a policeman. He was overweight. He had a business, fixing televisions. He was doing well, but he wanted to be a policeman, and he was a policeman. He was a very colorful individual. He would drive a patty wagon, taking all the drunks, dressed as Santa Claus in Christmas Time. At the Beach, he was obedient. One morning he was taking all the drunks, and one of the homeless shot him in the back, and then, when he fell down, he shot him on the head. And, I had to pick him, I had to work on him. That was very traumatic.

Kathy: No reason? He was at the wrong place, at the wrong time?

Luis Garcia: Yeah. We were working him and we got him back with a pulse on his blood pressure, but the brain was gone. They kept him alive for three days, harvested kidneys for his father. That was one of the stories that... There were a lot of light moments too. We had a visit from Luciano Pavarotti, he came to sing. Right behind this building. At that time, the day before I got a call, I was Assistant Chief of Department, and I got a call from the city manager that Pavarotti was sick and he was in Fisher Island. I had to go undercover as paramedic. At that time, commissioner Goble and her husband was a doctor. So, we were undercover to Fisher Island, we took the ferry, to take a look at Pavarotti.

Kathy: Why were you undercover?

Luis Garcia: Because, the Fisher Island was not a part of Miami Beach.

Kathy: It was not?

Luis Garcia: It was called Metro Dade. So, we were stepping away, and it was an undercover-type. When we got there, we asked to attend to Pavarotti. Pavarotti has eaten, it was seven pounds of strawberries, it was the day before. And, he had a little bit of indigestion. The funny part – he was the nicest man – he was lying in bed all covered up, because of shivery, so we had to uncover him. And, when we uncovered him, he was wearing red underwear. Something like shorts... not joggers, but bikini underwear. From that time, my picture changed, but he kid around with jokes in Spanish, he spoke Spanish with me. Actually, my partner kept a strip of his heartbeat, which he later signed. That was one of the light moments.

Kathy: What about fires? Did you have to put out any big fires?

Luis Garcia: Oh yeah. At that time, you have to remember, in the late 70s and early 80s we had a moratorium and we had rent control in Miami Beach, meaning, that you couldn't improve your buildings, and you couldn't raise your rents. At that time, you had De Mario Bold leave, you had a lot of under Sarro's here. South Beach was a real slum. So, there were a lot of suspicious fires at the time. You knew they were set, you didn't know who set them. These were called redevelopment South Beach town. It was cheaper just to burn the place down, than to tear it down.

Kathy: So, this was common then?

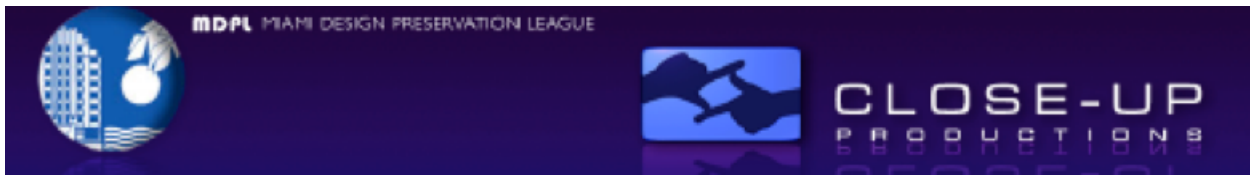
Luis Garcia: Yeah. We were busy. Actually, at that time, we had a tirade. We had a couple of buildings here on the Ocean Drive, Ocean and 5th, were three people died. The one that was worst was the Fontana Hotel. By that time, I think it was late 80s, maybe 1990, it was just before Andrew. It was a building, from the Fontana, it was on 26th and Collins. That building has been scheduled to be retrofitted with sprinkles. But they gained the waver, because they couldn't do it. In the meantime, it got on fire and nine people died. The flames went across, so that was... We also had a big fire here, the White House Hotel went down. Several big buildings.

Kathy: Were you called in on the Versace case? Were you working then?

Luis Garcia: There are events that happened, that you remember exactly what you were doing. That happened on Tuesday morning. At that time, I was the Fire Chief. On Tuesday morning, I had my staff meetings. I would bring my division Chiefs, and people that work days. We had donuts, bagels, coffee, we would talk – it was like a bonding. We would talk about what passed by the past week, and preplan, or whatever.

We were there and I got a call on my walkie-talkie, "Chief, this is firefighter Gower...", rightfully, the guy was there and was the Fire Chief, later on. "We have a shooting, in front of Versace state. A man got shot in the head. We're going to take him Jacksonville, but I don't think he's going to make it." And, by the way the ID says, "Johnny Versace". At that point in time, you had people with scanners, and by the time they got to Jacksonville Trauma Center, the press was waiting for him out there. They made me become a circus.

Shortly after, when they had Cunanan, I forgot his name, it goes like Cunanan, "They shot Versace". I'm in my office and again, I get a call on channel seven. "Chief they have Cunanan in the house bottom in Beach". Across from fire station number three. You know, the city is cut in half, because you don't have them very solemnly, the Police got there without warning. At that time, they had closed Collins Avenue, North and South. In other words, on the East side, it was cut. And, with the equipment on station three, they would have a hard time. I guess they wanted to put us to respond, they said, "how are you going to respond?", I said, "no problem, we had all the West, we had three other stations". Basically, I monitored that from the firehouse. Afterwards, I went to the scene and I



was there with the Police Chief Richard Baretto. That was very big. Those were very traumatic times.

Kathy: That was National headlines.

Luis Garcia: Oh, it was world. It was world news. Actually, he became larger in death, than in life. His property, which is only two blocks away from here, at one time it used to be the most photographed locations in the world. Everybody would come to Miami Beach, and we would get million visitors a year who just go to Versace Mansion to get the picture taken.

Kathy: The perpetrator was on the leave. For how long before they caught him?

Luis Garcia: I want to say a week. No more than a week.

Kathy: You must have been pretty busy during that week?

Luis Garcia: Well, we just... The Police Department was busy. We were just...

Kathy: You were monitoring it?

Luis Garcia: Yeah, we tried to keep... You have to remember, at that time, we had one of the top ten busiest rescue units in the country. You have to remember, in our little sleeve of land – Miami Beach is only seven square miles – we were answering close to 22,000 calls a year. That's a lot of calls. We were busy. We responded to all of them.

Kathy: You mentioned, and before I forget I want to bring that up, one of your early jobs on the Beach was, you were assigned I guess from the Fire Department, you were assigned to drive then-mayor Harold Rosen around? Tell us that story.

Luis Garcia: I'll tell you the story. Back then, the city would provide a Cadillac. It wasn't a limo but it was a big black Cadillac, like the ones you see [inaudible][35:37] right now. For the mayor, for official business, and they were housed at the fire station number one. When I was assigned there, of course, a lot of people didn't like it. I myself enjoyed it, to me it was great. Every time they knew somebody, they would get the queue and kid to drive the mayor. At that time, Harold Rosen was the mayor.

From that time, I developed a great friendship with Harold. He is a dear friend. He's larger than life in Miami Beach. Up until now, we have breakfast once in a while, or whatever. On every parade, every time we have the Veteran's Day Parade, then he drives me. He's got a convertible, and I drive his car. At that time, from memories, being the mayor's chauffeur, all the mayors would let the chauffeurs wait outside... With Harold, when he was going to a luncheon, or a dinner, the chauffeur would go with him. He treated us very well. Very human guy.

Kathy: Did you hear any of his stories about his breakfast with Meyer Lansky?

Luis Garcia: No, because that wasn't official business. I would only drive him to official

business. But, you know, Meyer Lansky used to live in one of our buildings. My brother used to park cars in that building when he was a kid. And, he actually met him. They say he was a very nice old man. Very polite and a very good tipper.

Kathy: What about Harold, was he a good tipper?

Luis Garcia: Yeah. Harold is Harold, let me tell you. He's a good friend. He's a good guy, truly.

Kathy: So, did you say that he was the one who got you interested in politics? Well, public service?

Luis Garcia: Let me tell you how I came to be in... When I was Assistant Chief, at that time, the Chief that we had... he wasn't comfortable going to the City Hall. So, he would delegate the political aspect of the Fire Department to me. I would go to meetings in the City Hall, and... a good friend of mine, an Irish man from Massachusetts good drinking buddy, we were out for a few beers and had a great relationship. He was my friend more than a boss. Anyway, I would go to City Hall, and I would have to mingle, work things out, and whatever. He was the Chief for the couple of years.

Kathy: What was his name again?

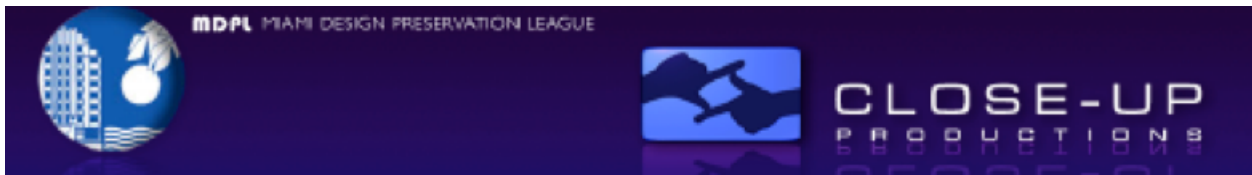
Luis Garcia: Tom Sullivan.

Kathy: Tom Sullivan?

Luis Garcia: Yeah. I think he was Chief for two years, then he decided that he had enough and quit abruptly. I guess he had an awful... At that time, there was intrusion from City Hall. You had to go through levels of supervision, to get to the City Manager. Anyway, I was one of the two Assistant Chiefs. actually, there was an Interim Chief for three months, I was Assistant Chief, because he was going to retire and they let him to be Interim Chief for three months, to help his retirement, or whatever. After three months I was a Chief, I was a Chief for almost three years. And, I'll tell you what, we did a lot of things in that time.

At that time, we were the first mayor municipal Fire Department to be what they call ALS-Certified. Advance Life Support Certified, meaning that all of our fire equipment had the same capabilities, as the rescue units, as far as medical treatment. We were the first in the Southeastern United States. And, with department of our size. So, that also was an accomplishment. We developed a system of transport, that we would transport every single patient, instead of having to call a private ambulance. It would save money of the patient, it would generate extra revenue to the city, but most than anything else, it would provide a better service, because we would take them right away.

Our rescue service, was second to none in the country. In the Country. We had people from Japan, Argentina, Peru, Brazil coming over to see how we are doing things. We were very proud of that. Of course, the mingling from the city administrators continued. I suspected that we were



getting a better publicity, than they were getting. Everybody liked us, they didn't like... They were very intrusive, and they made my work harder. After three years, I decided that I was old enough to retire. I was working for pay for peanuts at that time, because there were no pay raises. The salary of the Fire Chief back then, is equivalent of the salary of a surgeon right now. I could live with my retirement benefits.

So, I'm marching to the City Hall, I told the City Manager at that time, Mr. Rodriguez. I said, "Sir, I had enough of your intrusion. You're not a professional, I've got a letter from National Fire Academy. I'm running a good Department. In my Department, I manage almost 25 percent of the city budget with very little help. I've had enough, I want to retire. I'm going to run for office, I'm going to get elected, and I'm going to fire your ass." Can I say that - "Fire your ass"? Okay. He didn't believe me. So, I ran for the office, I was running against five other people.

Kathy: This is for Commissioner in Miami Beach?

Luis Garcia: Yeah, for Commissioner in Miami Beach. I was running against five people. I was running against, at that time the president of the Republican Club. I was running against his son, a former Senator, that later on became Richard Steinberg. A couple of activists. One very prominent gay activist. At that time, he was carrying a lot of weights, the gay movement was taking place in Miami Beach. So, nobody gave me much of a chance, right? Well, guess what? I won by 20 percent of the vote.

That was on a Tuesday, I got sworn in on a Wednesday. On Friday Mr. Rodriguez came to my office and said that he was leaving for the University of Miami. There was a paper at that time... I don't know you have him, because what I said, I cannot claim that but, there was a little city newspaper. And, they had two little laborers talking, and one of them says, "I wonder if he left, because Garcia got elected?"

Kathy: That was your first act then, to...?

Luis Garcia: No, I didn't do anything. He did all by himself.

Kathy: Oh, that's right.

Luis Garcia: He quit. At that time, I become a City Commissioner.

Kathy: What year was that?

Luis Garcia: 1999. I was going to leave, when I retired, I had a couple of offers for Fire Chief, and a couple other places. First of all, there was Grand Rapids, Michigan for a few dollars. But, Grand Rapids is... Michigan is not a good place for a boy from the Island. It gets cold there, it snows. And then, the other one was Vallejo, California. I was interested in that one. There was a Naval Base that was being taken over by the city. But, I'm glad I didn't take that one, because actually the city went bankrupt. It was the first city in the United States to go bankrupt. I was lucky that way. I was a finalist for the Fairfax County in Virginia. But, I didn't get that job. At that

time, my wife was greatly ill, she passed away a couple of years later. She had breast cancer. So, I stayed here, and I became a politician.

Kathy: What has it been like representing your district? It's part of the Beach, I understand, and part of other places.

Luis Garcia: First, it's nothing like representing Miami Beach. When I was a Commissioner in Miami Beach, it was fantastic. I was in City Hall five days a week. All that for \$6,000 a year job. I could do it, I was retired. I'm not a wealthy man, but I live fully, I lived by extra money, and I always spend my money. I could devote all my energy to the position. I was popular.

My wife refused to go walk Lincoln Road with me. Every block I would stop and talk to two, three people. It would take me two hours to go Lincoln Road. And, the dynamic at that time was great, it was the beginning of the century. We had the focus of the world. At the beginning of the millennium we had a party by the Ocean. There was a lot of glamour. So, there were some exciting times. Those are seven years I remember with a lot of fondness.

Kathy: Seven years you were on the Commission?

Luis Garcia: Yeah.

Kathy: Now, are you running for the Beach Commissioner again, or Miami-Dade Commissioner?

Luis Garcia: After the Commission, I went for six years to Tallahassee, that's where I am right now. But, now I decided I want to come back home. I want to come back home, because this is where I belong. I figured out that I had no agendas, other than the people I have no special interest. I have never worked. Since I retired from the Fire Department, I have never worked for anybody. I have never gotten a penny from any outside source.

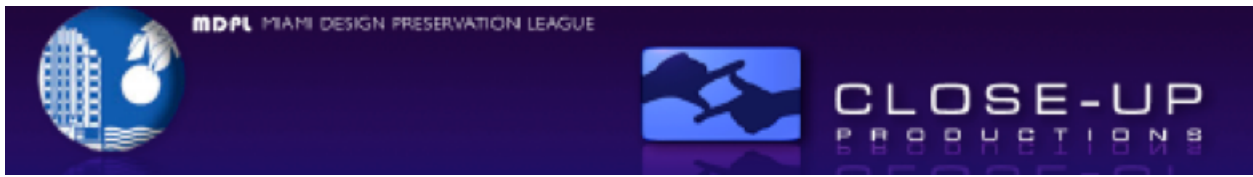
So, I don't have any ties to any special interests. And, I figured out what is going on in the county right now – every time you open the newspaper, there is a new scandal. I figured out I can do more help to my community. By being one of 13, then being one of 120 time Tallahassee. So, yes, I am running for the County Commission. It's a district that represents most of the Beach. All the eastern sea shore, all of South Beach, the islands – Palm, Hibiscus, Star, Fisher Island, Downtown Miami, Blue Havana. It's a very collective district.

Kathy: You've had a lot of experience in dealing with diversity, haven't you?

Luis Garcia: Oh, yes, I have. Yes, I have.

Kathy: Anything stand out your mind during your service in Tallahassee, representing your district? Big events, were you there for the Terri Schiavo thing? Was that...?

Luis Garcia: No, that came after. I'll tell you what, I got elected in 2006. Again, I've been fighting windmills like Don Quixote all my life. I got elected in the



republican district, and I became the only Cuban-American democrat in either two houses of the Legislation. That was interesting times, I will save it to work, across the aisle with a lot of friends. I will say it depends from a meaningful legislation. Some of it that will protect every single paramedic and first responder of the State. I was named the Legislator of the Year by the Florida Nurse Association.

And at that time, you could bring money back to your districts. Then, I saw the downfall of the economy. I saw the election of President Obama. This was exciting times. That was my second election and I was re-elected with a good percentage. Then, I saw the buckle of 2010, when there was a tsunami and I was the only Democrat that survived, of my class. So, I must have been doing something right at the time.

Kathy: What do you think, what was that something right? If you analyze it, if you think about it. How does the lone Cuban Democrat in a very Conservative Legislature still have friends to go out to dinner with and get things done?

Luis Garcia: I'm a conservative Democrat. My political heroes were Lindon Johnson and Scoop Jackson, senator Jackson, and they were something you would almost call a blue dot. I'm not afraid to back my party or the other party. I remember I passed a law – I didn't get to pass it, but, I was carrying the bill – claims bill for an African-American individual Alan Crotzer, he was jailed for 25 years, for the crime he did not commit. And, the only way for him to the institution was to look to [inaudible][50:58].

So, I took the bill the first year, it didn't go through the second year. I did a press conference and I told and I send a message to the Governor Garcia. If this bill won't pass, I will go see him in his office like Henry Mick had done with Jeb Bush. So, the governor didn't announce it, but somebody from his stuff said, "Charlie said, that if you sat in his office, he'd sit there with you". We became friends after that.

Kathy: Charlie Chris?

Luis Garcia: Yeah. I did endorse him, which cost me dearly with some of my fellow Democrats. But, I thought he was a good man, he was a right choice. Anyway, low and behold, Charlie mentions that bill, at the state of the State, and next thing the Republican Party endorsed a Committee Bill. In other words, they hijacked my bill, and they passed it through. It got passed, and it still was my bill. To me, it was one of the Golden Times. I felt so good, to start the process to compensate somebody that have been wrong.

Kathy: What was this man's name again?

Luis Garcia: Alan Crotzer. He went to jail when he was 18 years old and came out when he was 42.

Kathy: Do you remember how to spell his last name?

Luis Garcia: C-R-O-T-Z-E-R. He's from, I think the Tampa Bay area.

Kathy: Okay, but you started the bill?

Luis Garcia: Yeah, twice. It was funny, because when the government signed the bill, they both wanted me there with him. The picture that came out, it hangs in my office right now. It's from Florida Bar Newspaper where I'm embracing Charlie, and the three of us embracing. That picture made the news, and the woman that carried the bill never got any recognition.

Kathy: Being involved in Florida politics, has it made you cynic?

Luis Garcia: The moment you become a cynic, you should get out of politics. In many ways, you have to be a "babe in the woods", where you have to be a little... a boy scout, to be an honest politician. And, it's not easy, because when you're fighting... Back in 2008 a fellow who run against me, he was lobbied for one of the power companies. He put... as I like to say, he invested \$210,000 of his own money to get a job that pays \$29,000, right? And, the personal attacks, they don't bother me, but my family... When you are in politics, you expect to be attacked. Even though I don't attack, I run clean campaigns, and I have never run a negative campaign, but for the family it's hard, because the family takes it hard.

For you to label you, that you are promoting... that your tax records are not right, which is open for everybody... To say that you are promoting the teenage prostitution? It was ridiculous. You know what I did? If you go to my office, you will see all those negative advertisements, I frame them. You can see them in my office. When you win the election, you can do that. If you want to see how nasty they were to me, they help me remember. Well, that's politics. If I was a cynic, I would get out of it. I don't need it, I got my family, I got a lovely wife, and a 11-year-old son. So, I'm starting all over again. I guess this old horse still has a couple of alarms to respond to.

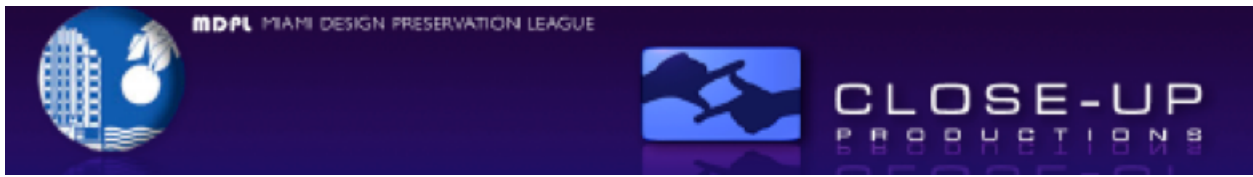
Kathy: I just want to give you an opportunity, if there is a story, or something that you would like to tell... You've given us some good stories, but is there one that you have, that's special? Let's say that your 11-year-old... is it a son?

Luis Garcia: Yeah, a son. I got all boys.

Kathy: So, when they say, "tell us a story", what one would you pick?

Luis Garcia: Well, usually the stories that really stick with you are the tragic ones and gory ones. For instance, a day doesn't go by, that I don't think of Donald Cramer. A day doesn't go by, that I don't think of other guy, a firefighter that had a massive stroke in the fire station. Bob Steel, and I had to drive him and he died in the hospital. My wife complains that I don't share my work. But, that's out of force of habit, because in my previous profession, you don't want to share what you went through. I have seen everything from amputations, to dismemberment, to rapes, to suicides.

There was a gentleman who wrote a book about a fire station. Sasser, I



think is last name. it's Mike Sasser. He named the book "The last American heroes". They spent with us about two months, just taking stories, or whatever. All the stories, they are based on true events. If you look at that... some stories I don't like sharing with your kid. You share with your kid, for instance, when the Beach Boys came to town – the old story, you know you can't share – when the Beach Boys came to town, and I was in charge of setting up the rescue responses, and things like that. For 11-years-old, he's going to have plenty of time for gore in his life.

Kathy: That's something that most of the public is not even aware of, is the preparation "what if", the stuff that the Fire Department have to do diligence about, if famous people come to Beach, or whatever... Were you involved in, I guess - the political conventions would have been before your time – preparing for the famous people, or events that have happened on the Beach?

Luis Garcia: Actually, every time there's a famous person, especially politician, that requires secret service, there's a meeting down at the secret service office. And, every department, every agency that's involved sends a representative. I supervised EMS Division for about ten years. So, I attended many of them, and I got to meet a lot of celebrities. To me, my favorite was Al Gore. I met Al Gore on the last week that I was Fire Chief. When they come to town, they require extra amount of Police protection, and they have to have a Rescue Unit assigned to them.

At the end, when he was leaving, me along with the Fire Chief Richard Berreto, we met with him. Nicest man you want to meet. Took a picture, shook our hands, then I have a big picture signed by him in my office. That was interesting. I remember offering him protection for Teddy Kennedy. George Bush's father. A lot of them I was as close to them as I am to you right now. I remember the owner of the House of Bush came down here, and we provided protection for him. And, again, of course I worked in Miami Vice for two years.

Kathy: Oh, tell us about that.

Luis Garcia: Do we have time?

Kathy: Yes.

Luis Garcia: Back in 1981, when Miami Vice came to town... Now, keep in mind, if Miami Beach is what it is right now, you have to thank Miami Vice for, because it really shows the Diamond in the rough. Back then, when they were filming, they would have to paint the facades, so all the hotels looked good. They were looking pastel colors. I was a paramedic. Every time the production company comes to town, they need to have somebody from first aid. That was a great part time job. That was my days off, I would be sitting on the set with a little medical bag, giving aspirins. If somebody twisted an ankle, I would put a bandage, if they got cut, I would put a band-aid.

And then, you'd have to hobnob with all the celebrities. I met a lot of them. A lot of them I met before they were famous. I remember sitting and talking for two, three hours with Bruce Willis when nobody knew who he was. That was one of the first shows, I remember sitting and talking for about six hours with Bill Russel, the old center from the Boston Celtics. For two years I did that, and that was the best part-time in my life. Those are stories I can tell my kids.

Kathy: What about Don Johnson, and Phillip Michael Thomas? Did you ever hang around with them?

Luis Garcia: Oh, yes.

Kathy: And, what was the...?

Luis Garcia: Don Johnson wasn't easy to hang around with, Phillip Michael Thomas was a great guy. And better than those two was Michael Talbott, the heavy-set guy. He was funny.

Kathy: And, Edward James Olmos?

Luis Garcia: Edward James Olmos was a real gentleman, very polite, very nice man.

Kathy: And, where did they stay when they were on the Beach?

Luis Garcia: Well, they all had houses. For instance, there were times when Edward James would come to the set driving a CR Boat. If he was filming somewhere, he had friends with house, I think, upwards from North Beach, or that area when you are on 125th Street. Keystone pond, they had a house down there. Then, the guest stars, they would put them on the Alexander Hotel.

Kathy: And, they had a lot of guest stars?

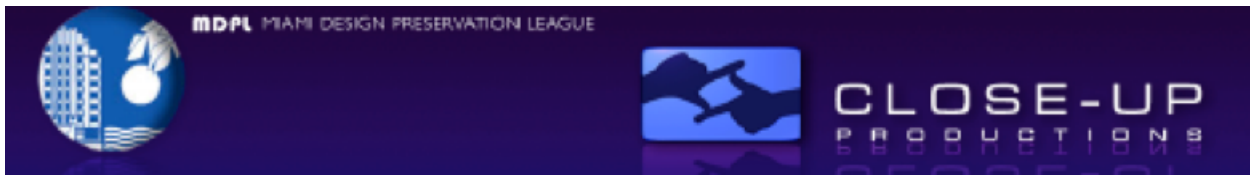
Luis Garcia: Every week, I remember meeting Phil Collins. That was interesting.

Kathy: His song opened the show?

Luis Garcia: Yeah, that was "In the Air tonight". Actually, that song wasn't supposed to be like that. It was an old song, and they played it. That wasn't the theme song for the show. But, that became so linked to Miami Vice, that it became like a show song.

Kathy: So, you think that Miami Vice was a real positive?

Luis Garcia: Absolutely. Not only for Miami, but for the whole area. And, that accelerated. Basically, Miami Beach was a forgotten destination. Tourist destinations are faddish. One year you go to Port Vallarta, the other you go to Cancun, then you go to Ibiza, then you go to whatever. Miami Beach has gotten away from that. Miami Vice came to town and they showed these whole buildings. And, they had to chase the old people out, so they could film. I remember when they were filming, they wanted to put Jazzy cars in front of the hotels. At that time, I had a MG Convertible, so they



used that for a couple of shows. And, it shows the people what Miami Beach could be like. They painted the facades, they created lights that did not exist. Basically, Miami Beach had to grow up to look like the show portrayed it. The rest is history.

These places across the street, a couple of blocks away from here, the Mangos Café... David Willock, the owner and I have been friends for many years since almost kids. We both grew up here. That place used to be a hospice. People would go there to die. It was called the "Eastern Sun". You know how many spirits you probably have around here? And, look what it became. We went from a hospice to be the hottest, one of the hottest destinations in South Beach, and it's going National. Look at Paramount's, it's a world brand right now. They are half way across the world. Look at the Opium Group, Roman Gomez's places...

Again, we have a nightlife that never stops. If anything, it's probably bringing a lot of people down. Sometimes it brings more people than we can handle. We're going to have Memorial Day in a couple of weeks, I went for a couple of meetings, and I know the city is bracing for what is going to happen.

Kathy: You said that at one point you were studying architecture, you thought you were going to be an architect? Was that influenced at all by what you saw here in your early days on the Beach?

Luis Garcia: No, not really. But, this just brings another story, and... When you get to be old, things trigger you... I will not talk about my good friend, the late Morris Lapidus. He was the architect of the Fountain Blue, and I was a personal friend. You remember that show "Tuesdays with Morrie"? that Bowie show? We'd meet on Thursdays with Morris Lapidus, because I would pick him up to go to the Kiwanis Luncheon, and I would sit with him and talk how Miami Beach used to be in the 50s, and to me he was a prominent architect of our time... of all times.

Kathy: And, what was he like, personally?

Luis Garcia: He was an actor. He was a frustrated actor. He died in his late... When he turned 95 we had a cake for him and at that time I put my fire gear, and I had an extinguisher next to the cake, because of the candles. But, he had a flare, he was an excellent guy. He wanted to be an actor, and he became the next thing – an architect.

Kathy: He had a slow start up for his career, didn't he? Because he was actually, ridiculed for the Fountain Blue when it was first opened.

Luis Garcia: Morris... yeah, he was ridiculed for the Fountain Blue and the Hidden Rock, but afterward he built a building, or a set of buildings called the Seacoast Towers. And, those were the first high-rises where they used – the balconies, they were round, the corners were round. Because, he devised the way to cast the balconies, and they would move the cast from floor to floor. That was transcending. Even before that, Morris got his fame designing Department Stores. The layout, the interior layout of the

Department Stores, the Monday Arts, that was Morris Lapidus' intention. Before that everything was shelves and no flare. Morris had a flare for the dramatic. Again, he was a frustrated actor, he wanted to be an actor.

Kathy: So, he kind of, created the stage seen in the Fountain Blue, for people's fantasy?

Luis Garcia: Exactly. He had stairs that was going to nowhere – just for people to walk up and down, so they could be seen. Then, at the floor, if you look at the tie, he had like a bow tie – that was a bow tie that he would wear. He always wore a bow tie. That was his signature. I got his book and he signed it for me, and I price that.

Kathy: So, you had a long friendship, then?

Luis Garcia: Well, it wasn't long, in the sense, that I met him late in life, but we had a friendship for over five years. It may have been a little bitter for him, but he made a life-long impression for me.

Kathy: Wonderful.

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