

MC: I'm sure it took him a while longer, probably, but we, probably after three years we made up our minds, most of us, that we were going to have to be dragged out of here as opposed to follow [laughter].

MO: But in a way life up here must have been a little harder. You didn't eat quite as well as you did down on the farm in those early years . . .

MC: Yeah, but we always have worked hard so the reason we didn't have food is just we didn't have work and we almost always had work because if you go out there and ask and ask more, somebody's going to give you something to do. I would say for us we always lived in . . .

**1:00:00**

MC: either very crowded conditions or very rundown homes, but it was an upgrade from where we lived before. [laughter] And that's what a lot of people don't understand, you know, how we look at a shack out there and, you know, for folks how can they live there. And it's hard. I'm not justifying that we should say that's a great lifestyle, but it was an upgrade. It's an upgrade for a lot of people. I mean just having electricity, having a television – we had never seen television before, you know. So a lot of those things you don't want to give them up after a little while, and that's what kept us wanting to stay in here cause we felt like if we go over there, there's . . .

**1:01:07 (end of first tape)**

**Beginning of second tape**      **Part two begins here**

MO: And you started working for Gardens \_\_\_\_\_ in what year?

MC: I believe that must have been in 82 probably – 83, 84, 85, 86 – yeah, around 82.

MO: So for about four years?

MC: For about four years, yeah. And February 1986 I left the company and that's when I started mowing lawns on my own and then right after that, I went and started Pro Landscape. registered the name.

MO: Really, right then in 86?

MC: Yeah, exactly. Not that anybody was going to steal it. [laugh]

MO: I think you told me over the phone, but why don't you tell me know what you had to start the business with.

MC: Oh, I, I basically didn't have much. I had received a credit card from First United States Bank for an 800 dollar credit limit. And I got that card since I was like, I think I was probably like 16 or 17 years old and nobody signed for me, but what I would do – I'm very persistent – I would do, I always \_\_\_\_ the one day I could have a credit card {laughter} and I would always go, whenever I went to a bank or someplace and I saw an application for a credit card, I filled it out. And even though I was under age [laugh]. Then one day a card shows up [laughter]. I'm sure they made a mistake and I kept that card, I kept my payments paid on time, so that helped me out. That really did help me out.

MO: So you didn't have a card prior to this?

MC: I had a \_\_\_\_\_ because I would always filled out these applications and I figured that somebody someday was gonna feel bad for me or make a mistake and send me something [laugh]. And they did, so I got a lawnmower with it, an \_\_\_\_\_ lawnmower, I remember

MO: This was a gas mower?

MC: Yeah, a gas mower, and I started working with one client, Mr. Balgo, up on Hilltop Lane. He hired me there for about three months. But I was charging him eight bucks an hour – no wonder he kept me there for a long time. [laugh]

MO: To do his place?

MC: To do his place, yeah, oh, so how much are you going to charge me? I was making five ten an hour so I figured if I charged him eight I was already going to be way ahead. In reality I was probably making less than I used to make because I was paying for equipment and everything else. That tells you how much business knowledge I had.

MO: It taught you something?

MC: Yeah. So he, before I was done with that project Mrs. Handler who lived across the street was waiting for me to do her place, too. And the Harris's up the street and Mrs. Hull at the end of the street. So they all had jobs for me.

MO: And were these places homes?

MC: Yeah, residential homes.

MO: They already had yards and stuff, you just maintained . . .

MC: Yeah, cleaning and mowing and raking and doing things like that, yeah. I don't think they trusted me to design a landscape for them. But they were some of the better homes in the Portland area, in the West Hills, so when I went to these \_\_\_\_\_ folks they had grandmas, nephews, aunts, and other family members of friends that they had and they sent me to them, too, so I was super busy. From the very beginning, after a little while though, I don't know, probably a year or so, I had to hire the first employees. Yeah [laughter]

MO: How many people did you hire then?

**1:05:00**

MC: Probably just one. I don't remember exactly but I'm sure just one and then another one and another one and kept on growing.

MO: And I assume you adjust your rate upward at some point?

MC: Yeah, it was very difficult for me because I was always scared every time I had to adjust the rate I felt like everybody was going to drop me and that was going to be the end of my business. [laugh] I always took longer than what I should have taken to raise the rates. I was

always scared to raise the rates. But ultimately I found out that if people like what you're doing, they're willing to pay a little more for your services.

MO: But at that point you were still just doing people's homes?

MC: People's homes and some stuff, and then I'm not sure, but I'm going to say about 10 years ago about four years after, I saw, I heard of a franchise called \_\_\_\_\_ One and I went to talk to them because I wanted to get bigger, you know. And they said sure, we'll take your money and sell you a franchise here, so we'll sell you basically the name, \_\_\_\_\_ One, but I kept the name Pro Landscape too so it was, now it wasn't just Pro Landscape but \_\_\_\_\_ One Pro Landscape. And never changed it with the state; I just used their logo. And that gave me some more exposure around until maybe, oh, two years down the road I found out that there were quite a few \_\_\_\_\_ One companies and some were maybe not doing a very good job or being competition to somebody else and if they were mad at the company then they would think I was the same folks. So I said I don't want this anymore so I dropped it again and I kept on going, just saying Pro Landscape.

MO: But it did originally bring you a little more business then . . .

MC: I think it did, I think it did. But I was already gone anyway; I don't know if he changed the rate or not. It gave me an opportunity to feel like I wasn't alone out there. I could talk to other business owners openly because they would talk about their financial problems and stuff and I would talk to them to.

MO: And at this point you must have had a little bit more equipment as well?

MC: I had a little bit more equipment and I'm sure it wasn't a big thing because I think I paid like four thousand dollars to the \_\_\_\_\_ to use the name, so it's not a big thing.

MO: And it was just the one fee that you paid?

MC: No, no they wanted also five percent from your gross sales and that's another thing that I didn't like either. So I went on working on my own and I hired someone who, after that, who had a landscape contractor's license so that I could start doing installations, new construction. And his name was Fred, and Fred was a nice guy. I met him through \_\_\_\_\_ and he was a nice guy. He was basically working for me for about a year or so. And then I met another guy who had a license, too. At this time I was trying to take the state exams and they wouldn't give me the state exams unless I have at least two years of college. Obviously at this time I'm thinking about going to college, so I went to PCC to try to get some college courses going so I could be able to take the tests myself. But I had several employees already. I don't know, maybe seven or so by this time already. Anyhow in class I felt like I was wasting too much time cause my life was going too fast at that point to sit around and listen to a class or listen to a professor joke about his dog. I want to say, just teach us something, get to the point, you know? [laughs] I asked him if I could \_\_\_\_\_ the test because I had some experience already . . .

**1:10:01**

MC: And they said no. So I went back to the state and they said well the other thing you can do because you have had already licensed folks working for you, they could sign an affidavit saying that you do have this experience so you qualify to take the exam. And I did, I did that, and I took the exams and I passed them and ever since then I haven't had that same problem.

MO: And when you were at PCC, were you taking courses in landscaping, or . . .

MC: Well, yeah, I felt that there were probably good courses but not for me because I already had quite a bit of on-the-job experience, and a lot of the folks that were there were probably there because their dads sent them or someone send them and I was sitting there thinking maybe while I'm here I'm losing money if I'm not learning something, so I was on a different path.

MO: And you said at that time you already had how many employees?

MC: Probably seven or eight when I tried to . . .

MO: And were you at that point mostly managing the business or were you still working . . .

MC: I was still going out and managing at the same time. I had to do both. But I would say about a year or two after that then I was strictly managing the business. Or right around that time, probably in the last ten years that's all I've done is manage the business.

MO: And so you did get your landscaper's license?

MC: Contractor's license, yeah.

MO: And then you started doing different kinds of jobs?

MC: Yeah, then we started doing all kinds of new construction for new homes and some small businesses and we're getting more and more experience and then we broke into an area with drainage, with some engineering firms. And we got real good at doing drainage and now we're one of the top firms doing drainage here, \_\_\_\_\_. And that same engineering firm was very instrumental in getting us into the pile-driving business which we do a lot of pile driving for foundations and slide remediation work.

MO: And what's the name of the firm?

MC: AW Geotechnical Services. It's a geotechnical, engineer firm.

MO: How did you first approach them?

MC: You know it was very interesting. I was at a home and garden show at the Expo Center and I had a little booth there. That was the first time I put a booth up, and this engineer showed up over there and asked if . . . he probably had an interest or he just wanted to talk or something and he asked us if we'd ever done drainage and this kind of work, and I said no but we're willing to try anything and we started working with him from very small jobs to fairly large jobs. Now we work with a lot of engineering firms around the metro area. So that's a big part of our business right now, and I think right before the light rail came in we did one of our biggest jobs – a park for the city of Portland – Cardinal Summers Park in the southeast part, Taylor and 20<sup>th</sup> out there. And that was the first job that we did over one hundred thousand dollars and we didn't make any money but it was a good experience and after that then we knew the light rail was coming in to town, so we bid on that and we got the job for the light rail downtown Portland and that was a pretty good-sized job.

MO: Landscaping or what?

MC: Yeah, landscaping for a little under a half a million dollars for one contract – and everybody thought I was nuts. How dare can you try to do a contract like that worth a year's sales; a whole year's worth of sales.

**01:15:00**

MC: Well, I know we'll do it some way. Have you ever done anything like it? No. If that was the only way you were able to do things, you would never do anything. I mean you have to always try for many things.

MO: And you were the lowest bid for that job?

MC: I would think so but I got the job, I don't know, I didn't have some of the business skills that I have now. Not that I have a lot, but I didn't have some of the basic business skills like to call and ask how low was I compared to the other guy. So I was working and not even afraid. Maybe I left a lot of money on the table. [laughter] But that was a good experience and after that we . . .

MO: And was that a profitable job for you?

MC: No, we didn't make any money again, but it was partly due to inexperience and . . .

MO: So you made mistakes?

MC: Yes, and well, efficiency problems in coordination. I had just never managed a big job like that. I'd managed a few mowing jobs and stuff but not something like that and for me going to meetings and dealing with different architecture firms and engineer firms and owners and inspectors – that was just a whole new world. So I was just happy that we had done quite a bit of other work around before TriMet came in because then after that we got another big project, a TriMet project, for the whole zoo parking lot and both sides of the tunnel which was our biggest contract ever – two point, no one point million something for one contract. And we started doing other big jobs, like Dornbecher Children's Hospital and rooftop gardens and with cranes and recently we just did the new sea lions exhibit, the Stellar Cove, for the zoo which is the most elaborate display there at the zoo. So, you know, it's just a learning process, a learning process.

MO: And I assume in the beginning when you first started working Pro Landscape yourself you were still probably working out of your home?

MC: Oh yes, yes, we just moved in here about two and a half years ago. But before that it was all out of the home. Out of the home, and the garage in the back of the house.

MO: And so even that first light rail you were . . .

MC: Oh, yeah, even those big jobs, light rail jobs, we were working out of the home. And people were shocked, you know, cause even when we advertised for employment, we asked them to come into our office, as soon as they got there they got discouraged because, you know, who wants to work for a company that's working behind this little house in the back. Even when we were doing, we were probably doing one point nine million dollars out of the back

garage there. That garage, the office space was twenty by nine, twenty feet by nine feet, and the shop space was very small too. Very small – it was probably no more than five hundred square feet.

MO: And I assume you would rent a lot of your equipment in those days, too?

MC: Yeah, yeah, we did. Actually I had purchased a lot of equipment already when I was living at home, but I developed a system where the equipment almost never came home. They were moved from job to job.

MO: Oh, so you didn't have to store them?

MC: No. I would tell whoever I would purchase it from, deliver it to this address, you know, and then from there they would move it to the next job that would come, and a lot of that equipment never saw our place.

MO: And then you moved in here, you said, two and a half years ago?

MC: Yeah. When we moved over here and we got our equipment over here, everybody was saying that, wow, where did you park all this stuff? And I said oh, at different customers' places.

**01:20:00**

MO: Was there any time in the growth of your business where you were in really a tight financial place?

MC: Yeah, all the time. All the time, yeah. I mean, without any real business skills that was really tough. But a lot of people helped me out. My customers helped me out. They're the ones that basically helped me do what I have done because I would talk to them and they saw that I was eager to do something they would ask me how're you doing. And I said well, okay, I have one customer that's not paying me. I remember one of them says well, you need to lien his house. I didn't know what a lien was, so he explained it to me, took about two hours explaining the whole process to me and, uh, just things like that, you know. Father Dave, a friend of the family, was, the first contract that I did years after I started the business my contracts were handshakes and years after the business I told him that hey, I got this project, this job that they wanted me to give them an estimate, but they wanted it in writing, and I'd never done anything in writing. So he did it, the priest out of Cornelius he did it for me, **Father Dave Seeger**, one day he typed up this maintenance proposal and then from then on I would just copy the same, copy the same wording and just change the amounts and that was kind of my first contract that lasted for years and years. Same thing with financial situations. The customers would help me out by . . . One of them, no, not just one of them, several of them, would lend me money. Yeah, yeah, they would say well, I would tell them that I'm in a bind and they would say well how much do you need. One of them moved from here over to Arizona. He called me and he asked me how I was doing. I tell him I was tight for cash. He says how much do you need, and I said twenty thousand. He said are you sure that's all you need. I said no, I need thirty thousand. He says okay I'll send it to you now, you'll get it tomorrow. No contract signed or anything. Yeah, and when I paid him back, he refused to take interest, yeah. And not just him but several really went out . . . this guy was just the one that helped me out with the most money, that really went out on a limb but most of them really helped me out. And some of the early employees too, which most of them we still have right now, some of them helped me out cause if I didn't have enough money I would go to them and say, would you not cash your

check until Monday [laugh] or Tuesday and then they just, okay, you know [laugh]. But they did help me out, yeah. Some of the ones that were close to me I knew who I could count on to wait for me one more day and who I had to pay off immediately. I'm just glad we don't have to do those things anymore, but that went on for quite a few years. And obviously family is very important because my sister, my older sister, one time that I was tapped for cash for the IRS, I had to pay them some money, she mortgaged her whole house and got a second mortgage loan to let me borrow I think like ten thousand dollars to pay off the IRS. So I mean it's been a really difficult situation, but it's got to be a huge team effort where employees, customers, family members and friends they all come together, yeah.

**01:25:00**

MO: And in terms of the business now, do you have . . . how do you compensate your employees? Are they just paid an hourly wage or . . .

MC: No, we have about, I think about, I'm not sure how many we have right now, but I'm going to say about 30, 33 employees and about 10 of those are salary. And there are no salary [cellar?] employees, I think the lowest salary employee wage is like 12 bucks an hour, most of them are more in the twenties, and so they're compensated pretty good. They get insurance, sick leave, vacation. So, we expect a lot from them but we also, I think we treat them very good, very fairly. We really, what we're doing right now we left the majority of the leaf-raking and mowing lawns and we concentrate more on the heavy duty construction – big boulder walls and steel walls and a lot of stone work, patios, and parks and libraries and schools. So the level of expertise that we need is much higher. So I'm not sure, but I think probably our average hourly rate here is about, mmm, I'm going to say around fifteen dollars an hour. So it's really; we can't . . . I don't know, I don't know if we've had anyone for minimum wage because it's so difficult to have someone at minimum wage be able to perform what we ask them to perform, especially breeding plants and keeping track of things and that kind of thing. So some of the challenges that we have right now is we have a lot of very good workers too that are Hispanic that don't speak the language very good, so we have classes two times a week, English classes after work and a lot of them are doing much better, but we really, really need – knowing English is a big plus for us here. Obviously being a good worker and an honest worker, too, being responsible, but knowing the language, being able to communicate is very important because we work with people. So that's a challenge and I'm committed to helping out as much as I can and making sure that those folks that have stayed here with us from the tough times, that they get compensated properly and that they learn new things so they can move on to better positions and so that they can help the company, too, be more profitable and they can be more profitable. Overall, I think it's, uh, we've been pretty lucky so far. Excellent team.

MO: And you're involved, actually with the Latino or Hispanic community in other ways, too, besides your business – is that right?

MC: Yeah.

MO: Can you tell me about some of those things that you do outside of Pro Landscaping?

MC: When I was in school I was playing in a band. So I was the leader of the band, too, and I was just a kid, too, so that gave me some exposure out there. And at the same time . . .

MO: Was this a Mexican music band?

MC: Yes, yes, a Mexican music band. And I did that for ten years, here in Oregon . . .

MO: What was the name of the band?

MC: **Syntaxes**, syntax, the way you would write sentences.

**01:30:00**

MC: But in Spanish it's **Syntaxes**, without taxes, so when we went to Washington they thought our name was because most of the tax was in Oregon. [laughter] But right during that same time I was approached by a friend, **Nivaldo**, a friend from Chile, to see if I wanted to do a radio program, and I said well sure, I'll do that, out of cable, KBLI in Portland, and I did that for ten years, every week, every Wednesday from five to six.

MO: I've probably listened to you.

MC: [laughter] So that was interesting because that exposed me again to other things, especially in cable you're exposed to a lot of different things there and you get invited to things that sometimes people gave me a host more credit than the others. They thought I knew more than what I did. I was just a kid, and then I left about 93? 1993? And when I left, because it was every week, I started doing TV at cable access until now. Next month is going to be my last month, it's going to be six and a half years of cable access.

MO: And what are you doing on cable access?

MC: Well, there I did a \_\_\_\_\_, open forum, and it was basically a lot of public affairs and debates on social issues, and from gangs to crime to health – you name it.

MO: You had guests on your program?

MC: Yeah, we would have a guest and, in most cases, my toughest challenge was there that I wanted to have -- the reason why I started the show was because I wanted to do a show where the people could feel that they could have different points of view and still be friends \_\_\_\_\_ Cause I have – that's not something you really do in the Hispanic community. That's not something you see a lot.

MO: If you have people with different points of view, then they're not friends.

MC: Or they don't even bring it up, you know, so . . .

**01:33:36**

## **SEARCH TERMS**

Agricultural Laborers – History  
Agriculture  
Agriculture – History  
Arizona  
AW Geotechnical Services  
California  
Cardinal Summers Park  
Communities  
Cornelius  
Dornbecher Children’s Hospital  
Dwellings  
Families  
Families – History  
Farms  
Hillsboro  
Hilltop Lane  
Housing  
Labor  
Labor - Mexico  
Labor – United States  
Los Angeles  
Light rail  
McLoughlin Junior High (Pasco, Washington)  
Mexicali  
Mexico  
Migrant labor  
Migrants  
Minimum wage  
Pasco  
Portland Community College (PCC)  
Tijuana  
Transportation – History  
Travelers  
Tri-Cities  
TriMet  
Washington  
Work  
Zoo