NF: My name is Natalia Fernández, and I am Oregon State University’s Oregon Multicultural librarian. Today’s date is January 30th, 2015, and we are conducting an oral history interview as part of the IRCO Asian Family Center oral history project. So let’s get started. If you could please state your name and spell it out loud.

RC: Thank you, Natalia. My name is Ronault Latang Sayang Catalani. Last name is spelled C-A-T-A-L-A-N-I. And my personal name is spelled R-O-N-A-L-T. And then I have two middle initials, L and S.

NF: And those middle initials...

RC: They stand for Latang Sayang.

NF: Okay, does that have any particular being translated to English?

RC: Yes. Not a good way to translate it directly, but it, it is—it would be like heart song, heartbeat. And it really means compassion and caring.

NF: And what is your birthdate and your birthplace?

RC: 15 December 1953. Our family was living in the Dutch East Indies at that time, but we were on holiday in the Netherlands, so my birthplace--by accident, by lucky accident--was Den Haag, the parliamentary capital of the Netherlands.

NF: And with which ethnic or cultural backgrounds do you identify?
RC: Oh, lots. You know, in our country, we have 700 living languages, right, down from 1200 two decades ago. But Indonesia is a kind of intersection of many, many cultures, so race and ethnicity are complicated. We are all mestizos, you know. In our case we’re called Indos, so we are mixed blood. But primarily, on my abuelo, on my father’s father’s side, on my grandpa’s side, we are Catalán--Barcelona, Catalán. And on my mother’s side, we are what was called [?], you know, or Earth People from Sulawesi. So, they ethnic group there is Manado, from the island of Sulawesi, the nationality would now be Indonesia, but there wasn’t a nation called Indonesia at the time I was born.

NF: Great. And, when and where were your parents born?

RC: My father, our father, 1927 in la casa in the island of Sulawesi--was then called Celebes, also in what is now the nation of Indonesia. And my mother in Manado, same island, Sulawesi--the time she was born it was called Celebes; 1931 for our mother.

NF: And where did you grow up?

RC: Eh, that’s complicated. In Indonesia, of course. We went through, and when I was young at the time of real political instability, like every nation like you see in Arab countries now. So, it was a time of severe civil strife, murderous civil strife. And so, first in Indonesia we left, we were expelled, and lived in the Netherlands for six more years, where I started school. And then we moved to the United States in 1966. And then 1972, six years later, I won the lottery to be drafted into the American army. It is the first time our family’s every won anything, we are old-school, long-time losers. My parents, our father, thought that it would be a very bad idea to go back to the chaos we had just left in southeast Asia, so I went to live with my grandpa, my mother’s mother--my mother’s father in the Netherlands again until Mr. Nixon became president. He called off the draft, called off this—he defunded the selective service administration and they just forgot about me, which made it safe for me to come back to the United States. And, I went to university then.

NF: And when your family moved here in 1966, where did you move? Here to Oregon?

RC: To Salem, Oregon, yes.

NF: How did you and your family choose Salem?
RC: Good question. Yeah, Salem is not a pretty place to be, you know, in the 1960s. Here’s how it worked in those days under different immigration law regime: In those days, the policy of the United States was to move people all over the place, that is, not to create pockets of ethnicities or ethno-cultural groups or races. So, immigrants, refugees—we were refugees—were sponsored by churches. So, through the Catholic, Catholic system, or through the Lutheran system or Presbyterian institutions, sponsor churches were found for families. And so, there was a Presbyterian church in Salem, Oregon—very, very kind uncles and aunties who took care of us and settled us there, got us an apartment, got my father a lovely 1953 Chevy Bellaire, two-tone, and got him a job at a woolen mill. So we were very grateful to these folks. They loved my parents and mother like a grandma would, you know, a daughter, and taught us everything we needed to know.

NF: So the support system was the church community?

RC: The church, yes.

NF: You didn’t seek out other organizations? It sounded like you didn’t need other organizations, the church community took care of your needs?

RC: Well, we did need more, of course. And I don’t want to minimize in any way or show any lack of respect for these folks because we thought of them as our grandparents, and I love them still to this day and cried like a baby when they passed away. But, you know, folks in Salem don’t know a lot about the world outside of Salem, and we are from quite a cosmopolitan background. In Indonesia, you have to be fluent in several languages to get by—you have to be able to work with Muslims, and Buddhists, and Hindus, and Christians, and Communists, and for us, it’s just normal. So we’re used to a higher level, you know, I guess, of language and ethno-cultural complexity than Salem. So, for many reasons it was not quite enough for us to be in that community. And, we sought out other refugees from our parts of the world. And, our father then sponsored my mother’s sisters to come join us. So then we had, my mom had her sisters, and as you know, this is really important to traditional people for women to have their sisters and their moms around. And so, it created a safe and more secure community for our mom to raise her children. We had our cousins, thirteen in all. So, we had our own tribe soon enough. Also, we made friends real rapidly with Mexican kids up the street and down the street. And, I don’t want to make it sound like there was a lot of us, there wasn’t. There was always six, eight, ten brown boys and girls in the school, and it was our family or the Mexican families we became familia with.

NF: And how old were you when you moved to Salem?

RC: Twelve.
NF: You were twelve, and so you went middle school and high school in Salem?

RC: Yeah. It was called junior high in those days and then senior high.

NF: So then, you were drafted and you moved and then when you came back, your family was still in Salem, Oregon, so you moved back to Salem?

RC: Yes, yes.

NF: And then you mentioned you went to college.

RC: Yes.

NF: So how did you choose your college? You wanted to stay in Oregon?

RC: Oh, I didn’t choose. You know, my older brother’s the first ever, in history, to graduate from high school. You know, in the Dutch Colony apartheid system of South Africa or Indonesia--Indonesia was a Dutch colony too. In the apartheid regime, you get to go to different levels of education depending on your race. So, if you are [?], if you are native, third grade, fifth grade, roughly, in equivalence to American education. If you are mixed blood like we are, maybe you would get to go to eighth grade or, yeah, eighth grade, end of middle school unless you were really an excellent student, then you could go farther. So, my older brother was the first and I was the second ever to finish regular, public high school.

You know, public high school means you all start off at the same place with a diploma, and you get set free in the mainstream and you compete for work--we were the first to do this. And so, I was the first to go to university ever, anywhere. And so, I knew nothing about universities, and I wouldn’t have known and wouldn’t have known how to begin even, but I was an athlete in middle school or junior high and high school, international competition. And so, I was picked up on an athletic scholarship by University of Oregon. Actually, also offered one by OSU, but the U of O one had some money attached as well as books and tuition, so I went there. And it was wonderful, but, you know, I did not graduate from high school, I didn’t finish. I didn’t have enough math credits, I didn’t have enough health credits, and interestingly I didn’t have enough physical education credits, although, my life was around being a jock. We didn’t get P.E. credits for being in sports junior high, or junior or senior or varsity sports. So had it not been for athletics, I would not have gone further. In fact, our high school counsellor--and this really underscores a lot of the reason why I’m involved at IRCO or Asian Family Center or Africa House. Without a kind of a broader context for
us to relate to in the mainstream or for the mainstream to relate to us, my high school counsellor thought I was Mexican. And, I was too polite to correct her, and she’s a nice woman, and it’s an elderly woman, and, you know, we have great respect for aunties, and so I would never contradict her, I would just smile and nod. But, whenever I met her, which is once a year, she would greet me in Spanish and start talking about her vacations in Acapulco, which is very popular at the time, resort destination in Mexico. And, you know, I would smile and nod. But she sent me to what was then called Salem Tech to prepare for the next school year to learn how to repair cars. And you know, I’m not angry about this or anything, she recognized in me that I’m able to concentrate, I’m disciplined, polite, so maybe a life under a hood of a Chevy or a Ford would be good for me. And, you know, and maybe she’s right when I look back on it, I mean, I probably should have done that, it would have been an easier, simpler life to come home from work after being at the garage. But I didn’t go to Salem Tech, you know. I hid out in the Netherlands until the draft was dismantled and then came back to university.

NF: And were your parents very supportive, they wanted you to continue your education? Was that something that they hoped for you?

RC: Oh yes, our father’s a learned man and so is my mother’s oldest brother. That’s what we call them traditionally, they’re not school trained, but they are intellectuals. And they are both what, in our communities are called Hakim, which means justice. That is, if you have a family fight or a business fight, a neighborhood brawl, you get Hakim from both sides of the dispute to seek out the elders from both sides of the dispute to figure out what’s fair so we can live together. It’s not an adversarial problem solving thing where you sue each other like in America, but it’s a conciliatory problem solving platform in most traditional cultures. So, our father always read, and the first, one of the first things he did was bought encyclopedias from a guy knocking on the door. And, we had a 36 set of Encyclopedia Americana and a 36 volume set of Our Wonderful World. And I made it a goal of mine to read each, all of our wonderful world’s 18 volumes--they weighed about six pounds each--and I did. So I know a lot about a lot of things, useless factoids. But, we come from a family of smart people. But we just don’t know anything about mainstream institutions, education being one of them.

NF: So what was your experience like at the University of Oregon, and what did you want to study?

RC: I didn’t know. Different from our children now or our grandchildren where we’re asking them all the time, “what do you like?” Ah, if you like this, then you have a math brain, let’s go do that. Or if you like this, you have a writing brain, let’s go read books, let’s go draw pictures. So, our parents, of course, traditional parents, probably same as
yours, never asked kids, “what do you want to do, you know, what do you like?” That just wasn’t in the parenting. So I went to university, I didn’t even know why I’m there. I do know I have practice in the morning and in the evening, we have training table at five, we have trips to all over the country, and you know, I was an international competitor. Also, that’s I was thinking about, but I had no idea what you do at university.

[00:15:08]

Luckily, there were some uncles, some professors, right--we call them uncles--who then take care of you and say, “hey, come here, you look like you’re smart, you look like you’re lost.” And, I have a great debt, humble debt of gratitude to two professors who saw in me something and I became their protégé. And I stress this because that’s our work, really, at Immigrant Refugee Communities of Oregon, at IRCO--both Africa House and Asian Family Center--it’s to be those uncles that look at kids at say and connect them--you know, “I recognize your intelligence or I recognize your kindness or I recognize your creativity, let me hook you up.” Otherwise, we’re never going to find our way into the mainstream. Like, my parents wouldn’t know how. When we grow up, when the phone rang, we dashed to it—my older brother and me. Not only because it might be school and we’re in trouble, but because we are the mediators between our parents who work really hard, really long and with really bad people, our parents who come home exhausted and anxious. So we mediate that world for them in every way we can by answering phones, by not embarrassing the person on the other end of the phone with their difficult accents. You know, when you pull up to the gasoline station one of us kids will order it, you know, to show respect to our dad, you know, but also because we don’t want the gas station guy to make fun of our father’s speaking because to us, he’s this heroic gentlemen, right, that generation of men, like your father or your grandpa, got your family out of some really deep shit, you know. And, kept everybody together and kept everyone moving and worked 20 hours a day to make money so moms could be relaxed and be able to properly love and nurture their children. You know, so we love them a lot.

NF: So then, at the U of O, these professors, what were they, um, professors of?

RC: Yeah, one is Professor Goswami, he’s Indian, of course, Gujarati, and he is a physicist. And this—I’m a guy who didn’t have enough math credits to finish high school, but this man made sense to me. And he is recently in a Hollywood feature, feature movie called What the Blank Blank Blank. And, physicists are a lot like shamans, you know, they’re a lot like priests. It’s a very close place--quantum mechanics and mystical religions are actually the same thing. So, he captured my attention. I would still pay money to go listen to his lectures today, he was just brilliant. That’s on the science-y side. On the other side, I met a professor named James Chowning Davies
who’s an international scholar on human migrations and political revolution. And Professor Davies, who then became my next younger brother’s mentor, six years younger than me, right, because otherwise how would know if we don’t have family members to show you how to sort things out. He was my mentor. He—a beautiful gentlemen, but he only knew walking from his house in Skinners butte, Spencers Butte, in Eugene to his office and from his office to the lecture hall. He was encyclopedic brain, a very kind uncle, but he didn’t really leave Eugene. So, I did his field work for him in the Netherlands and Greece and Turkey when I was undergraduate—and, Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia. When I was a graduate student in Iran, India, and Thailand. Good for him, good for me. So…

NF: These were fellowships and grants?

RC: Yeah. Yeah. So I did most of my work outside of the country, and I’m good at this, right. I know how to maneuver. I’m ethnically ambiguous, you know. Where we grew up, you learn languages really quickly because that’s how you show respect and stay alive. And so, I did his work, and he took care of me, and it worked out just very well.

NF: So what did you, what did you major in?

RC: Well I had to major in more than one because I just love this. There’s this universe of things to learn, and I didn’t start learning until later. And, this again gets into my work at present, both as a community lawyer and as a board member and counsel for IRCO and alike. And I work for the city. Is that, our children are developmentally delayed. You can’t go through traumatic dislocation, traumatic discontinuities, and just pick up where you left off. Our children are behind, and it takes three, four, eight year to catch up and get over all of that, especially refugees who leave under murderous circumstances. So, it wasn’t until I was in my 20s that I started to be able to think clearly, articulate well, and study and be—I never spoke up in class ever in Salem. I mean, I think I was invisible, I think, you know, if you look at the yearbook, I probably wouldn’t be there. You know, I had no place. Now, of course as an athlete, I was. But that’s physical and you’d say nothing, and it’s very clear as an athlete what you need to do, especially in a combat sport. There’s you and your adversary, that’s it, and whoever is the last to quit, the last to become exhausted, wins, period—that’s how that works. We are raised on combat sports where we grow up, so shifting from Jujutsu or boxing to Greco-Roman or international freestyle wrestling was easy for me. But, in university, I started to, you know, kind of wake up and blossom. That went well. So, suddenly everything—to answer your question about majors—was so interesting to me. So I did a major in political science. Psychology was so interesting to me and I was going to become a therapist, so I have a major there. But, philosophy is so interesting to me
because it’s words, it’s concepts, it’s underlying reasons for reasons. So, I finished those three majors, as well as a kajillion air miles.

NF: And then, right after your bachelor’s degree, did you do your graduate work...

RC: Yes.

NF: …or was there time between?

RC: No, I stuck with Dr. Davies.

NF: Wonderful. And so, what was your graduate work in?


NF: And what year did you finish graduate school?

RC: Um, well, I didn’t finish because I made pregnant the mother of our children. It was 1979. Yes.

NF: Did you meet your wife in Eugene?

RC: Yes, I met her in Eugene. I was, in fact, I was working on my psychology degree. So we had to do practicum, and I loved children, so I was a teacher in University of Oregon Child Care and Development Center. And, it was important because they have a lot of international students there, and I was the only non-Anglo there, so I could explain to teachers. They had a box where it would be a sand box, but they put rice in it. And you know, everywhere rice is sacred beside it being food. You know, rice is a staple, I mean, it’s as close to God as you can come, you know. And, and they had rice for kids to play in. And so, for international students, whether they’re Arabs or Persians or Africans or Latinos or Asians, playing in rice was not right, right. So, things like that as well other matters of how children are raised and disciplined and expected was something I could I add to the curriculum, add to the score, the competence of the teaching crew there. Yeah, so, and yeah, so I did those things. And then, when I was teacher then the, a mother, with—a single mother—with a four year old boy was one of my students, and I fell in love with her. And, I was working for Dr. Davies in India at the time, and she came over. And so, we conceived our daughter, [?], in Delhi, when I was at Delhi University. And she, interestingly, has women and children’s HIV clinics and stuff in India too. So we’ve made a complete loop from where she’s conceived, you know, to her work in India. We are a very lucky family.
NF: Wonderful. So then, you, as a family, you were in Eugene, how did you decide where to go to next? Was it very clear that you wanted to remain in Oregon?

RC: Yes.

NF: Or, did you move up to Portland? What happened after that?

RC: No, I have a wife now, pregnant with a baby on the way, so finishing school was, sort of, went to the back burner. And, you know, every university town there really is no work. And I couldn’t make sandwiches or, you know, that kind of money is not enough for family. And she was bringing a four year old, so we’d immediately be a family of four. So, I found a friend of mine working in the children services division, and this was then Oregon Department of Human Resources, and she’s the affirmative action director there. And I said, “Oh my god, Vicky, I need work.” And, again, it’s by connections to people close to your ethnic or racial groups that we know each other from school or from social situations. She got me a job as a social worker in Coos Bay, Oregon, and I immediately became the brown boy in the office, which meant all the Mexicanos and the Native Americans and Fijians and Japanese families were sent to see me to solve their problems. And, it was very interesting because my take on how to do this work was very scary, too mainstream, protocol…

NF: Could you give an example of that?

RC: Sure. Yeah. And it’s still my work today. We believe that we folks, especially traditional people, really already know how to do things, we know already how to do things. And you do it just like your mom did it, like your grandma did, and like her grandma did. And, community has a part in solving problems. So, what’s now called “strengths based counselling” or “strengths based therapy or parenting,” is what I started doing there. So, for example, there’re lots of Fiji Island people there. When the Fiji mom lost her temper and clobbered her kid, I suggested we don’t take the child into foster care away from the family, no, but we bring the entire family in, and all those aunties and grandmas put pressure on that mom because we know we’re not cruel to our children, that is not allowed. She was feeling lonely, she, her husband was not good to her, it was his family not her family, so she didn’t have a support system of ladies to support her politically as well socially and help her with way too many kids, and she lost it. So, we expect the family to fix this problem, I’m expecting you all, you know, care for her so she can care for them. You don’t want the state involved with your kids, you don’t want a judge deciding what’s best, you don’t want your baby boy and girl in a white household across town, and it’s gonna take you six months to get your two kids back, at best, if you get a great lawyer. That system is not healthy, it’s not happy, it
harms everyone, so you all need to be responsible for solving the problem. What’s more, if you put that, those two children in grandma’s house, it costs nothing. If you put those children in foster care, it costs a lot. And, in the end, the research is already there how badly children are harmed by the instability, insecurity being cared for in foster care, it’s not right. So, we were doing this with Native American families, with Japanese, with Mexicanos because mostly—there are a few psychos out there who hurt kids and they need to go to prison—but mostly, you’re having a social problem, you’re having a familial problem, not a personal guilt problem, not a criminal problem. So the systems that are set up to criminalize people from this behavior were completely inappropriate, ineffective, and way too expensive. So, when I was doing this, people from the district offices and from the state offices would come and watch, in part, to do risk management with me because they’re afraid, you know, about this, but also because the better educated folks are recognizing the efficiency of what we’re doing.

NF: So your coworkers, administration, they were supportive and they saw the results, the good results?

RC: Yeah, our branch manager was, right. And that was very, very lucky for me because it isn’t always so. These are risk-adverse agencies. But, Pat [?]--Pat [?], later, we lived in the same neighborhood in Salem again when our kids were going to elementary school. His daughter, my daughter later became best friends in high school, but he supported my thinking in how to do this. And since he had no skills in these communities—access, trust—but I did, he simply had to take my word for it, I could have been making this stuff up. But, I think, to the credit of institutions like this one, child care institutions, they’re culturally curious, and they’re also getting that the system’s not really working, the system’s expensive and it hurts people forever.

[00:30:10]

So he was willing to trust me, but he had to bring in his regional and state administrators, you know, to cover him. So, we became a little laboratory. And this works out later in the history of work with communities because that’s what we’ve been doing. Now, it’s not fully developed into culturally specific services, right, this is a service delivery model that allows, that allows the county—Multnomah County or Marion County, state of Oregon—to give these huge grants, multiyear grants, to Asian family Center or to Africa House or to Latino Network Programa Hispano and alike, and to say to them, okay we trust you know how to do this, we already know we can’t, we can’t even do it with white folks, it’s a mess. You seem to be able to do this much cheaper, much more efficiently, and with great compassion and for long-term outcomes, you just take the money and go take care of it. So, I was a part of that and the development of the, of the policies and practice in Oregon history.
NF: So then after Coos, it sounded like you moved, you and your family moved to Salem for a time. And then, this was in the early 80s, correct?

RC: Yes, this job, I couldn’t continue being a case worker. You know, the distance between what I wanted to do with families in crisis and my power to do it was too great, right. It’s a very difficult job being a case worker—many, many young people coming out of universities wanting to be helpers are just destroyed by this, are just crushed by this, are made bitter by this, and I could see that right away. And, so I went to law school in Salem again so that our parents and my brothers and their wives or girlfriends could help care for our children ‘cuz then I had more kids. So we used the traditional family style, you know. Where our generation can work hard, it’s what we do, but our elder generation is really good at parenting, so why don’t they stay home, love these kids properly and when we would go to work and make money. So I did, I had to go to law school. I had three part time jobs, and, you know, just like my pop, you know. If I could cut my work, I sleep down to four hours, that’s how we model what men do, right. Men are heavy lifters, it’s what we do. And if we can get our wives’ respect for that, you know, and our children’s love then we’re done, we go back and do it again tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. So that’s what we did, it took me three more years to get a doctorate in law. And then another couple more years to get a postdoc in community lawyering, which is basically the model I’ve just explained. People know how to solve their own problems, they really do, especially traditional people. We’ve always been solving our own problems, we never had government’s help, we never had Asian Family Center or Africa House, you know. We took care of it within our family systems, and we’ve done a pretty good job. So, community lawyering is the same concept where we really know how to do this. And, in a community, you have all the skills you need. On a Sunday dinner table, you have someone who can work on your Toyota, someone who can working on your teeth, someone who can talk to God for you, someone who can talk to your enemy, someone who can grow crops, someone who can cook like a wizard, right. And we all have these skills, and some people get paid more or paid less, are educated more or less, but each of those skills are really essential to a healthy, happy community or family. That’s the model we have then undertaken for community development.

NF: And your postdoc was in Salem, that community lawyering?

RC: No, at Howard University in D.C., a historic African American institution with some of the grandest statesmen and jurists in American were schooled at Howard. It’s wonderful. Yeah.

NF: So then after your postdoc, you came back to Oregon and you and your family remained in Salem for a bit or did you move?
RC: Yeah. During the postdoc time, I was given a stipend for practicum to start developing community law practice. And so, we did that in Salem, quickly organized Cambodians, Vietnamese, Hmong, Yumen communities. And then we took the model to Portland because, at the time, Portland was overwhelmed, at least Portlanders felt they were overwhelmed. Nowadays folks are overwhelmed by Spanish speakers, back then they were overwhelmed by southeast Asians—it was only 25,000. It’s only 25,000 southeast Asians showed up here from four sending countries. And so, these are folks, then, in the same situation we were in. Complete communities, including everything from priests, politicians, poets, prostitutes, moved, like your family from Cuba, over here. So, everything’s there already, they’re just missing the real estate that used to be underneath their feet. We know that America is very erosive of all those skills and values and talents and abilities—in fact, destructive of traditional cultures. So the caring community systems we have set up with IRCO, among others, is ways of, sort of, easing that transition, giving folks lots of time and lots of support for settling—getting them confident again as parents, reassuring them that you really know what to do, you really do. Just take a deep breath, you know, we’re gonna go through this together, you’re gonna go through it together with all these other folks. Some will be Africans and some will be Arabs and some will Latinos and so, but, you know, we’re all in this together, and we’re gonna have fun. And so, that was my work then coming up here. Things needed to be changed in Oregon statutes; we took care of that right away. Things need to be changed in administrative rules; we took care of those things right away. And, communities were given—I provide technical expertise as a lawyer. I’m not a leader, you already know what to do, you tell me what your folks need, and I’ll find a way to fashion it and find a process that will get us through this. And that process is democracy, and you’re really gonna dig this, you know. You can actually make safe forever the health and wealth of your children by managing that school, that’s your school—you need to be down there, telling teachers what you expect, that you’re there to help them, you know, that you’re kids are disciplined. You know, for us, it’s yes teacher, no teacher, we’re there to get educated. That’s your police precinct—you need to help those police officers, they don’t know. They don’t know about Islam, they don’t know about Asians, they don’t know about Latinos, we need to help them be better police officers. You need to own it. That’s democracy, we love this stuff. We’re there to help them; they’re here to help us. So that’s the model of self-sufficiency and integration that we represent at IRCO, at Asian Family Center, Africa House, and that’s the model of immigrant integration that I manage at city hall.

NF: So when you moved to Portland, how did you connect with IRCO and Africa House and Asian Family Center? Did they invite you? Did you reach out to the organization? Can you talk a little bit about how that relationship began?
RC: Yes. Well, they weren’t here; that is, those brick and mortar institutions. IRCO now is at 15 million dollars a year. I mean, we are a big flag ship, and we’re a national model in all the ways I’ve just described of actually empowering, engaging, and educating our communities. Not to look needy, not to be pitiful, but, you know, we all come from dignified, ancient, and elegant cultures that needs to be a part of the American blend—not us as miserable minorities, not at all. So these institutions weren’t there then. We worked—our firm, Northwest Communities Council, works with mutual assistance associations. A mutual assistance association can be a Catholic church, you know, it can be Oregon Bhutanese Community Organization, it can be Somalia American Community of Oregon; these are elder aunties and big uncles in our communities who just take charge. They don’t get paid for this, it’s their duty—they may be educated, they just may be dutiful families, right, they’re responsible people, they take charge and they create an organization and off they go. They’re the ones who take folks to the emergency room on weekends and mediate the problems with police, with teachers, with doctors, and so on.

So, that’s our law firm connected up with mutual assistance associations, mostly from refugee communities—Cubanos, southeast Asians, of course, back in those days Romanians, people from former Soviet Union. And we hooked up with the elder uncles and big aunties and civic activists, and they told me what they needed, and we put that together. And, if it’s important enough to you all, you will raise the money to pay me, and we’re gonna do this together. These are all community cases, we call them impact cases. Every immigrant community, whether is Gujaratis who work at Intel and are making half a million dollars a year or Mexicanos who have a third or fifth grade country education, they have the same cultural conflicts—teenagers and parents, parents and schools, families and cops, government rubs of all kinds. So, MAA’s, on a sliding scale of course of what they could afford, would pay me to fashion a remedy for this family’s problem. But, actually this family’s problem represents a thousand families’ problems—we all have this problem, let’s throw in together a chunk of change, and we’re gonna take on whoever, we’re gonna go out to the court of appeals, we go to the supreme court. We’re going to set the mainstream straight about what the rules of engagement and what the wealth that we’re gonna blend will be from here forward. We’re not going to become, you know, politically submissive. That African American-white model, or the white folks and the American Indian model, no. We tried it already, didn’t work well; we’re not going to do that. So that’s the law practice I did. And, in that law practice, a number of mutual assistance associations got together and created and umbrella group called Southeast Asian Refugee Federation—SURF. And SURF said, “Oh, well of us together need to create an organization that will integrate our folks through jobs, through civic engagement, through education, through sports, and all that into the life of the mainstream,” and that’s how IRCO was started. At the time, there
was a publicly funded, sort of, welfare agency called Indo-Chinese Cultural and Service Center, got some state funds to do employment training and alike. So we joined together that state agency with SURF and we created IRCO. And IRCO has grown every year about two million dollars a year in the last decade.

NF: So you were a part of that initial development?

RC: Yeah, I was the attorney then for the SURF side not for the state side but for the SURF side, and put together a board of directors then that was the MAAs directing the service delivering—developing it, designing it, and then helping to deliver an effective and efficient model.

NF: And so what years were these? How long did this process take?

RC: Um it was 1980, 86, I believe, when IRCO really started. Now, IRCO will say they started in ’75 or ’78, but that may be SURF or it may be Indo-Chinese Cultural and Service Center, you know, the sort of parent organizations that combined formally into this brand new 501c3 IRCO. And, back then was called Immigrant and Refugee Center of Oregon—International Refugee Center of Oregon, same acronym. International Refugee Center of Oregon then changed into Immigrant and Refugee Community of Oregon. But yeah, so I was, I’ve been amazingly luckily. You know, sometimes when I think back about revolution and expulsion and how badly we were treated in the Netherlands ’cuz we were not welcome, you know; 500,000 colored people suddenly showed up in the Netherlands, and they were not so happy about this, right. After 400 years of imperialism and looking down on us, suddenly, here we are. And so, they didn’t want us to stay, and they treated us very badly and moved us out without properly giving us all the benefits of citizenship. And then we came to Salem, Oregon, for heaven’s sake, which was really unready for anything, so bad. So, it seems like misfortune, but it’s not. You know, I’ve been able to be at just the right places at just the right times, which allows me to serve in this very efficient, and I hope effective way, the families we really, really care for.

[00:45:05]

NF: So then, you started out as the attorney for one of the organizations that then combined to become IRCO. And, what other roles within the organization have you held?

RC: Just about every, you know. So, I’ve done contract work to do the, sort of, original—back then, we called it public participation, but—civic engagement work, establishing a sense of place for newcomers that this is your place. You know, we now need to secure this neighborhood; we now need to calm down landlords. Because if,
you know in traditional feelings, if the mom is anxious about raising her kids, you will not have peace in that home, you have to settle the ladies down. So landlords have been a problem. So that would become an important focus place for IRCO or Asian Family Center to try to find some way to make landlords less brutal than they would be if you didn’t have a lawyer glaring at them, reminding them what the rules of the game are, and then educating our tenants about what Oregon landlord tenant law is. I mean, you can’t treat me this way. You can’t have wind blowing underneath the door in the winter time, you can’t have mold climbing across the carpet and up the wall. You know, our folks don’t know this. So, I’ve had a board position, I’ve had contract positions where I’m doing legal education, I’m doing civic engagement. I’m back on the board again now. I use IRCO programs to partner with city service providers like cops, parks and rec, housing, transportation, you know, sidewalks, streetlamps. So we partner IRCO programs, mutual assistance association elders and activists and city staff. And then, together--like the early stuff I described--together we’re going to figure out what the problem is, what you bring to the solution. In our communities we have social culture, social capital, cultural capital. In the mainstreams we have material capital, we have political capital, we have very valuable city services that aren’t getting to our communities. When we combine these things and we, together, design, develop, and then deliver a very effective city service, everybody’s happy. City workers have never worked with Latinos before, never worked Somalis or Bhutanese or Burmese or [?], you name it. And you know how it is with us folks—we take you home, we feed you, we put the baby on your lap, you know, we tend to be more emotional, more fun. And that’s different from white residents who are quite used to taking services for granted. We get a sidewalk, we have a party. We get police protection in these god-awful, grim apartment complex blocks, we love those cops—ah, come in, I’ve made you some soup—you know. And we want to introduce you to these uncles, to these aunties, right. Together, then, we deliver a very valuable city service—recreation services, parks we’re building together because we love that stuff. On the city side, they’re, now they’re learning how to work with us and enjoying our company. And on our side, we are committing to the city of Portland, to this neighborhood, this block, these politicians, these cops, right, these transportation workers. And then, people are getting a sense of place, their place. And they want to own it and make it theirs, and they’re not gonna be renters, they’re not gonna be refugees, no, they’re gonna be Portlanders.

NF: So you’re currently a board a member of the Asian Family Center, do you hold other roles currently within the organization? What are the other ones?

RC: Yes. Yeah, I’m also a board member at the parent organization, IRCO, right. So, I can bring those concerns in for our—Asian Family Center doesn’t just serve Asians. It serves Russian speakers, Islanders, and Africans--mostly east Africans--and Asians of course, too, and, not that many Latinos, but yeah, certainly some. So I--because I’m kind of a street-level problem solver, I bring those things to the board. Asian Family Center is
a service provider; the IRCO board is about board governance, about direction of the agency, about fundraising, and what kind of funds to raise, or what kind of political future, future coalitions and connections we need with other communities with governments. So, I’m able to bring that, sort of, street-level urgency to policy and political people. So, that’s sort of, that’s my role. And, since I have a 30-year stake in IRCO, I take it really kind of seriously. So, at present, I’m on the board, yeah. But also, I’m the partnership builder between IRCO programs and city service bureaus.

NF: So you’re the liaison between the community and the organization to make sure that the community’s needs are heard and acted upon?

RC: Yes. And, I facilitate the partnerships, right. Get people together, we have huge dinners, we laugh too much, we eat too much, and then when we talk together about what’s up in our neighborhoods, and what have you got that can help us alleviate this. Many neighborhoods, for example, are in east, east, east Portland; there are no grocery stores. You want to go to a grocery store it takes you half a day to bus there. And you gotta take all your kids because you have to carry those stupid plastic bags to drag back groceries. And grandma can do that on the weekends, right, because we don’t like it when they do it at night because there’s no streetlamps, there’s no sidewalks. So, the city of Portland has a Bureau of Environmental Services, they have small garden grants--$10,000 grants. We will go find a plot of grass somewhere, and then our elders can go out and grow healthy, happy vegetables. We will teach them how to grow it organically, and our ridiculously entrepreneurial women will go sell them to downtown restaurants, to farmers’ markets as organic vegetables and exotic vegetables. So, we’re getting all kinds of things as well as environmental stewardship. It’s not just that we’re tearing up a church parking lot to do a garden so that the water gets filtered when it gets down to the water shed, but we’re also getting these elders out of their blues. They need to be out of their apartments, they need to be together, laughing, growing things; they’re really good at this. We need to get our women making money because there’s, they don’t have skills to compete. And, we need food—healthy, happy food that people are familiar with and know how to cook. So we’re taking care of all kinds of things, the city gets to take credit for all that. Good ‘cuz [?], God loves you, and we get the goodies here, we get the clean water. So, these are partnerships where we sit together, you tell me what you need out of this, I’ll tell you what I need out of this, and we’re going to do.

NF: So, thinking about your experiences—you and your family’s experiences when you first moved here, and now, several decades later, the experiences that current immigrants and refugees are facing, do you see that the needs are the same? Have they changed? Can you talk a little bit about that?
RC: The needs are the same. Yeah, the needs are the same. In fact, in our work, in our community work here, we have been through, maybe, four waves now of refugees from different continents. And, of course, they’re very different, and each group is profoundly beautiful in their own way, but the collision of traditional cultures in a highly urbanized, abbreviated, accelerated American mass culture is the same, and it is a collision. So, the needs are about the same. The sorrow of people who’ve left their homelands is the same. Many, if not most, of our refugees are deeply wounded people like our family, my brother and I, our parents. They, you know, you can’t just zip into America and go to work. They’re—actually, you can, and you do, and we will, right. Our parents just did. They didn’t take a breath, they didn’t cry a tear, they just stayed, you know, first gear, first gear forward, and ground their way through until their kids were dressed nice and educated well. And then, our parents crash, you know, a lot younger than they should because they are exhausted. So that, this is much the same—the grind, the hostility, often times, in the neighborhoods where we settle. That is, neglected white people are seeing us show up—these are neglected white folks, neglected by their political leadership, neglected by their country, left behind, and now we show up and our kids go to school dressed really well, cuz it’s really important to us, right.

And our teachers go to school sharpening teachers’ pencils, bringing apples, you know. And, we do really good in school because our kids are gonna do homework. From the first grade on, that’s what you do because we need for you to be successful and healthy and wealthy. That’s our modus operandi. So, we have neighbors mad at us for how resilient we are and how, and how ambitious we are. This is hard, was hard then, in the 1960s, in the 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s, that’s the same. So the challenges are about the same. We are just so much better armed now because of the Asian Family Center. And that’s just one of seven very important community-based organizations in Portland that create a mediative Chinatown. You know, Chinatown is not a location, it’s where you just go and take a deep breath and be around people who nurture you until you’re ready, and then you go. Right, so we have ethnic enclaves. And, these centers, like Asian Family Center, is that place. You’re gonna be understood, and you can calm me down, we’re gonna reassure you, and reassure you, and reassure you, and get you all the things you need to be successful.

NF: So, it sounds like in some specific neighborhoods, the hostility and the racism is still very prevalent. But, overall, has Portland and Oregon become more welcoming or do you find that when your family first came over it wasn’t very welcoming and it still isn’t?
RC: Yeah, I think it varies from neighborhood to neighborhood. We can say with great confidence that in the - in the David Douglass school district, which has 70 languages, 60/70 languages, it’s like an international school. It’s not—in less-diverse neighborhoods, kid culture in American is really cruel, you know. And, we had to go through this—our brothers and cousins—where we had things done to us that would be measure 11 sex crimes now. I mean, the perpetrator would go to prison and be a sex offender for the rest of your life, right. And, I’m certain that this still continues to happen—the bullying, the racism as you call it. And I don’t even know if it’s racism so much as, you know, in all groups, there’s an in group and out group—whether they’re chimpanzees or humans or bonobos, or whatever ethnicity, it doesn’t matter. And then, there are socially sanctioned target groups for your hostility. And, in the past, that’s been race, it’s been black. And, it may be Latino, it may be Asian, it may be Arab, it may be racial ethnic or not. It may just be because you’re different because you got curry for lunch in little tins instead of sandwiches, right. Kids are that way—they, there’s in group and out group. And then, you know, you can be miserably out with no way in. So, there’s a whole range of, what we call, receiving community environments from very super-duper, like David Douglass. We’re so proud of David Douglass school district. They do so great work with so little money, you know. And our parents love the school, they spend time there, they think of the school as their community center, as their school. Teachers treat families with real respect, not just kids, but families. They talk to parents even though the parents speak no English, you know. You can’t talk to a kid, it’s undignified, right. You can’t talk to my kid instead of me when I come for a parent meeting and ask my kid to tell me what you just said. I’ve been one of those kids, I will lie, you know. I mean, that’s really wrong, you need to have professional translator there; explain, you know, that the parent is the authority figure, not the child. So, David Douglass is creating a much more welcoming, international cosmopolitan community for their children to learn in, all children. Some schools not. But I would imagine that the level of violence, the level of bullying is a lot the same where the circumstances are the same as when we first came to Salem.

NF: And the, the communities that, that move here—and, perhaps, you can only speak to your own personal experience—but, you and your family, did you ever think of moving elsewhere? Or, when communities come here, when family members come here, do they find that they want to stay or does it just, maybe it depends on the individual group, but as a whole, do the communities like to stay in Oregon?

RC: This is—this is an excellent question, this is actually a—this is a big question, issue in human migrations, which is an international discipline, right. And the patterns are much the same everywhere. The answer yes, folks want to move, if they can, to where others like them are. So, that model of immigrant or refugee resettlement that we came
under, that is, disperse these people around so they Americanize really rapidly is really not best practices. That’s how you create poverty, that’s how you create forever marginality of the kind we experienced when we first arrived as teenagers. You were forever in the rut over there. The better model is the Chinatown model where people come and all be together because together we raise children, together we keep community standards this high, we don’t get into street culture, we don’t get into drugs, or we get—you know, we brow beat each other constantly about how much money you’re making and how what level of Toyota or Honda or Acura, you’re now at, right. This is so central to traditional people, this competing and comparing. So, we—people do move, and my mom’s sisters moved to California where there were a lot more Indos and grocery stores and entertainment and alike, and some stayed here. And you will see all over the United States, once families come, they will move to where there’s other folks from their region, from their village, from their state, from their country. Now, about Portland, Portland is 11th largest refugee resettlement city in the United States. We’re the 50th largest city, but we are the 11th highest population. So there’s—Portland, because of things like IRCO, because of the MAAs that feed IRCO, has become, has an international reputation for compassion. And, that’s combination of Catholic Charities of Oregon, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, sort of faith community that sponsors people. It’s a combination of MAAs taking care of people, dutiful big uncles and aunties in communities, it’s the CBOs that grow out of that, and then it’s the partnerships between the CBOs and local government—Multnomah County and City of Portland—so that they trust us to serve our people well. And we enter into partnerships or you just give us the money, we’ll take care of it. And the county’s had that position, right; “Oh god, we don’t know about Africans, let’s just give the money to Africa house.” Cuz, you’re gonna be wasting money if you’re not from that ethnic group and you have no idea of that person’s experience. To say nothing if you don’t have language skills, you know, in the 18 African languages we speak in Portland.

NF: So that perception of Portland, do you think that really good reputation began to really emerge in the late 80s, 90s when IRCO really was established?

RC: Yes, that’s right. Yes.

NF: Because it sounds like when you first, you and your family first came, Oregon did not have that reputation.

RC: No. Yeah, we didn’t have the infrastructure. The informal infrastructure of MAAs is always there, right, because people just—if you go to any east Oregon city, and you find yourself a Mexican café, and you will find them, and you ask them, “who’s the abuela, you know, who’s the grandma around here? “Oh yeah,” you know, “Senora Sanchez, she lives right over there.” You know, she will know everybody in town and everyone
will respect her as a sort of community leader. So there’s informal systems have been everywhere. We took that next step of formalizing those little mini organizations under one umbrella, SURF. Umbrella connected up then with a brick and mortar, state public-funded organization, now we’re bringing in tons of money. So the— we have really developed an immigrant and refugee resettlement model that’s very successful, and that’s what draws so many people to Portland. So, folks who come here usually don’t really leave. IRCO does a really good job in many ways—in many ways it doesn’t, but—of getting people to work right away. Refugees have eight months to get self-sufficient, eight months, eight months, you know. It’s unbelievable because when I started this work, they got 36 months. So then you have a chance to learn English and you don’t take the first job at the window factory or the coffin factory, at the rag factory, at the metal coating factory, you know, because people tend to get stuck at those jobs and not treated well. But, we have eight months to get people to work, and we get them to work. And, somehow or other, this combination of MAAs and CBOs and governments working together has been a really, pretty successful draw. Portland’s this way. We draw homeless from all over the country, right, because of a reputation for compassion and for caring for people, and the same is true for refugees and immigrants.

NF: So, over the years it sounds like you’ve been able to change policies, change laws that the county, the governments trust these organizations to do what they need to do. Have there been challenges over the years or has, at some point, are there examples of things that you’ve wanted to change, but there’s been resistance?

RC: Um, there’s always resistance to change, and we’re not by it, and we are actually quite good at getting over it. We’re now in a new round of getting government to be, to commit even better. Right, Portland, if we just take this city, is 500,000 people, 100,000 are foreign born—100,000. Half of the kids go home to ethnic minority families, half. So you can see where this is going. And yet, government’s response to that is not, is not, is not parity, it’s not equitable. We have it in the literature of immigrant integration, you have it 8—6, 8, 10 years to integrate people into the mainstream or else they will disintegrate into poverty. And if you want to do that, just say so right up front, and we will start suing each other like crazy. We will force government to take care of our families, or we can do it the way we do it, which is by forming partnerships, urging, urging, urging government to get closer to us. Letting them experience what a joy it is to work with immigrants. God, we’re so fun, we’re so funny, we eat too much, you know, and everything, work is like play to us, you know, we’re so enthusiastic about democracy and government caring about us, you didn’t have that back home. So, we’re now in another phase of having, asking government to get even more serious and more committed to what we’re doing. It can’t be our work all the time, we now have to share it up more evenly because the demographics have shifted so dramatically that
government’s not keeping up. We’re not getting people engaged within that ten year time frame. And after, if you don’t do that, after that, families start to disintegrate — men start to feel humiliated, they lose their hope, their dreaming becomes a nightmare, they drink, and they punch somebody, either at work, at the bar, or their wife, or their teenage boy. And, from there on out, it’s gonna get much more expensive. So, we can integrate by design, as I’ve explained it, or we can integrate by default, which is public welfare, child welfare systems, juvenile justice, adult criminal systems. Those are very expensive, much more expensive than our partnership work. So, now we’re in a new phase of, kind of, yes, resistance from institutions because now we’re asking more, and now our numbers are profoundly more. For that reason, the Coalition of Communities of Color has got together with PSU, and we’ve built up this huge database of what’s up with us, how our numbers have changed, how the city of Seattle and the city of San Francisco have got…[interruption]…We now have the data that shows extraordinary disparities between all our ethnic streams and the mainstream, not just black and white but all of us compared to the mainstream. And then when you compare that to King county and the city of Seattle, when you compare that to the county and city of San Francisco, we’re doing much, much worse in outcomes in Portland — educational outcomes, health outcomes, wealth, and so on. So, someone needs to explain this to us. Why is it they’re doing better than we are when you compare the data? And now, we have the data, we’re not just saying it’s bad, we’re now showing it to you. So, this opens up a whole new dialogue about what’s Seattle doing — same demographics, 500,000 people, 20% percent foreign-born. Their foreign born is about 18, they are older than we are, our foreign-borns are younger, so we have actually more urgency here. So how come they’re doing so well there compared to us? Let’s have a look at that, and let’s start working on that together. Our communities are in there with you. You know, you lead, we follow. We love this democracy stuff. So, yes, we’re at a time now of more resistance than usual, but it’s because the demographics have shifted dramatically and we are actually asking more of local government than we’ve ever asked before. We always have an attitude, all the A groups — Africans, Asians, Arabs, and our kind of Latinos, we just take care of it, you know. Problem, I’ll just take care of it. We don’t think that government should be taking care of us; we just take care of our own problem. So, we’re starting to say, “oh no, we can’t take care of it in our MAA levels; we’re exhausting our elder aunties and uncles.” Our CBOs are working three times harder than any other employee, but we need help from the mainstream because these are public issues, not just our issues, these are public issues.

[01:11:08]

NF: So over the years, the needs have remained the same, it’s just greater numbers at this point.

RC: Yes.
NF: And you see those numbers growing even more in the coming years?

RC: Oh gosh. Oh yeah, of course. This is a Spasian coast, right, Spanish-speaking, Asian coast, or Latino coast—just a mix of Latinos and Asians. And we're very vigorous communities; we're a little impatient, you know. We are boundlessly optimistic, right. And we love this America stuff; it's so great compared to back home. You can work here, three shifts if you want to. Where I come from, or my Mexican, or my cousins' Mexican wives come from, there's no jobs. Even if you wanted to work, there's no money to be made. But here, you can work like crazy. Now, they're really awful jobs, right. But, that's okay because you're gonna hand that money to your wife, and she's gonna dress up your kids, and they're gonna go to school, and they're gonna be great—no doubt about it. What's more, you're kid's American born, phew, no problem—no papers, no problem, right. I have all kinds documentation problems, but my kids are cool. So, yeah, it's harder now because the numbers are more difficult and our demands are greater now than ever before. And, we're much more sophisticated and savvy about participating in the mainstream than we were before. We're no longer happy just to have the, the manual labor jobs like our fathers did, you know, and the humiliation of it. It's impossible for me, I'm a smart-alky lawyer, you know. I can't go there anymore. I'm really impatient with the way the gas station worker treats me, you know. I mean, I'm gonna step out of the car and punch you. I'm expecting the policeman to treat me with respect and dignity. Now, in my parents' generation, that was okay.

NF: So this is a two-part question. Um, thinking back to 20, 30 years and what your hopes were, your expectations, your vision for the future, if you could talk a little bit about that and if those expectations have been exceeded or not. And then, after that, thinking about your vision for the next 20 or so years and what your hopes are for that. So, first, looking back, if you can think back to what you were hoping for, you know, when you first moved to Portland, when you were first helping establish IRCO, all of that.

RC: Yes. Well, you know, I have to say I never had a vision. I really have not been burdened by expectations a lot. And, some of it is ethno-cultural because we tend to be more present-oriented and we tend to be more social-orientated than whatever the other thing is. So, if I'm in your company and we are happy, you know, I'm happy as can be, you know. In our culture, we don't really have careers. I never thought of, you know, I'm down there, I'm going to be a lawyer 20 years from now, 15; it never occurred to me. So the journey looks a little zig-zagy because it is, because it was. But I wasn't harmed by it. In fact, it was very good for me, and it happens to have turned out very good for the people I serve, given the skills I have collected over that wiggly journey. So, I can't say that it's less than I expected or more than I expected. I'm just
really happy to be living and to be educated and to have educated children and lovely grandchildren. I don’t know what to say.

[01:15:05]

Our mother’s really, really cared for by all of our brothers, you know. And, our father’s passed away, and we’ll never stop loving him. So, I’m fine with the last 10, 20 years. Looking forward, because now I’m an educated wise guy, you know, and Americanized in some unattractive ways, I do have expectations. And, again, this is contrary to our cultures because expectations lead to heartbreak, right, and we don’t do that. And we, you know, in our country we’re [?], it’s a kind of Islam, so we trust that God would love us. And we just do the best we can, and your love in this universe is grand and a beautiful production, and it will be fine. But, I do worry some about that 10-year window within which our families have to engage economically and civically in the life of wherever they’re living. And that I do worry that America is so preoccupied with things other than that, and that this is going to cause a great amount of grief, conflict in fact. I worry a lot about the racism in America and the stuck family fight between African America and white America, and how much creativity, how much love that squanders, how much money that just takes away from our national pride. That is a very stuck family fight, and white America can’t turn their attention to brown America because of the paralysis of this cruelty, of this brutality, and the rage of the victims of it. So, we squander so much creativity and just plain love and time on that unresolved wound. And, it’s a family fight, and family members know how to hurt each other, you know, and stay stuck in it. For us newcomers here, looking at it, we’re going, “Oh, wow, wow that’s bitter.” You know, we are so sorry for you all. But really, it’s not our fight. We will never say no to any of you, we will take you with us, but you guys need to, you know, make right with each other because its killing the rest of us. The institutionalized racialized ruts in the legal system, for example, that I’m a part of are deep and impossible. Oh my gosh, Ferguson is just code, right. Ferguson is code for Watts, Watts 2, Rodney King, you know, and all the other murders and awfulness of that regime that keeps in check that awful black-white family fight. Terrible, it’s so ugly. So, I worry about that and America’s ability to deal both with that black-white problem and then the brown issue because we really don’t want to be in that. But, we will be taken down by it, for sure—the racism. So that’s my biggest worry, that I can’t get political leaders to be proud of us. They can’t use the “I” word—immigrant—whether they are national, state, or local leaders. They can’t say immigrant because the voters won’t dig it, you know. And then, we’ll get into a shoving match about who needs that white money more, black or white, as if it’s a zero sum game. This really, really, concerns me, and so, the next step of American development—what is America going to be? And we, kind of, have to insist as Asians and Latinos that we have to create a new ethos that we bring, you know, with our generosity, with our open heartedness, with our familia, right, with our faith. That is so stuck. And America’s, just, America’s
creativity is enormous, right; it’s just awesome. But, that creativity, when it comes to this problem, it is just paralyzed, just paralyzed because of the guilt and the rage between those two people. So, that’s my concern, and I don’t know, I’m 60 now, if that can be something I can contribute to resolving so we can move on and be a great nation again. Right, the rest of the world kind of looks down on us, they think, “Oh shit, these Americans, man. Their racism is so barbaric.” You know, you can’t get off that level until you solve this. So that’s my expectation for the future—to find us a way for black and brown and white to move forward together. I believe we’re the answer, we’ve got the energy for that, we’re not stuck by it.

NF: So, you have hope?

RC: Oh yes. Yeah. Yeah, of course, yeah. Alhamdulillah, thanks to God.

NF: So, is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to share or anything that you’d like to talk more about?

RC: No, that was a pretty—-that was a pretty global, wide-ranging spin. Maybe just one other thing about that: And, I think the only difference in the way I express myself and the story I tell, or the journey we’ve talked about or you’ve asked about here, is that I’m able to articulate it. I think this is pretty much the truth for all 100,000 of those foreign-born Portlanders. You know, whatever percent of the population nationally or state-wide is foreign-born, it’s the same story. You know, we are not sad, dirty people who come on a big boat to America and, you know, and didn’t have anything before they came as they say on that narrative - you know, give me your unwashed, your humble, your stinky, your uncool, and yearning to be free, that’s nonsense. That’s never been true, never. Whether the people came from Italia or Ireland or España or Indonesia or China or India, we come from 4,000 year old civilizations. We are very sophisticated, very civil, very humble people with deep love for each other, for God, for our Earth, you know. And so, what I’ve just explained to you has been the unraveling of my awareness that that’s how I am. And that’s how everybody is. Had I followed the mainstream narrative about who I’m supposed to be, working under the hood of a Chevy, you know. I’m always the guy that gets stopped by the cops, it’s always me and somebody else at the airport sitting in a special line, you know. If that had been the narrative I followed, I would be reduced to being, you know, an oppressed, angry, somebody. I’d probably be in prison because I have lost my temper a few times, and, luckily, I know how to maneuver and not end up in prison. But, the journey I’ve just explained to you about our families back home, you know, the values we bring with us, and how we now move around from here and home all the time, that’s the new America, and that’s actually the old immigrant story of all of us if we were just given the chance to take pride in ourselves. You know, and being amongst ourselves and talk
this through, if we were educated in the same way I have been, and can conceptualize now, the whole thing, the whole journey, the back and forths, the “oh, gotta leave the country, don’t want to be in the army,” “oh, gotta get out of this country, they’re going to kill me,” you know, “oh, gotta move out of here because they don’t want us here.” That whole thing is our story, and the resilience behind it, the love behind it, the commitment to each other. So, I think, I’m no different, I’m just lucky, you know, that I got into university and then got into law school. It wasn’t because I’m particularly smart, you know, or I score well at admission exams, because I don’t. You know, I’m the funky guy they let in if you can prove to us during your probationary years that you’re, that you should be here. Yeah. So I think that’s the sort of thing I would draw from all this, that we all have exactly the same story, and I’m only able to articulate because I’ve been lucky. But, and I sit around dinner tables with Mexican gentlemen with third grade educations, and they are so civil. They are so proper and courteous, and I love those gentlemen. And they’re 10, 20 years older than me; their hands are broken from having worked so hard. They’re skin is all cracked. My best friend’s dad had his arm smashed in an iron machine on purpose because he couldn’t work anymore, and he got a huge payout because he’s permanently disabled. He did this on purpose, right, so that he could give money to his kids so they could buy these houses in 1980s, houses that are now worth half a million dollars. Wow. Right, so, well, I don’t think I’m up to putting my hand into a metal stamper at work, but I think it goes to show how grand we are. And then, we want to make America this grand.

NF: So, any other closing thoughts that you’d like the share?

RC: No, I wouldn’t know what it would be. But thank you for your confidence in our work, you know, [?] a voice for us.

NF: Well, thank you for sharing your story and for, for your voice. It’s wonderful.

[end of interview 01:25:49]