

Southwest Detroit Oral History Project
Detroit, MI

Myrna Segura

Interviewed by
Nathan Kuehnl

12 December 2014

Detroit, MI

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

Fall 2014

Brief Biography

Myrna Segura was born in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico. After earning degrees in Communication and Fashion Design, Segura worked in the fashion industry and later the manufacturing industry in Mexico. She moved to Detroit in 1997 to learn English and explore a new culture and new potential careers. In 2000, Segura found work with the Mexicantown Community Development Corporation running cultural and business assistance programs. When the MCDC closed in 2008, Segura began working for Southwest Detroit Business Association. She is currently the Director of Business District Development. In her time with both organizations, she has been responsible for organizing multiple cultural events and for providing business support to local entrepreneurs.

Interviewer

Nathan Kuehnl is a Ph.D student in the history department at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. This interview is part of a project for a graduate level course in oral history.

Abstract

Myrna Segura discusses her upbringing in Mexico. Segura then describes her college education and life in her early 20s (7:50). She attributes her career path to her mother as well as to her experiences with the culture and socioeconomics of Mexico. Segura talks about life in the fashion industry and contrasts that with working in the manufacturing industry (12:00). Her experiences in the manufacturing industry shaped some of her economic views (19:34). She then explains how she arrived in Detroit (27:27). After some time in Detroit, she acquires a job working with the Mexicantown Community Development Corporation (31:46). In 2008, she moved on to take a position with the Southwest Detroit Business Association, where she currently works (44:46). She then reflects on her time with both organizations (48:43). Later, she discusses the importance of grants, not just for businesses, but for the community as a whole. (56:24)

Restrictions

Original Format

Transcription

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Southwest Detroit Oral History Project
Walter P. Reuther Library
Wayne State University
Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted 12 December 2014 with:
Myrna Segura, Detroit, MI
By: Nathan Kuehnl

(Kuehnl): This is Nathan Kuehnl on December 12th, 2014, interviewing Myrna Segura about her experience in Southwest Detroit and working for the Southwest Detroit Business Association. So, Myrna, we'll start with hopefully some easy questions. First, I want to know just a little bit about your early life. Where were you born, where did you grow up, and what was your early life like?

(Segura): I was born in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Reynosa is a border town. Tamaulipas is the state. In Mexico, the country. Tamaulipas is next to Texas. Reynosa is a border town next to Hidalgo, Texas. I grew up there. I had a happy childhood. From a middle class household. I have a brother. He is one year older than me. My parents moved to the city from another city in Tamaulipas, which is Madero, because of the work opportunities in Pemex which is the oil company in Mexico. So, I was very involved with sports. I think I was a good student. I played basketball. I was also a performer since I was a little child. We grew up going to the Mormon church. We were not Catholic, which was something different for us. I grew up in that religion.

(Kuehnl): And when you were growing up, did you have any aspirations of what you wanted to do, whether you wanted to continue with basketball or performing or anything like that?

(Segura): Yes. My mom was a person who was very involved with music and with children. She was very involved with different programs at church. She had leadership positions. She was the president of the primary, which is the program that offers classes to the kids. So, since I was a small kid or child, I was always attending those classes. And then she was the choir director. So, she decided that we needed to learn, to take piano classes, and we did. We liked music. I liked dance, dancing. I wanted to be a performer. My mom was also very into fashion. She studied when she was younger how to make patterns and how to sew and how to, you know, design somehow. She was always creating dresses for herself and for me, so my love for fashion started with my mom. I guess my love for performing and somehow music was also because of my mom. So, yeah, somehow I wanted to go into... I used to go to the stores with her to select the fabrics. She was always paying attention to the quality of the fabric, the type of the fabric, like cotton, wool, polyester. She would touch those fabrics and kind of, she felt the love for those materials and I learned, I guess, to appreciate that. She selected colors. So, I got very involved since I was a child with her. The first thing, I believe, the first show that I produced is when I was a child. Maybe I was like ten year olds. I created like a fashion show for my dolls and I got all my friends together and they had to create some kind of outfit for their dolls and we had a competition. I also put together like a cultural event where people had to bring all their costumes. They participated in different performance activities at school. Also then were part of the folk

lore dance group so we will have those performances also on our block and I will be leading those. It's just so funny because I go back and think about it and I'm here and I kind of, I started doing that with the nonprofit organizations that I worked and work for in Southwest Detroit. So, basically, I think everything started from seeing the love that my mom had for those things and those activities. I think that's why I decided to go into communications and also, at some point, fashion design and merchandising.

(Kuehnl): Yeah. So you can kind of see the roots of what you're doing now all the way back then right away, kind of, coming from your mom, too. Was she a big figure in the community as well, then?

(Segura): My mom was a big figure at church.

(Kuehnl): At church.

(Segura): It's a big community. She was a leader. I was telling her, because she is 80, she has been volunteering for that church for 50 years.

(Kuehnl): Wow.

(Segura): As the choir director. Now she's not just the president of the group that works with the kids of the church, but also the regional director for that group. So, basically she manages or works with other people that go back to their branches and, you know, offer the classes to the kids. So, she has always been a leader. She's not being paid to do that.

(Kuehnl): Right.

(Segura): But I think by watching I learned how it was possible to become a leader in my community or how I could, you know, do good things for the people around me. She also is an animal lover, and I'm an animal lover, too. I do a lot of rescuing. I rescue cats and dogs. I have been doing that for over 10 years. So, yeah, I think, I guess, it's very important how you grow in your family circle and what is the support you receive and what is the education, not just by going to school or going to church or your parents talking to you, but also by observing what they do.

7:50 (Kuehnl): Cool. So, from there, I noticed in your bio: you ended up going to university for, you said, communications and fashion design as well. Where was that at?

(Segura): I went to the Universidad de Nuevo Leon in Mexico. It's in Monterrey. It's an industrial city. It's one of the most important cities in Mexico. I first went to another city, which is Madero, where my mom is from. I was there for one year and then I decided to move to Monterrey, to transfer to the other university. The reason I decided to study communications is because it was the closest I could find to continue in that world of, you know, performing, somehow because I was not going to go to Mexico City and become an actress or do something similar. I had to get a degree and get a job, so that was the most appropriate career for me is what I thought. I did think about fashion design and merchandising, especially fashion design, but I

didn't know if there was a school in Monterrey and then I found one and I was doing both at the same time.

(Kuehnl): Oh, wow.

(Segura): So I didn't even think about it when I first saw the school. I talked to my parents that I really want to go study fashion design.

(Kuehnl): Did you continue to, kind of, do the same activities that you were doing as a child when you were at university as well?

(Segura): I was also very involved with sports. I was a basketball player and I was very good. I continued doing that when I was in school. I was in a dance group, a folk lore dance group. And my mom sewed all my costumes since I was a child, she did. I still have some of those.

(Kuehnl): Oh wow.

(Segura): I was also part of the basketball team. I was what you call right wing? Correct?

(Kuehnl): Yes?

(Segura): I was very good. I was part of the main team. When I went to college, I wanted to continue doing that. It's just that I was... Monterrey is a large city. My parents couldn't buy me a car, so I couldn't move very easily around. I was living not really close to college, so I had to go take a couple of buses to school. And basically they didn't have a program in place. They did have a basketball team that I tried to join. But I decided just not to do it because of the difficulties for me to, you know, to have to go to training. So I just decided to focus on my studies. Then also going to the fashion design and merchandising school.

(Kuehnl): Just to clarify, what year did you start college?

(Segura): I would not remember. Let me go back to my resume.

(Kuehnl): Okay.

(Segura): 1983. And 1984.

(Kuehnl): Do you remember when you graduated?

(Segura): Yes. It's 1987.

(Kuehnl): Okay.

(Segura): And the other one was 1986.

12:00 (Kuehnl): Alright. Thank you. And after that, from university, where did you... What was your next step in life?

(Segura): Basically, in Mexico, it's so funny because things are changing now. But I was not... My parents were not expecting me to get a job when I was going to college. They were just paying for my, you know, tuition, and for my rent and also giving me the money to pay for my food. Which is very traditional, I think, mostly because I am a woman and also they do it with boys, especially when they can afford that. But, I think that's changing, and I hope it's changing, because it's very different to what happened to college students in the United States. I think it's very important that they start looking for jobs and working when they are studying. It's just that, I guess, the pay per hour in Mexico is different so probably sometimes it's not worth it to spend all the time working instead of studying.

(Kuehnl): Yeah, while trying to study at the same time, sure.

(Segura): Correct. So at some point my mom told me, I think I was 21 or 22, and she said, Myrna, if you want to stay in Monterrey you have to find a job because we won't be able to send you any more money. So we won't be able to take care of your expense. I think about it, and I think it's great.

(Kuehnl): Yeah?

(Segura): Yeah. I think it was great because it pushed me to go out because I wanted to stay in Monterrey. I had a lot of friends and I was young and I was going out and we were having fun, so I wanted to stay there. And Reynosa's a small town. I didn't want to go back to Reynosa at that point. So I started looking for a job as a fashion designer and I went to a manufacturing company. They do uniforms for different companies. They have, you know... it's a large city, so, they have these companies that provide the uniforms for banks, for maybe hospitals, and they have people doing the design and the pattern making. So, I went there and they reviewed my resume. I just graduated so they told me, come back when you have more experience. So then, after that interview, I went to see one of my friends. We used to hang out at a place called Coco Loco. They used to play a lot of, well basically, rock – alternative rock music. And you will see there very creative people coming from all social levels. It was a very good experience. I met very interesting people. One of those people was Marcelo Rios. He was the owner of a boutique and a small workshop in Monterrey. His parents were, or are wealthy. They own a couple of buildings in what is called a historic area in Monterrey in the center, or it would be midtown Monterrey. So he used one of those spaces to open this boutique and he was designing, he had a person design who went to the same school I went to. But she was coming to the United States to study English. He was looking for another designer. So when I went there, he said I could hire you. So I got hired to do fashion design. I started working for him then.

(Kuehnl): That's a good turn of events.

(Segura): It was a good turn of events. He was a well known person. The only thing was is that my designs were not... whatever I designed, of course, they didn't print my name. Because I was working for him. He was the head designer for the company. It was his company. But it was a

great experience. I learned that he didn't ask me to change any of my designs, to revise them with the former designer. And some of those designs were in Vogue Mexico, the magazine. It was very, it was great.

(Kuehnl): Do you remember when you started there? I was trying to look through here [the resume].

(Segura): I don't think I... I used to have a longer resume. That's not part of this resume. But it had to be around 1987, yes.

(Kuehnl): So just shortly after...

(Segura): I graduated, yes. Between 87 and 88. It was great. I had a lot of fun and I was... it was a very creative time in my life and I really liked it. I really liked it. I also learned how competitive and how materialistic that, you know, field can be.

(Kuehnl): Right. Kind of a first job experience in the field, so you're learning kind of the things that aren't told right away.

(Segura): Correct. You had to work with models. People had to look good. People have egos. And I know that you deal with those things in any type of work.

(Kuehnl): Sure.

(Segura): But in that industry it's a different level. And even if it wasn't Mexico, just because of the social level of my past, and they were very wealthy. The many contacts he had, and the many people that came to our store not just looking to buy but looking to hang out. And then you have other designers trying to compete with us. It's just... It's a different experience. I was glad that I learned and that I saw what it was about. Not that I didn't like it. I enjoyed doing designing. I didn't the enjoy the other part where it made me feel maybe that was not leave a print. That it was not going to be that important, even if I know that fashion is important and that it makes a big impact. But, I think, as a young person I was growing, I was thinking what else can I do that really is going to help the people around me.

19:34 (Kuehnl): Sure. Do you remember how long you stayed there, then, and when you ended up moving on?

(Segura): I think I stayed there for a couple of years, maybe, two or three years. I came back to my parents' town a couple of times. I went back and forth and the only work I could find there was with the manufacturing, U.S. manufacturing companies, the Maquiladoras. The good jobs I could find. So, because of my background with communications and fashion design, I became a supervisor, a production supervisor for Converse.

(Kuehnl): Oh, okay.

(Segura): They were manufacturing the Converse tennis shoes. I was supervising between 25 and 40 people at some point. I was in my middle 20s. And then I was a production supervisor for TRW. They were manufacturing the safety belts. And then another company that was manufacturing the Victoria Secret bras. So that was the best experience I had. I had to work with people and production in Mexico. They get paid a minimum, the people in line, I believe they were being paid \$50 per week. So these people are really not in a good economic position. And then in the back of my mind, I know these are U.S. manufacturing companies. I know the minimum salary in Mexico is different. And I know they come to Mexico because they have the opportunity to find the inexpensive labor. But what can they offer more to those people? And, so, I was always very conscious of it. I didn't like it. It was painful for me to see how little they were making. And they would have to select or choose between buying a small house or buying a car, even a used car. Many of them, they didn't have a mode of transportation. They had to take the bus or they had to take the Peseros, which is like the little SUVs.

(Kuehnl): Oh, yeah, sure.

(Segura): That they have in Mexico, or they had at that time. It was a great experience because people were tough and I was young and I was constantly tested. After that everything became very easy for me.

(Kuehnl): Interesting. So these two experiences, I think, then shape you quite a bit because you were able to deal with the competitive fashion industry and then you came into management and had to deal with these other issues, too.

(Segura): Correct. And then I work with different people from different social levels.

(Kuehnl): Right.

(Segura): When I was in fashion design, and then when I was working for these manufacturing companies.

(Kuehnl): Almost a reverse.

(Segura): The people I was supervising were low income people. I fell for them. I even had a couple of friends, people who were close to me. So I felt... I saw the difference that exists out there.

(Kuehnl): Was that something you were aware of growing up as well?

(Segura): No.

(Kuehnl): No? Okay.

(Segura): My mom was very good at administering my father's money.

(Kuehnl): [laughs] Okay.

(Segura): [laughs] You know? His check. Not that she'd keep the money but she would get whatever she needed to take care of the expenses at home. She was very good at budgeting. So I never felt that we needed something and we could not get it. Because our needs were always satisfied. So I didn't realize that until I went out.

(Kuehnl): Okay.

(Segura): I knew there were people that had more money than us, you know, rich people. But I never experienced it. I never saw it. I never had a relationship with those people. And now when I left home and I went to college I was able to, you know, have friends from different social levels and see how they lived and compare. I realized, you know, how different the world is for different people.

24:37 (Kuehnl): Did that kind of shape your experience to... So, from there, where did you go? Were you looking for opportunities to make a difference on those different levels of inequality? Did that shape the job experiences you were looking for? Or the things you wanted to do with your life after those jobs?

(Segura): There was a period where I was trying to find out where to go. So for some time I went to Cancun. I was living in Cancun. I had a couple of friends there. I was doing sales. And Cancun, again, is more like... for those who come from outside, for outsiders who just go and try to look for a job in the touristy area, it's more like a party town.

(Kuehnl): Right.

(Segura): So people go and leave. So, I went there and I realized this was not the place I want to be. I enjoyed being there for a couple of years with my friends and, you know, doing the sales work was fine. It was not what I wanted to do. But I wanted to see places. I always wanted to travel. I did that a lot later in life. That was... I did that for a couple of years. And I went back to my parents' town because I basically wanted to, what I decided was I couldn't stay there because I didn't think that was the city for me and because I wanted to go to other places where I could expand my learning experience and I could also be able to experiment the culture and the diversity. I don't think that was happening in Cancun. So the reason I went back to my parents' house was to prepare in order to come to the United States because my aunt, my father's half-sister, was living here in Southwest Detroit. I went to the University of Texas a couple of years before to study English, but I was coming back home every day so I was not practicing. I knew as a production supervisor in order for me to move to a different department I had to improve my English so the goal was to come and study English in the United States, in Detroit living with my aunt. But I also wanted to see if there were any opportunities for me.

27:27 (Kuehnl): Interesting. Do you remember roughly when that was?

(Segura): 1996.

(Kuehnl): 1996. So you moved to Detroit in 1996?

(Segura): Correct.

(Kuehnl): And then did you live with your aunt then?

(Segura): I was living with my aunt. My aunt was around 80 at that time. She was very nice. She basically paid for my ticket.

(Kuehnl): Oh.

(Segura): I had savings. I came to Detroit with \$2000 and a suitcase.

(Kuehnl): Wow.

(Segura): Yes. I've always been very practical and very conscious about my expenses. So I was very concerned about spending my money and not getting, you know, not having a source of income. And I was learning English. I went to the International Institute because they offered a program, it's free. It's where I studied. And there was... It was a very nice area. I loved it. There was the DIA, the CCS, Wayne State.

(Kuehnl): Right, because that's right across the street almost, isn't it?

(Segura): Correct. There was a restaurant called Capi's. And I went one day just to get something to eat and they had a big sign. They were looking for help and I saw the waitress and they were going crazy. And I'm like, should I apply? [laughs]

(Kuehnl): [laughs]

(Segura): And I did!

(Kuehnl): Yeah?

(Segura): I did. And I thought okay, right now I'm studying English I can't really, you know, get a job because I had a student, no, I had a tourist visa at that point. So they called me the next day.

(Kuehnl): That seems like that would be a good job to practice English because you would be...

(Segura): Yeah. Basically. Exactly. I want to see it like that. And probably I should have waited in order for me to officially start working but again I wanted to make sure I had an income. Then I decided to go to the Wayne State University to the ESL program. I think that was in 1997. By then I had already met my now ex-husband. So when I went back to Mexico, I got a visa as a student. A student visa. I came back and I went to Wayne State. I was there for one semester and I was studying English and I passed my TOEFL. And then in 1997 in August, we got married. Basically after that I was, I started looking for a job, for a formal job. And the people at Capi's, the customers were very nice. Again, they were coming from the DIA. They were artists coming from the CCS. People thought I was an artist. Well, I was a designer. I was not designing at that

point. I wanted to do that. But I also wanted to know if I could do something else. So I was referred to the director, to the president of the Mexicantown Community Development Corporation. That's where I first started working for a nonprofit. The president of the organization looked at my resume and my background and she really liked it. Because at that point, the office manager and administrative assistant got sick so she was going to be off for one month. And they had to start planning the Cinco de Mayo celebration. So the president really needed the help. With, you know, my background being bilingual and originally from Mexico, I thought, she thought I was a good fit for the position.

(Kuehnl): Sure.

31:46 (Segura): So I started working as the administrative assistant and marketing assistant for MCDC, Mexicantown Community Development Corporation. So the first, what I was doing the first year, was organizing cultural events. So, the Cinco de Mayo attracted over 20,000 people to the area. So I was planning and coordinating the events, implementing the events. We also had a business incubator during those events. So we were recruiting the vendors for the events. So I was in charge of basically all the planning and implementation and recruiting also not just the vendors but also the entertainment. It was Cinco de Mayo and then we had Summer Mercado. We started with 8 events during the summer. It was every Sunday from 12 to 7, but I had to be there since 8 in the morning. And then we did Day of the Dead, Dia de Muertos. So basically that's what I did. I was an independent contractor. At that point, I was offered a job by somebody who I met through my work with MCDC to work with logistic organization, a company in Livonia. I really didn't like it. It wasn't what I wanted to do. It kind of reminded me of the manufacturing companies.

(Kuehnl): Oh really.

(Segura): So I went back to MCDC and they gave me a full-time job. They hired me. They hired me and then I became the marketing manager. And I continued organizing those events and promoting the events. My resume kind of tells you how much, kind of, was done during that time.

(Kuehnl): I'll make a note when I transcribe this as well. When you were with the Mexicantown Community Development, was there anything that stands out in your memory as like, that was the memory of my time there. This was my favorite part of being there, or the most interesting thing that happened.

(Segura): Yeah. It's very funny. Not funny. Because when I came to the United States, my goal was to improve my English and I was not sure if I was going to be able to stay or I had to go back, but my mom knew that I wanted to experience living here in the United States and the culture of the United States. So, when I told her what I was doing for Mexicantown CDC, she smiled because, she's like, Myrna, you left Mexico and basically now you're getting immersed in your culture again. I think what I remember and it stayed with me is that I learned to appreciate my culture more when I was here than when I was in Mexico. I think, because of the work I was doing for Mexicantown CDC, promoting these events, promoting the culture, promoting our vendors, promoting our performers, and bringing people from outside Southwest

Detroit. We had people coming from the area, but we had a lot of visitors coming to see these events because they wanted to learn about our culture, about the Mexican culture. They probably, some of them, couldn't go to Mexico, so they could come here and experience that. That's one of my really good memories about working for Mexicantown Community Development Corporation is the fact that I learned to appreciate my culture more than I did before. I got to work with my people, from different social levels. I got kind of protective of them, too. I wanted to make sure that they were given the opportunities they needed. We also, with our organization, had to go, to have those events and the opportunities for the vendors to come and sell their merchandise every week to make it permanent, or permanent. That's why we had those two projects, the welcome center and the Mexicantown Mercado. The main goal was to transfer those vendors into those spaces. And I think, basically, that it stayed with me. I also managed an entrepreneurial program. So, we offered workshops for people who wanted to start these business or people who wanted to expand a business. Something that has been very valuable is the fact that we were able to offer those in Spanish and English. I was offering the small business technical assistance in both languages. Many of the people in the area, in coming from other areas, who are immigrants from Mexico or other Hispanic countries, sometimes they don't feel comfortable going to these trainings when they are offered in English, or going out of the area to get the advice from another organization in order to improve their business. They feel more comfortable Spanish. Basically, we designed the program in order to attract those entrepreneurs and offer the tools that they needed to take advantage of the opportunities that are, you know, offered in the United States and many of them are not aware of.

(Kuehnl): Right. I think that's the most interesting thing I was looking at with SDBA and kind of doing a little bit of background research on MCDC is that it's kind of two-fold in that you're supporting local communities. You're supporting, and offering these opportunities that wouldn't be there otherwise. But then you're also going outside and drawing people into the culture, into the neighborhood. So it's kind of this two-pronged approach of bringing people in, but making sure that the people that are here are getting the support they need.

(Segura): Well, you need to offer the support to the businesses and the community in the area. So, one of the programs that I managed with MCDC and that I continue managing with Southwest Detroit Business Association is the façade program. So, you offer, it's façade improvement program. You offer incentives to the property and business owners in order to renovate their storefronts because you want them to look more attractive and you want them to look safe. So, people come in from outside, you want them to continue coming and shopping so that's the reason you do the cultural events. It's not just because you want to offer the entertainment. You bring in those people to the area and then you promote the commercial district. Like, we did the Day of the Dead brochure or the Cinco de Mayo brochure. You have a list of the different events that are happening but the main goal is to also have a list of all the businesses and restaurants so they can go and visit. They can go shop. They can go to the supermarket. They can go to the restaurants and have lunch, have dinner. And they can see that it's safe to come to this area.

(Kuehnl): And then they'll just keep coming back.

(Segura): They will come. They will keep coming back. Yes. There's a lot of negative [pause] messaging going on about Detroit, the whole city. But, I have been here working in this area for 15 years. 15 years, yes. I've never had an issue. I know other people experience different situations but this is a large city, one of the largest. A large city like many other large cities in the United States, so those things happen. So, of course, the city of Detroit was going through some issues where some things could not be addressed in time, like they do in suburban cities. But they have very important things to take care of, so that's why it's very important for nonprofit organizations doing economic and community development to address these issues. And that's what we do when we do the façade program, when we do the graffiti removal, that's part of the business improvement district does. It's a program that was initiated by the Southwest Detroit Business Association. We had a voluntary business improvement district in Mexicantown, too, where the businesses were paying a fee in order to remove graffiti, in order to take care of the trash, in order to have the trash cans removed, the trash bags. All of that creates an impact of security, not just for the residents, but also for the visitors. So it becomes a very active commercial district and it's a message of safety for those visitors and people living here.

(Kuehnl): Right. And I think the perspective of Detroit from people living outside of Detroit is so different from people who actually live here and see it every day. So, I think it's important to have that perspective that you're talking about that, you know, what's happening here. What does this area actually look like? What do we actually offer? As opposed to these really negative stories that you see from these national news or national media.

(Segura): Yes. And things happen. And that's why you have to be able to plan an event with enough time and have everything in place like security to make sure that everything is going to be okay for everybody. But, you know, with the Day of the Dead Ofrendas event we had, we offer tours to the schools. We have like, 20-40 schools, and then they come on their own, too. They bring their students, and they walk. They go to the different stores and churches, to go see the ofrendas, which are the altars dedicated to those who pass away. And then we have the Run of the Dead. And people come, many of the people who come are suburban. People and then residents and they run. It's on ??? Park. It's on the west side of West Vernor. They go to different streets. Woodmire. And then come back. They feel very comfortable. We have to continue doing this. We have to constantly be working about addressing issues. And sometimes it has been difficult for the city to address those issues which are very important. Talking about design, talking about fashion design, my background, that's why I think I like running the façade improvement program. I think I'm good at it because I have that design background, but I also have my cultural background and I'm bilingual so I relate to our business and property owners. They feel very comfortable talking to me because I'm one of them, somehow.

44:46 (Kuehnl): So, what ended up bringing you to Southwest Detroit Business Association from the Mexicantown group?

(Segura): Mexicantown Community Development Corporation had to close its doors in 2008. So that happened in 2008 around March. So, there was an opportunity here with Southwest Detroit Business Association. They were just waiting for the funding to cover my position. I had a couple of interviews. When I was a marketing manager for MCDC and then became the Main Street program director, it was part of the revitalization program with the city of Detroit. It was

the program of the mayor's office. This is a national movement. The National Main Street Center. They have four points of approach. Promotion, which is you promote the area and do events and raise funds for the organization. There's organization. There's economic restructuring. There's the sign, the façade improvements. And then the city of Detroit added the clean and safe element. So, I became the director of that program in 2003, from 2003 to 2007, because later I became the business incubator for the Mexicantown Mercado. So, I went to trainings offered by the National Main Street Center and by the [unintelligible] forum. I really loved the program. When I came to work here... what was the question?

(Kuehnl): Oh, yeah. When you came to work here, and I guess what you first you started off doing while you were here.

(Segura): Okay. When I came here, basically, the people at SDBA knew my work because Mexicantown came out of SDBA.

(Kuehnl): Right, right.

(Segura): They were... SDBA was organizing events in Mexicantown in that area, then that was the reason to create a different organization to focus on that specific area of Southwest Detroit especially because the issue with the Ambassador Bridge. They were buying property on the commercial district with the idea of creating parking lots for their trucks. So, the community didn't want that.

(Kuehnl): Right.

(Segura): So it was necessary that another group went to the east side and took care of those businesses and continued doing the promotion of the district and creating the events and the assistance and support to the businesses in the area. So, when I came here, I came with the background. My background as the director of the main street program for Mexicantown and also as the program manager for the façade improvement program. They were looking for somebody to take over the position here.

(Kuehnl): So, a lot of the same responsibilities or goals that you had kind of just transferred over?

(Segura): Correct.

(Kuehnl): Interesting. I guess, what are some of the accomplishments you can talk about while you've been here, I guess in the last maybe... Because you started here in 2008, right?

(Segura): Correct. November.

48:43 (Kuehnl): So you've been here around 6 or 7 years almost. In that time, what have you seen or what have you done that you would remember, that, you know, these are the things that mattered most to you in that time period?

(Segura): Sure. The façade program is something that I'm very proud of. I love to work with the business and property owners. The grants are offered to the property owners or the business owners who can be the tenants. It could be a façade matching grant up to \$15,000, which means they had to match it. So they had to at least spend \$20,000. We also offer the mini-grants. Those were \$2,000 per address. So you can have a building like the one across the street, State Farm. They have four storefronts, so it's \$2,000 for each storefront, so they got \$8,000 in mini grants. And then we decided to also continue offering mini grants with just having a couple \$10,000, but we offer a minimum per address. We decided to see what the need was for any specific applicant building. So, that... I am very proud of that program. I really think that we are doing a good job and I have worked with different architects and I have been lucky to have created good relationships with the specific architects that also understand the area and everything started with the ONCR, which is the Office of Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization for the city of Detroit. That's the main street program they started in 2002. So, they were offering the matching grants. They selected or recruited a list of, a group of architectural firms that were going to be offering the architectural assistance for these projects. Also, their fees had to be cut, so for small jobs they had to be paid up to a certain amount. For large jobs, they had to be paid up to a certain amount. Even if they were accustomed to charge more working for other clients because this was revitalization work done for this community, they knew that, you know, they probably had to charge less. So, that's where I met a couple of the architectural firms that are doing great work around the city. Like Steven C. Flum. I brought those contacts with me when I came to work for Southwest Detroit Business Association. So, basically, when I was with Mexicantown, we completed, I believe... Let me see. We renovated 11 local storefronts and the public and private investment was around half a million dollars.

(Kuehnl): Wow.

(Segura): Which you know, creates a big impact in that community.

(Kuehnl): Yeah.

(Segura): And then what we have been doing with the façade programs since I started, we have renovated 8 façade storefronts, large projects. And then we did 14 as part of the small façade improvement program. Right now we have 10 projects that are going to start construction soon. So, these projects, the façade improvement program doesn't just create visual impact. It also creates job. It retains jobs in creating businesses. Since I started walking here, 96 temporary jobs have been created. 10 full time, part time jobs have been created. 5 new businesses have been created. 5 businesses have been retained and 12 jobs have been retained. The way that we track these is you probably have a property owner who has a vacant building and he's not able to rent that building. He needs to fix the building, but he needs the support. He needs, not just the financial support, he needs the technical support. We offer a lot of one on one mentoring, technical support with the licensing process, with the permitting process, with getting the contractors for the work to be done, the construction bids. It's a lot going on. We establish a relationship with each one of the applicants from beginning to end. Sometimes it feels too much for them to just do it on their own. Sometimes they also want the financial assistance, but if you leverage the private investment, we had a project which is [unintelligible], they got \$15,000 in matching grants. The total cost of the project was around \$60-70,000. He also renovated the

interior of the building. Now he has a new tenant. She has been there for a long time. So that was the main goal, to be able for him to attract a new tenant which means that place was empty, so you created a new business. And also, that business owner has hired 2 people, and herself, and her husband. So you created jobs.

(Kuehnl): Right. That's interesting.

(Segura): Yes. So that's something, that you have somehow worked it out. You have to talk about it. You have to track all of the outcomes and the outputs of the projects that you have in order to demonstrate the impact, the economic impact, that is bringing into the community and into the city of Detroit. And, basically, that's what we had to do with the funders, you know. But I love to do that. I love to be able to help these businesses to stay in business. And also the property owners to get new tenants and the business owners to attract new employees or to retain their employees because the way your business looks has to do with the people you are going to attract into your store.

56:24 (Kuehnl): That's, I think that's really fascinating. I think you're talking about the human component behind it. I think people look at grant money and you just see the money and you see it going somewhere. But you don't, there's all these underlying issues of how it's spent, and what it means, and who's actually getting the money and where that's going...

(Segura): Yeah. Right now, we have this program that we are running this year for the façade program. We decided that we wanted to report not just the before and after photos, we wanted to talk to the applicants because it has been very emotional for them. You go and they talk to you about, I needed this for so long but I didn't know who could help me or I didn't want to ask for help and I don't know how to do it. I'm so grateful that you're doing this for us. And also, again, the fact that I am able to communicate in Spanish with those applicants that even when they speak English, it could be a little English, they feel more comfortable speaking Spanish. I'm happy and proud of helping everybody, but somehow I've become a little... Nationalist? Is that correct? Can you say that? No. Is that appropriate no?

(Kuehnl): In the sense that you feel kind of protective toward the Spanish speaking population? Yeah.

(Segura): Yeah. Correct. I feel like I'm needed here. I'm not saying I'm the only person that can do this work. But I'm needed here because of my cultural background and because I'm bilingual. I can understand how the immigrants feel. Not just Mexicans, the Hispanics, but also the people from the Middle East because we have many them here, you know. They have businesses. So just the fact that they come from another country, and, you know, they started a life here or they came here as children or as adults and now they are trying to adapt to this culture. I'm doing the same.

(Kuehnl): Yeah.

(Segura): So I know how to communicate them and establish that relationship. So that makes me very happy.

(Kuehnl): Yeah. I think it's important to have that cultural mediator and then also, you know, having your experience, other people that come in and want... They may want to help various neighborhoods or various people, but if they don't know how to communicate or if they don't know how to empathize with the situation, then it's not going to be as good of a result.

(Segura): Correct.

(Kuehnl): Yeah.

(Segura): Yeah. So I think that's one of the skills that I have that I'm able to use in my work every day. Something that has also created a big impact and that has... It has... Not just created a big impact, you know, talking about the work we do as a nonprofit in this commercial district, but for me as a person is offering this small business technical assistance. Almost every day, people come. People come, and they call, and they e-mail us. And we have a lot of Spanish speaking people coming and asking, what do I need to do to start a business? What do I need to do to get a loan? I need to get this permit and I don't know how to do it. I need this license but it has been very difficult. So, just making sure that we have the tools, that we offer the tools, that we collaborate with other institutions that also do business development and that offer the technical assistance. We offer referral services. Just to make sure that we are here and offer those tools to the people coming to us has created a big difference, especially for the Spanish speaking entrepreneurs and business owners. Who, again, it's kind of difficult for them sometimes to go and try to start a process with the city just because they may feel they cannot communicate what they need. They have to bring somebody to translate what they need. They need to explain to that specific person they need to talk to. And sometimes it's also the fact that... Because of how, what the city was going through, is the lack of capacity that they have to offer the support to these specific groups. But we offer the assistance in English and Spanish. I know I am talking a lot about those Spanish speaking, Hispanic people, and I guess you can tell that probably that's what I'm proud of, more proud of, being able to help my people and the people in the city of Detroit.

(Kuehnl): Right. Well, I think you relate to that more, probably, having come here and needing to learn English. And then, you know, your own experience. I think that makes sense that you know that, that you know that situation probably a little bit better than other people do. So, I find that really interesting. When you first arrived... We'll kind of talk bigger picture here. When you first arrived to now, what do you see having changed in Southwest Detroit? Whether it's specifically in Mexicantown, or whether it's the city of Detroit as a whole, what were your experiences when you first arrived and do you see, kind of, progress or development over the time you've been here?