



Joe and Lydia Olivares

Brownsville, TX

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Date: June 8, 2022

Location: Brownsville, Texas

Interviewer: Cynthia Torres

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: 1 hour 9 minutes 32 seconds

Project: Mexican-American Barbecue

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Cynthia Torres: Okay. Here we go. My name is Cynthia Torres. The date is June 8th, 2022.

We're in Brownsville, Texas, and today I'm speaking with . . . ?

Joe Olivares: Joe Olivares.

Lydia Olivares: And Lydia Olivares.

Cynthia Torres: And how old are you?

Joe Olivares: I'm eighty-two.

Lydia Olivares: I'm eighty.

Cynthia Torres: Eighty.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Cynthia Torres: And how are we related? So your mom —

Joe Olivares: My mother was Cindy's sister.

Lydia Olivares: No.

Cynthia Torres: Your mom was my grandmother's sister.

Lydia Olivares: No, your grandmother's sister. Cindy is your niece.

Joe Olivares: Right.

Lydia Olivares: Our niece.

Joe Olivares: Right, Cindy's my niece.

Cynthia Torres: Yes. Okay. And you two are married.

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And how long have you been married?

Lydia Olivares: We have been married fifty-five years. Yes, fifty-five years. It'll be fifty-six in December.

Joe Olivares: It'll be fifty-six in December.

Cynthia Torres: Okay. And your kids are my cousins?

Lydia Olivares: Yes. Our kids are your cousins, yes.

Cynthia Torres: Okay.

Lydia Olivares: Corie and Steven.

Cynthia Torres: Okay. Awesome. So I'm just going to go through these questions and we're just gonna start from way back when so feel comfortable answering as long as you'd like to just get the story out. So the first question is going back to what do you remember as kids, what was the dinner table like? What was the kitchen like? Was it busy? What kinds of foods you remember being served? Were you a part of the cooking team?

Lydia Olivares: Well, my mother was a single mother.

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We lost our dad when I was five, so we lived in the same — we had our own home but in the same yard or plot with our grandparents. So we did a lot of eating big dinners at my grandmother's. So she would get us all together 'cause we'd have big dinners at her house.

Mother would work late and most of the time we just ate at my grandmother's, and it was a big

family. It was five sisters at home, my mother's sisters, and the three of us and my grandparents, so it was always over there.

Cynthia Torres: What was being served?

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Lydia Olivares: My grandmother was very eloquent in her dinners. She would have a nice salad. I remember she'd always make a salad and I remember she'd make the — with sliced boiled eggs and really nice. And whatever rice and beans and some kind of meat. It was funny that they didn't go to church that often, but we never had meat on Fridays. It was just a Catholic thing. So usually on Friday we'd have some fish or any kind of seafood, so no meat on Friday. It was funny.

Cynthia Torres: Nice. Where did you grow up? Was that here in Brownsville?

Lydia Olivares: Yes. I was born and raised here, and I lived here all my life.

Cynthia Torres: Okay. And how about you?

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Joe Olivares: Well, I remember we always had eating breakfast together and sometimes lunch, but mainly I remember having breakfast, all of us, which is my two brothers and two sisters and myself and my mom. And just like my wife, I grew up without a dad. I think he passed away when I was about three years old. I've always said three, but for sure, for sure, for sure I don't know exactly how old I was, but I'm always saying that I was about three years old. But I remember living at the housing project and having every morning — just about every morning we would all sit together about 7:30, 8:00 and have basically the same food which was papas con

huevos with flour tortillas and maybe — and for sure, for sure always the flour tortillas with egg and papas, with potatoes.

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And sometimes I think we had beans, homemade refried beans. And at lunch we didn't sit down together. Sometimes we did but most of the time either somebody was working, somebody was too busy, somebody was not there. But basically the breakfast was always there. And like I said earlier, basically the same breakfast all the time, which I loved, papas con huevos. And sometimes — well, no, not really — just beans, I guess. And my mom was not the best tortilla maker 'cause back then you couldn't go to the store and buy the tortillas, you'd have to make 'em.

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We would love the tortillas, but she really wasn't the best tortilla maker in town. [Laughter] And then at noontime we had different kinds of food, but basically for breakfast it was always the same thing, eggs and tortillas. And I grew up drinking coffee. I don't drink coffee anymore. I like the way it smells but when I taste the coffee I really don't care for it. But since I grew up drinking coffee at morning, coffee and coffee and coffee. At noontime, Kool-Aid, mainly Kool-Aid.

Lydia Olivares: [Laughter] That's all we had back then, I think.

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Joe Olivares: Yeah. And, like I said, you didn't go to buy a can of ranch-style beans or refried beans. You'd have to get the package of beans and clean 'em and whatever they do with them and then cook 'em or fry 'em or —

Lydia Olivares: Boil them.

Joe Olivares: Boil them. And then from there they would, I guess, pound them or whatever they do with the beans.

Lydia Olivares: Mash 'em.

Joe Olivares: Mash 'em. No store-bought beans or like now that you buy the tortillas. Everything was homemade. Yep, that's how I remember. And like I said, in the morning we'd probably all sit together. And at noontime sometimes. In the evening not really. In the evening my mom was working, or she wasn't home, and we'd have to feed ourselves whatever was at the house.

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But there's always food around the house. Not that we were rich, 'cause we were not, but there was always something to eat.

Cynthia Torres: Nice.

Joe Olivares: Yeah, good times.

Cynthia Torres: Very nice. What were your roles in the kitchen? When did you first start having kitchen duties?

Lydia Olivares: No roles in the kitchen. My grandmother was a very tough love kind of a person. She'd ask me to wash the dishes, but then she'd get after me because my stomach was all wet

from leaning against the counter and she'd get after — “Aw, there are with your tummy all wet!” But as far as cooking, my sister and I would just watch what she was doing and learn from there.

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But we just didn't. She was home and she always cooked and did everything, the heavy-duty stuff like makes tamales that would take two or three days and the ordeal. We would can tomato and we'd make sauerkraut and all that and we'd help with that, but as far as the actual cooking dinner, no. And I don't know what it was but both my sister and I, when we got married, we just started cooking. And we both loved to be in the kitchen and we both loved to have people come over for us to cook.

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But it was just by, I guess, from watching my grandmother.

Joe Olivares: I don't remember having any chores.

Lydia Olivares: Well, boys back then, they were not allowed to be — yeah, they were not allowed.

Joe Olivares: Yeah. In spite of the fact that, Mamaw, my mom wouldn't want us in the kitchen. And besides, she prepared whatever she was preparing by herself. And I don't even remember my sisters or my other brothers ever getting in or asking if she needed some help, like I do now that I ask, because she would say — well, maybe she wouldn't say but we knew that she's doing everything and that's the way it was back then.

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Nobody would help around the kitchen except the ladies or the moms.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: But I don't remember having any chores. I don't even remember taking out the trash. I know that has nothing to do with breakfast but as far as a chore, the only chore I had that I remember was mow the yard, mow the yard, mow the yard. [Laughter] But that was about it.

Cynthia Torres: You didn't barbecue until later?

Joe Olivares: No. There was no such thing as barbecuing back then.

Lydia Olivares: You know, when we were young we didn't. We didn't barbecue. I don't remember it in my grandfather —

Joe Olivares: No.

Lydia Olivares: 'Cause my grandfather was the only male influence in my family 'cause it was all girls, my mother and all her sisters, and my grandfather was the only male influence we had. And I don't ever remember —

Joe Olivares: I even asked you about two weeks ago did your grandpa ever —

Lydia Olivares: No, we never grilled at home.

Joe Olivares: No.

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Lydia Olivares: Not until we were married.

Joe Olivares: The memories I have of a barbecue is when we used to go out to Tío Mateo's ranch and they would fix barbecue.

Lydia Olivares: Yes. Going out to the ranches, to the farms. Here in the valley his family ranch or uncles or whatever, and we used to go down into San Fernando. And over there those were huge — they'd have the whole side of beef or —

Joe Olivares: A pit.

Lydia Olivares: — the whole pig. But it was big celebrations like weddings or New Year's. We used to go down there for New Year's and there was a big coronation and celebration and stuff. But that's the only barbecuing that we used to do back then.

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Not until we got married and we started grilling at home with our cousins.

Joe Olivares: Yeah. My tío, Tío Mateo was his name, had a ranch in San Benito and during the week from Monday to Friday all the workers, of course, were out there in the field working. And then on Saturday — Saturday was like a day of rest or a day of partying — I remember the women would go into the kitchen and fix whatever, rice and beans, and the men would be outside fixing food, fixing the pit, a pit barbecue, and slaughtering some calves to feed everyone. All the workers and all the kids and, of course, the wives.

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But the wives were in the kitchen, and we were out there playing. And then, come eating time, there was always some music and we sat down to eat and party, and the men would be out there having their party and drinking. And we were too young at that time. But we enjoyed going and seeing some of the cousins that we hardly ever knew or met during that time because we'd only see them during farming season. And sometimes we didn't even know them, but we knew they

were our cousins and we got along fine. As far as barbecuing, that was it. That is not barbecuing like we know it today, but this was a big pachanga, big —

Lydia Olivares: Yeah, that was barbecuing. Big —

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Joe Olivares: Yeah. Like Lydia says, special occasions like as the weekend comes close —

Lydia Olivares: And it was always about sharing.

Joe Olivares: Yeah.

Lydia Olivares: Like I said, we used to go down to San Fernando and have some big — over there since way back then they didn't have refrigerators or whatever, the iceboxes or whatever, so whenever a family would slaughter a calf they would hang a little flag on the door. A red flag meant that they had meat for people to come either get some or buy some or whatever and share it. It was always about sharing. Because, I don't know, that's the way we were brought up. You had something and you had to share always. Always sharing. And the more people in the home the better. I don't think we ever just sat by ourselves years ago.

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Now we do 'cause it's just the two of us but back then, after we got married and we'd always get together with family, cousins and their families, cousins and the kids, and it's always we're gonna grill and we have to share. Come on over, come on over. And since this was a big house most of the time we'd get together here for Easter, anything.

Cynthia Torres: When you were growing up and sitting around the table with your families, 'cause it sounds like you had communal meals and everything, what was the conversation like? What kinds of things did you talk about as a family? Was there any storytelling or bickering?

Lydia Olivares: Usually about what had happened to us during the day. My grandfather was a comedian. He'd always have us in stitches and ribbing my grandmother.

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It was always a happy time of the day. Just telling stories and my grandfather would tell stories about when he was young. But it was always a happy time, very happy.

Joe Olivares: We were kind of in a hurry because we had to have breakfast and go to school, of course, rush out to school, but my mom was always working in the kitchen bringing this or bringing that, and we would just sit there. And since I was the youngest most of the time the topic of conversation did not pertain so much to me.

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But like Lydia says, what was the day gonna be like? What was your day yesterday like? But I don't remember ever sitting down to converse, to say this is what we talked about yesterday or I need someone to talk to about this. It was just a fast pace that I remember. My mom hardly had time to sit down. I don't even think she sat down with us to eat 'cause she was always cooking in the kitchen. And she'd bring this, and she'd bring that. And then she'd sit something on the table and go back into the kitchen. And then we'd be rushing to get to school. Of course, we walked most of the time to school so, even though the school was not that far away, but we still had to be ready on time and walk just to make sure that you get back to school on time.

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‘Cause that also happened at noontime sometimes. But conversation-wise, not really. I mean, there was, but I don't remember.

Cynthia Torres: And then, how did you two meet?

Lydia Olivares: Well, we knew each other a little bit in high school, ‘cause back then there was only one high school here in Brownsville. He was a year ahead of me, but we actually got together when we went to our junior college here, at Texas Southmost College. And my best buddy that I’ve been good friends with her since we were, like, five years old, we loved to dance ‘cause we were on a dance team in high school. And we joined the dance team.

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The had a dance group, dance club, dance team at TSC and she and I joined the dance team and a couple of our friends. And then, he and his friend also joined the dance team because, according to them, that’s the place where all the girls were. So how do we meet girls? And that’s where the girls were so they joined the dance team.

Joe Olivares: [Laughter] We were sitting there, and someone said, “Hey, how do we meet girls?” And I can’t remember who it was, it could’ve been me, they said, “You know what? There’s a bunch of girls on the dance team.” ‘Cause hardly any boys were in the dance team.

Lydia Olivares: Right.

Joe Olivares: I said, “Well, how ‘bout you? If you join I’m gonna join, too.” So there must’ve been, I don't know, seven, eight of us guys. We decided to go and join the dancing just to meet

the girls, which we did. And that's where we finally got together, even though we knew each other— not really high school that we knew each other.

Lydia Olivares: We knew of each other. It was enough just to say hello.

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Joe Olivares: But we started to dance together and go out together. I think it was back in [19]61, [19]62.

Lydia Olivares: And our teacher paired us off to dance together and we've been dancing since then.

Joe Olivares: We've been dancing ever since.

Lydia Olivares: That was in 1962.

Joe Olivares: [19]61, [19]62, yeah.u

Lydia Olivares: Yeah, the school year [19]61-[19]62.

Cynthia Torres: And then, how did you propose?

Lydia Olivares: Actually, no, not a formal proposal.

Cynthia Torres: No?

Lydia Olivares: We just knew that we were getting married and that's it.

Joe Olivares: Yeah. We just said, are we getting married? Like some people say, you get down on your knee and propose, will you marry me? Will you be my wife? Or I'm gonna have to ask your mom or your dad. No. We were old enough to —

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Lydia Olivares: Yeah. And I was already working here at the bank, so he went off to school. He went two years here and then two years in Kingsville, so we wanted to wait until he graduated.

Joe Olivares: That's how we met. I can't remember if we started to date first or dance.

Lydia Olivares: No. Started to dance first and then —

Joe Olivares: We danced first, and we just got together dancing. And most of the time we would dance together as a dance couple, of course, with all of our friends, but normally she would be my partner and I would be her partner.

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Lydia Olivares: And my girlfriend and her partner, his best friend, they also got together. And they got married maybe six, seven months before we did or a year maybe before we did, and they're still married. And they baptized Steven.

Joe Olivares: They were married already when we got married, right?

Lydia Olivares: Yeah, um-hm.

Joe Olivares: Yeah.

Cynthia Torres: And so you get together and you're starting your family. Did you have to talk about the kinds of sit-down dinner traditions or food traditions or did it just kind of come together? How did that work? How do you talk about how to start —

Lydia Olivares: No, we didn't plan or talk about it. We'd just say, okay, on Thanksgiving it's all the family here, it's always been here. I've always held Thanksgiving here. Or when we'd get

together our husbands would watch the football game, the Cowboys game on Sundays and we'd all get together somewhere to watch the game.

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And then we'd grill and every Sunday we'd do that, or anytime, Easter or Fourth of July or just the weekend. You know, what are we gonna do this weekend? Or where are we gonna get together? And we'd always end up grilling.

Joe Olivares: Well, that's where we'd bring the family together. That's when we'd bring the husbands and wives and the kids. And the kids became — they're still very, very close. And then, one more thing, we were, I guess, going steady. It wasn't official engagement, but we were together for four-and-a-half years before we got married. So between that time and when we got married we knew each other very, very well.

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And we were, I think, at the right age when we got married. I was twenty-five or twenty-six? Twenty-seven.

Lydia Olivares: I was twenty-five.

Joe Olivares: Twenty-seven. You were twenty-five. So during that time between, like I said, when we started to date and the time we got married it was four-and-a-half years, so we got to know each other very, very well. But as far as proposing, we just took it for granted that we'd been together this long and, when are we getting married? But not an official proposal.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah.

Joe Olivares: We just took it for granted that we were gonna get married. “When we get married . . .” “Yeah, yeah. You haven’t even asked me.”

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Cynthia Torres: [Laughter]

Joe Olivares: But it was understood.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah. So what did you decide to make? So you didn’t spend a lot of time in the kitchen learning how to cook. How did you put ingredients together? Were you looking for the taste of your grandmother’s food or were you trying to make your own —

Lydia Olivares: Yes.

Cynthia Torres: Okay.

Lydia Olivares: Yes, I was. Especially like the spices, because in Mexican cooking what gives flavoring to any kind of dish is the spices, the combination of the spices. And I really don’t know how to measure, I just know by —

Joe Olivares: A pinch of this and pinch of that.

Lydia Olivares: — a pinch of this, a pinch of that. And then grinding the spices in the molcajete. I don’t even know what you call molcajete in English.

Joe Olivares: A grinding stone, I guess.

Lydia Olivares: And just the smell of the spices, you can tell, okay, it needs more of this, more of that.

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And just any dish that you make in Spanish and Mexican cooking it's the spices or how you combine everything together.

Joe Olivares: She's a good cook now. Just about everything she makes it's good, good tasting, good smelling. But before we got married, I remember this story, that she really didn't cook that much, right?

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: [Laughter] So since then she's become a very good cook.

Lydia Olivares: I love to be in the kitchen.

Joe Olivares: Now she says, "Get out of my kitchen. Get out of my kitchen. Go watch TV. Go do this. Get out of my kitchen."

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Cynthia Torres: [Laughter]

Joe Olivares: But everything now you make now, just about everything is good.

Lydia Olivares: He was not used to spicy food. To him anything that's chili, hot, he just doesn't like it. So when I started to cook for us I made it like I was used, how I learned how to do it. "It's got too much peppers, too much peppers." I had to tone it down, tone it down. Now gradually he's tolerated it more. But I still, even to this day, have to watch the amount of spices I put, especially pepper, in the food because of him. He's not used to eating with chili, and I mean chili like —

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Joe Olivares: Spices.

Lydia Olivares: No. Not chili powder but chili chilies. And I love it, so I have to have chili with my food, Mexican food.

Joe Olivares: And I said she's a good cook, that doesn't mean just Mexican food. Sometimes she fixes some Italian food. [Gasps] Or she says, "I've got a surprise for you." [Laughter] Last weekend — she knows I like potato salad. And she says, "I got a surprise for you," but she won't tell me what it is. "I've got a surprise for you," which is the —

Lydia Olivares: Pasta salad.

Joe Olivares: Is that the pasta salad?

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: Pasta salad.

Cynthia Torres: Oh, yeah. That was awesome!

Joe Olivares: And then, what's the other thing? Fideo.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: What's fideo? Macaroni?

Lydia Olivares: Vermicelli.

Joe Olivares: Fideo is vermicelli?

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: And it smells so good, and it tastes good.

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So it's not just Mexican, like when she makes — last week she made some frijoles a la charra. Those were good, and you can have them just about any time, for breakfast or in the evening or when we're barbecuing. Good. Good cook. Good smelling.

Cynthia Torres: What meals did you have together as a family when you had your kids?

Lydia Olivares: Well, breakfast when the kids were going to school, I would get up earlier and always make a couple of flour tortillas. I'd make papas con huevos, traditional or whatever, and make them the little taquitos and they'd be ready while they were getting up and ready. And I'd get ready, and then they ate before going to school.

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So it was more or less together in the morning, but it was in a rush going to school. Now, in the evening we always had a meal together. Always had dinner together. And, oh, I don't know, we'd make all sorts of things, tacos and — every day I would make dinner.

Joe Olivares: Another thing she'd make, she'd save a lot of those — the patties or the — to make tortillas?

Lydia Olivares: Tostadas.

Joe Olivares: Tostadas. Anyway, she'd leave some.

Lydia Olivares: Oh, I would make, yeah, flour tortillas.

Joe Olivares: And she would cover them with wax paper and when we would come home from school or she was working in the house I was home already and I'd try to make those tortillas, roll them out.

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And I would take that rolling pin — but the tortillas would come out — they'd look like Africa or Australia. The kids would eat it with butter.

Lydia Olivares: We were very lucky because since he was a teacher, and he was always in the class — a number of times the principals wanted him to go into administration, but he never did — so he taught at the school that the kids were in. He'd come home with them. I'd be working but he'd come home and give them a snack while I came home and made dinner for them.

Joe Olivares: But she would come home and take [inaudible 0:32:46] the thing and she'd go [whistling sound] and they would come out a perfectly round tortilla. Me, and they would spread out and then they'd shrink again. Roll them up, they'd shrink again.

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And they would come out, that looks like Africa. That looks like — [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: So what I did was I would spread them out and put wax paper in between them so I'd have a pile of — they were uncooked tortillas, but they were spread up, so that was easier.

Cynthia Torres: And what were dinners like? What was the conversation like? How was it? Was it also a fun time like when you were growing up?

Lydia Olivares: Was it a what?

Cynthia Torres: Was it also a fun time like when you were growing up?

Lydia Olivares: Oh, yes. Yeah. We'd sit there, the four of us, and just have fun. The kids would only watch TV for a little while after coming home from school, and it was family time. We'd sit there and just have fun.

Joe Olivares: Just playing with the kids.

Cynthia Torres: Is there any one particular dinner that is most memorable?

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Lydia Olivares: At home?

Cynthia Torres: At home.

Lydia Olivares: They were all the same thing.

Joe Olivares: No. I remember one time that the — who was there? Corie and Steve and Belinda, Sissy, or some kids from school that they didn't like — they had never seen Chinese food.

Lydia Olivares: Oh, yeah.

Joe Olivares: And I think you were making eggrolls or — anyway, so they say, "Oh, what is that?"

Lydia Olivares: "I want to make you some Chinese eggrolls." "Ughhh."

Joe Olivares: They said, "Ughhh."

Lydia Olivares: We had that rule at our house, the kids were not going to tell me they didn't like anything. I said, "You're not going to tell me that you don't like something if you've never tasted."

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I would get the trashcan and I'd say, "Taste it. If you don't like it you can spit it out, but you're not gonna tell me you don't like it if you've never tasted it." So that was a rule. So it was here.

We were already here. And I made eggrolls for them from scratch.

Joe Olivares: And they ate those things! Gee.

Lydia Olivares: Oh, man. They loved 'em.

Joe Olivares: And then they wanted more. But at first they were saying — actually they didn't say, they just looked at the eggrolls, "What is that?" [Laughter] "That's Chinese food, eggrolls."

Lydia Olivares: "Taste them."

Joe Olivares: "Taste them." And then they ate them all and I think they wanted some more.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm. Of course they did. And that's another thing that our families were so close, Sonny and them and you guys and Josie and Monche, all the kids, we'd go pick 'em up at school.

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Everybody gave a ride to everybody and gave them snacks. It was very rare — I don't think we ever grilled just the four of us, very rarely.

Joe Olivares: No.

Lydia Olivares: It was usually with family, either at our house or at somebody else's.

Joe Olivares: It was like a standing invitation for everyone. What are you gonna do? It's the weekend. They'd say, okay, we're gonna barbecue. Where? At what time?

Lydia Olivares: What do I bring?

Joe Olivares: Everybody would show up. And that was a party time because the kids would be outside playing and then the women would be sitting there talking and we guys were out there.

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Now, we were drinking beers, of course, and watching TV, especially, like Lydia said, the football games. But when it was time to eat, the kids would eat first. But we'd say, okay, let's feed the kids first, and they'd come over. And then we'd eat, and the women would serve them, and they would eat. And then the adults would sit down to eat. But first we would take care of the kids.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm. And then there was a bunch of kids, a bunch of us, and the tables were normal sized, so we really didn't have a big enough table for all of us to sit at at the same time. But you're saying about a memorable — that's the norm. Then we'd have great big parties, especially Easter. I think Easter was the most —

Joe Olivares: Easter?

Lydia Olivares: Yeah, Easters, because we'd have the big bags of cascarones.

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And we'd always grill.

Joe Olivares: And the egg hunt.

Lydia Olivares: Egg hunt. And those, I think, were the most memorable. Even going to the island or going on vacation, 'cause we always even went on vacation together. But I think Easters were special 'cause we'd all go to church in the morning and then come to — usually here because we

had the biggest house and biggest yard. And we'd grill or hide the cascarones while you guys were grilling. And then we'd have a big —

Joe Olivares: A competition and games. We used to play games.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah, a lot of games.

Joe Olivares: The balloon toss, carrying an egg —

Lydia Olivares: With a spoon.

Joe Olivares: — with a spoon. And the egg toss, right? And then we had a tortilla —

Lydia Olivares: Remember that?

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Joe Olivares: Remember the tortilla run? [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: You'd get in lines, rows of people, like, here, and then we'd toss an egg, but you'd have to catch so it wouldn't break and then throw it back and forth. And once you broke your egg you were out and see what team was the —

Joe Olivares: The tortilla run; did you ever play that game?

Cynthia Torres: I don't remember that.

Lydia Olivares: You'd have to put a tortilla in between your knees—

Joe Olivares: You'd have a tortilla here and you'd run.

Lydia Olivares: — and run races.

Joe Olivares: And then if you dropped your tortilla —

Lydia Olivares: You had to go back and restart.

Joe Olivares: — you'd have to go back. And then, when you get to a certain point you have to come back, but you gotta waddle like a duck and then hold the tortilla here between your legs and **[let the tortilla run right 0:39:48]**.

Lydia Olivares: [Laughter]

Joe Olivares: And everyone participated.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. I think Easters were our most fun. It was a kid thing.

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And even way after the kids were grown Easter is just — in fact, I have some cascarones there that the last couple of years something happened, and we couldn't have —

Joe Olivares: Well, and Easter is also during the daytime. Christmas is — Santa Claus comes at nighttime so people have to be at your house at a certain time or going to bed early because Santa is coming. But Easter was —

Lydia Olivares: A whole day event.

Joe Olivares: Yeah. And the kids still remember all that stuff that they did.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah.

Cynthia Torres: And did you do any teaching of cooking in the kitchen?

Lydia Olivares: Teaching the kids? Teaching Corie?

Cynthia Torres: Or Steve.

0:41:02

Lydia Olivares: Well, that's another thing that I guess I just transitioned into the role of my grandmother. I did everything. Like on Thanksgiving, yeah, they would help chop up the stuff for the stuffing but not really.

Cynthia Torres: And the grill?

Lydia Olivares: Your sisters? No, were —

Joe Olivares: No. As far as I know we didn't grill.

Cynthia Torres: Or did you —

Joe Olivares: And my brother, on Sunday especially we'd go by there and the kids would go to Jesse's house to be there just getting together.

0:42:01

And they were at the right age that they would enjoy being with family and being there and barbecuing. Maybe, like, once, twice a month we'd go there after church, and we'd just sit there and talk and have a good time. But, like you said, we didn't grow up with barbecuing unless a special occasion, but it became a tradition, I think. More like a tradition especially during the football season. We're gonna get together at this house and we're gonna barbecue and you bring this, and somebody brings this, somebody else brings this. But I'm trying to remember. When we started the barbecues, I guess, is when the kids were little.

0:43:04

Everybody was little back then.

Cynthia Torres: Did you teach Corie or Steve how to do the grill and how to start the fire?

Joe Olivares: No. But one thing we did — we were talking about it last week — Corie and Steve would have their own fire, a small little fire. We would have the grill here. We would be fixing the meat or whatever and we would put a small amount of charcoal —

Lydia Olivares: Like a hibachi or something for them.

Joe Olivares: It was on the shovel.

Lydia Olivares: Oh, yes.

Joe Olivares: On the shovel. And that was their grill. Of course, we were there watching them, and they loved to wrap up an onion with plenty of butter and wrap it up in foil and throw them on the ashes and the embers. And that would be their barbecuing.

0:44:02

And then they would enjoy that because they had their own fire going, even though it wasn't a fire, it was just the charcoal.

Lydia Olivares: But I think Corie learned from just watching me or the smells and the — I don't know what it is. Steven has learned to — they're very, very good cooks.

Joe Olivares: He learned how to — he knows.

Lydia Olivares: And a lot of the things that he picked up from my — I wouldn't call it recipes but my way of preparing things.

Cynthia Torres: And now that you have grandkids, and you see Corie —

Lydia Olivares: Oh, the grandkids. I think Michael has been teaching them, especially Sal, how to grill, a little bit of that.

0:45:04

Well, I think you did a little bit with Diego or —

Joe Olivares: Yeah, a little bit.

Lydia Olivares: I don't know. I guess we just took the roles of our ancestors, you know, this is my kitchen, you're in the way. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: Well, I do remember coming in and, when phones had good video or a decent video, recording you making things. And I do remember on Facebook showing little cooking classes, how do you make tortillas or something.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm, right. Yeah, that was one time that Michael came over and said, “Okay, you're going to teach us how to make tortillas, flour tortillas.” Okay. So we sat here and, “Well how much . . . ?” “I don't know, Michael. I just put that . . .”

0:46:02

And I remember a friend of mine told me the easiest way to do it is half a bag of the flour, five-pound, half of that and half a block of the lard or the stick . . .

Joe Olivares: Butter?

Lydia Olivares: Shortening. Shortening. And then you break it up, just by feel, and then a handful of salt and a handful of baking powder, and then hot water. But it just — by feel. That's about the closest of a recipe. And just by the feel and do this. But no, you need to break it more.

Joe Olivares: Like your grandmother used to do it.

Lydia Olivares: Yes. Yes. And they did good. They came out good.

0:46:58

Joe Olivares: I think that that was the way ladies would fix food or cook back then, just a pinch of this and a pinch of that.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah.

Joe Olivares: Even your biscuits.

Lydia Olivares: [Laughter] Yeah, the biscuits. And it's really just that Pioneer mix and milk, but it's just—

Cynthia Torres: It's more than that 'cause I've tried it.

Lydia Olivares: Huh?

Cynthia Torres: I've tried it. It's more than that.

Lydia Olivares: Corie has tried it. Diego has tried it. My sister. And even right now that I made these and —

Joe Olivares: Well, you had some.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Lydia Olivares: I was telling Diego, "Look this his how . . ." I don't know, it's the —

Joe Olivares: And you weren't here when they first came out. Oh, they're fluffy biscuits.

Lydia Olivares: The butter just [inaudible 0:47:56].

Joe Olivares: If you like butter. Some people like butter, some people do not.

0:48:00

Cynthia Torres: I do. With biscuits, I do.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: When they come out they're just big, cooked properly just the right amount, and the color is perfect, perfect biscuits.

Cynthia Torres: And you're still grilling out in the back?

Lydia Olivares: Oh, every day. And now we even just grill just for the two of us. We love the thighs. Just two or three thighs, that's enough for the both of us.

Joe Olivares: Yeah.

Lydia Olivares: And leg quarters we love. We like to make leg quarters because they take longer. They take longer to cook, and we just sit around the grill and —

Joe Olivares: Enjoy the backyard and the shade and the breeze.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. And have our cocktails.

0:49:01

And it's always just the two of us, or should I call my sister, or should I call our daughter and them, the family? The more people for us the bigger the group that — and I love being in the kitchen. Even when you'd go to the island and he would say, "You're taking so much stuff to make! We can just go out to eat." No. I just love to be in the kitchen. What's the sense of going out to breakfast? So I love to be in the kitchen. I love it, I love it, I love it.

Cynthia Torres: But you also grill — ‘cause you fished for a long time in the gulf.

Joe Olivares: Oh, yeah.

Lydia Olivares: And even before they had the boat he would go wading here in South Bay and bring — oh, my gosh. And that’s another thing that he would — we never order fish at a restaurant because we were spoiled.

0:50:04

He’d catch the fish in the morning, and we’d have it at night. And there’s nothing better.

Joe Olivares: Fresh fish. Ooh, fresh fish!

Lydia Olivares: And that’s one time I just called my grandmother, “Nana, how do you make fish soup?” ‘Cause she made the best fish soup. So she told me and that’s one of the best things that I’ll make also. Oh, fish soup is so good! Just fresh fish.

Joe Olivares: Not seafood soup.

Lydia Olivares: Just fish.

Joe Olivares: Just fish.

Cynthia Torres: What kind of fish did you get?

Joe Olivares: The red.

Lydia Olivares: Usually red.

Joe Olivares: Red or drum, black drum, but normally it’s redfish. We always had fresh fish. And then we’d invite a bunch of people and have a fish fry.

0:50:59

Lydia Olivares: If he'd bring two or three we'd call and have a big fish fry at home. Always, always sharing.

Joe Olivares: Throw in there some shrimp and some okra. Oh, I miss it 'cause the boat's gone and you can't get into that fishing spot anymore.

Cynthia Torres: I remember just you standing at the grill with your Budweiser.

Lydia Olivares: Oh, yes.

Cynthia Torres: And your little Longhorn koozie.

Joe Olivares: Yeah, uh-huh. It's there.

Cynthia Torres: Nice. Over the years growing up with your family and your food traditions and sitting down together at the table, that tradition just seems to have been passed along down each generation.

Lydia Olivares: Yes. Yes.

0:51:57

Cynthia Torres: How is it important to you and why was it important to you, becoming the people that you are, and why was it so important to pass along those food traditions?

Lydia Olivares: It's just the time of the day to get together.

Joe Olivares: That's a special closeness because, like you're saying, it's a good time because at this hour most everybody is home by now. In the morning you don't have enough time to sit

down and converse and enjoy the conversation because sometimes there's not even a conversation.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. You're in a hurry to get to work or school.

Joe Olivares: In a hurry for people to get to work or get to school. Same thing at noontime.

Lydia Olivares: Well, at noontime the kids would eat at school, and we'd eat at work.

0:53:01

Joe Olivares: Right. But we wouldn't sit and eat and talk. But now, since they're so close by, we can just call and say, "Hey, we're —" or they call us.

Lydia Olivares: But while they were growing up, while they were still home, it was just the time to get together.

Joe Olivares: Um-hm.

Lydia Olivares: And then, when we had something special, we'd always share. We'd call our friends, call our family, come eat. We have fish.

Joe Olivares: Oh, I still remember the fish and shrimp and sometimes — I don't know if you like oysters, fried oysters? [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: Oh!

Joe Olivares: And the okra and French fries. What else that the kids could eat?

Lydia Olivares: Yeah.

Joe Olivares: That's one thing. Another thing when the kids were going to school this house always full of kids. Not our kids or cousins. It was their friends.

0:54:03

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. Especially on a Friday afternoon if there was no football game they'd always be here watching TV.

Joe Olivares: Right there watching TV.

Lydia Olivares: And of course we'd make food for them, whatever. We would get pizzas or whatever. Food is just such an important part of our lives daily.

Joe Olivares: Mom and Dad, they'd call —

Lydia Olivares: We have about fifty kids that call us Mom and Dad.

Joe Olivares: Yeah. And the phone was right there, and we'd say, "Okay, get on the phone everyone." And most of the kids lived around here. "Okay. Get on phone to call your parents — where you are."

Lydia Olivares: Like, after prom or whatever they'd come over here and I'd make tons of biscuits and bacon and scrambled eggs.

Joe Olivares: Yeah. [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: And we've have them line up, "Call your parents that you're here. Call your parents that you're here."

0:55:02

So then they'd stay here.

Joe Olivares: "But, but, but Mr. O . . ." Because most of the kids were my students at Martin— most of them, not all of them — so I knew all of them or they knew me even though they weren't

in my class. But they'd say, "Mr. O . . ." "Get on the phone." "But they know where we are. We live around . . ." "Get the phone and call your parents that you're here."

Lydia Olivares: That you're here. Every prom or whatever they'd come over here afterwards at twelve or one o'clock in the morning.

Joe Olivares: Bring out the bacon, bring out the eggs, bring out the biscuits. [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: So it's always food. It's always about food. Always about food. And grilling is . . .

Joe Olivares: Grilling is special because, for one thing, we're by ourselves now but we're still enjoying it.

0:55:59

You're out there, it's shady, it's breezy, and you have more time — like you said, those leg quarters, they take a lot longer time than thighs. So you just sit there, have your drinks and converse and enjoy the fire, getting the fire ready.

Lydia Olivares: And if we have family come over we sit and reminisce. There's been times they say, "No, no. Don't put the fire on yet. Let's just sit and relax, have a cocktail and his beer." And we'd sit there and just laugh and have fun. "Okay. Now put the grill on." So we'd spend some more time outside.

Joe Olivares: Put some music.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Cynthia Torres: So what kinds of things do you think coming together around food and learning together and having those conversations and being intimate with each other around the grill or in the kitchen and everything, what kind of value does that add?

0:57:05

Perhaps that's different from the grab-and-go type lifestyles that are so common.

Lydia Olivares: Different from what?

Cynthia Torres: Than, like, the grab-and-go food lifestyles that are so common.

Lydia Olivares: Oh. Hmm. I think it's just the slowing down and just being together. The loving of just the bonding, and it's been a bond. It's just been bonding since the kids were little or we were little around food, especially with the grilling. I think that has evolved. We didn't use to do that when we were young but now it's always grilling.

0:58:01

We sit around and it's a three— or four-hour thing because we get together and then we slowly light the grill, and we still sit around and talk. And then we grill, especially the leg quarters, I would say that takes longer, so we have more time to sit and - usually we're just laughing or reminiscing or telling stories or making fun of each other or laughing about our whatever and just having fun.

Joe Olivares: And once and a while try to dance. [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: And so it's always about food.

Joe Olivares: But the thing is, if you think about it, every time we'd get together, I'm not talking about immediate family, but Sonny and Johnny and everybody else, it was mainly to barbecue something.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: It wasn't, like, saying, okay, I made some chicken with rice or whatever, come eat.

0:59:01

No. We'd be outside. We'd be outside.

Lydia Olivares: Yes.

Joe Olivares: And the kids would be doing their thing and we would be doing our thing. This was when they were —

Lydia Olivares: Really, the only thing that we would make for the inside — and that's another thing that we share — is, like, when it gets really cold they know — my family knows the first cold front I make this big old pot of beef soup. Or, like, at New Year's we'll make the big pot of menudo, and that's the only thing I think that we eat inside, that we don't go out and grill. But as soon as we get a real good cold front, everybody knows, we have to make soup.

Joe Olivares: And Corie's the first one, "Are you gonna make caldo? Are you gonna make some soup?"

Lydia Olivares: "It's cold. Are you making soup?" "Yes, I'm making soup."

Joe Olivares: Cold is, like, 68, 65.

1:00:00

Lydia Olivares: [Laughter] And then, around New Year's, it's always the menudo, the big pot of menudo.

Joe Olivares: That'd be good right now. I would like that.

Lydia Olivares: That's another thing that my grandmother — she wasn't the, come here, let me teach you, it was just we'd be there watching and that's how she made it. And just by the smells.

Joe Olivares: Did she make menudo?

Lydia Olivares: Oh, yes. Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: And then your famous frijoles a la charra.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Cynthia Torres: So good.

Joe Olivares: Those are good.

Lydia Olivares: And lately within, I would say, the last year, H-E-B has been canning just the boiled beans so that's what takes the longest, the boiling of the beans.

1:01:01

But these last ones that I made last week, they were from a can. Well, just the beans but I did make them a la charra with the spices and everything. And modern things are making it easier. Like, what I call the lazy rice with the Knorr tomato bouillon instead of the spices and stuff.

Joe Olivares: And you've got now — I just bought some this morning — refried beans. And before you'd have to make that.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm. Oh, yeah.

Joe Olivares: And then you have the ranch-style beans and the pinto beans.

Lydia Olivares: And the black beans.

Joe Olivares: And the black beans. What else?

Lydia Olivares: My sister's really a little bit more exotic in her cooking. It's really good.

1:02:03

Well, another thing is that her husband, Bennie will — he just loves eating anything and everything. He doesn't like spicy stuff, so I have to [inaudible 1:02:28] exotic sandwiches with the Hawaiian bread and all, he doesn't like sweet bread or stuff like that. And we both just learned by watching our grandmother. My mother used to cook very differently. It was just roasts and stuff like that but very little because she worked, and my grandmother used to take care of us.

1:03:00

Cynthia Torres: What do you hope that your grandkids get out of coming together? What are you hoping that they're getting that they can take with them in life?

Lydia Olivares: I hope they feel the familia or the family bond of just being together. Now with technology they spend so much time with their games and phones and stuff. But still a good thing that Michael and Corie, they say, "No. Put away your phones. Come, let's sit outside." So they'll sit and talk. And I think they do appreciate the bonding that we have.

1:03:58

Joe Olivares: And they say they consider this as their house or their home. They've got one over there and one over here. They come over here it's not like saying we're going to Pop and Nana's

house. We gotta be careful to do this or do that. No. They come in here, if they're hungry they open the fridge no matter what time it is. And another thing, though, the kids that are grown up, many of them don't stay around here. They leave. They go to another state, and they meet a different culture and different people, but somehow they still value what was learned over here.

Lydia Olivares: And we've had a lot of them come back.

Joe Olivares: Yes. And [Oli 1:04:57] said in New York she tries to find a taco place.

1:05:00

Cynthia Torres: [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. But it's very important. I think in the Mexican culture the sitting around the table is very, very important and it's a bonding situation, and that's the way things are done. And now with the grilling that we all do, we grill at least a couple of times a week at least, if not three.

Joe Olivares: And we can smell the neighbors and their —

Lydia Olivares: Ooh, somebody's barbecuing.

Cynthia Torres: [Laughter] Yeah.

Joe Olivares: Somebody's barbecuing. Somebody's starting a fire. Oh, it smells good!

Lydia Olivares: Okay. Let's barbecue.

Cynthia Torres: Well, there's a lot that comes with bonding with your family. There's this you know that you're not alone.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Cynthia Torres: You know that there's someone to talk to.

Lydia Olivares: Right. Right.

1:06:00

Joe Olivares: And even sometimes Steve calls and he says, "Mom, how do you make this?" or, "What do you put in this?" So Lydia says, okay, this and that and that and this.

Lydia Olivares: Right.

Joe Olivares: 'Cause there's always cooking over there. Not grilling but making all kinds of fancy foods.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. We hardly ever go out to eat when they come down here. They get in the kitchen, and they make their — something Española — tortilla Española that they make with the potatoes and stuff. Or even migas, migas with egg and all this stuff. They love to get in the kitchen. And then we'll grill or . . .

Joe Olivares: It's odd because when we go to the island we'll go out to eat and at different restaurants.

1:07:02

When they come down they buy all their food, and they fix — they don't go out. They come to the condo, and they fix their own food. But there they buy whatever they're gonna cook and they — like saying, okay, let's go eat over here. Let's go eat at this restaurant. They never — they stay at home and eat there.

Lydia Olivares: I think both kids and we all — my sister and I, we just love to be in the kitchen.

And then, he loves to grill. We've, the last few years, gotten used to just the two of us, but

usually it's my sister or all of them, Corie and Michael and the kids. And always the more the merrier.

1:07:58

And everybody knows that they can come in anytime, anytime. There's always enough food for everybody. There's always room for one more, like our sign says.

Joe Olivares: [Laughter] That's what she's got there, little plaque, "There's always room for one more" Cleto gave you that, I think.

Lydia Olivares: Um-hm.

Joe Olivares: There's always room for one more.

Lydia Olivares: Because everybody knows, they always know, everybody knows that everybody's welcome. And like I say, our front door is always open, unlocked. People just come in.

Cynthia Torres: Well, thank you. Thank you all for sitting down and talking about it and everything and sharing your lives and everything and your histories. It's been wonderful.

Joe Olivares: We enjoyed it, too.

Lydia Olivares: Yeah. Yeah, I think food is the bonding —

1:09:01

Joe Olivares: The main attraction. [Laughter]

Lydia Olivares: — glue in our traditions. And really it is a tradition in a way.

Joe Olivares: It is. That's what I was going to say.

Lydia Olivares: But it's our norm. There's nothing special because we do it every day.

Cynthia Torres: Well, thank you.

Lydia Olivares: You're welcome.

Cynthia Torres: Thank you so much.

[End]