

Interview with
LUIS E. AREVALO

October 10, 2023

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This program has received funding from Utah.
Humanities and Utah Division of State History.

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LUIS E. AREVALO

Luis E. Arevalo was interviewed by Cameron Nielsen on October 10, 2023 in St. George, Utah. He related his experiences of coming to the United States and living in St. George. Caitlinn Grimm also participated.

CG: I am starting the recording.

CN: Alright. I'm here with Luis Arevalo to do an interview for the Estamos Aqui oral history project. My name is Cameron Nielsen, I will be interviewing today. With me is Caitlinn Grimm who will be acting as the recorder. It is October 10th, 2023 and we are on the campus of Utah Tech University in St. George, Utah.

Alright, Professor Arevalo, could state and spell your full name?

LA: Yes. Luis E. Arevalo. The spelling is L - U - I - S. Middle initial E. A - R - E - V - A - L - O.

CN: Thank you, and what languages do you speak?

LA: English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

CN: And where were you born?

LA: I was born in El Salvador, Central America.

CN: Alright. Thank you. So those were the very short questions; now for the more open-ended narrative questions. Tell me about your childhood and family.

LA: I was born to a regular [chuckles] Spanish family in El Salvador. When I said a regular, my extended family was my family. I grew up with seventeen cousins, went to school together, they – that I remember is very happy, you know, very happy times, yeah.

CN: Could you elaborate a little bit on maybe the circumstances that your family was in? What was the living situation of everyone?

LA: Yeah, my dad was an accountant and my mom a nurse, so you can say that for El Salvador that would put us in the middle class. The rest of my family, the majority of them were teachers, you know working for the governmental institutions, public school teachers mainly. Although some of them were in the private sector, you know, so that would be – And, you know, I had everything in my family from people who are very well off to people who were not very well off, so we had the full range.

CN: Mm-hmm. Did you primarily grow up in an urban or rural sort of setting then?

LA: Urban. But seventy percent of the population in El Salvador is urban.

CN: Mm-hmm. Thank you very much. Any follow-up questions you wanted to add?

CG: What types of things did you do for fun with your family?

LA: Summers, the equivalent of summers here, our vacation starts around October, end of October, till January so that's the best time to go to the beach. The beach are very – you know, the rivers are running very clear 'cause there's no rain in the uplands so they get very clear water to the beach so they don't muddy the water, so that's the best time to go and the temperature's kinda mild. So my main – I grew up in a city, in Santa Tecla, which is about thirty minutes from the beach. So going to the beach, going to rivers, or hiking in the mountains were our main pastime. In addition to other things, like playing basketball or soccer, swimming in the local pool, things like that.

CN: Thank you. Tell me about school.

LA: School is probably one of the things that I really enjoyed the most. You know, I went through – I'm a product of the public education system in El Salvador. I went through my grammar school years and, you know, high school. Half and half. My first half is in the public school system and the other half in a private school, a school run by the – it's a brotherhood, it's a Catholic congregation. I don't know if you have heard of Marist. Yeah, so I went to a Marist high school.

CN: Very good. Did you have any – were you involved in any particular extracurricular activities? Extracurricular – that's a hard word to say – activities in school?

LA: Yes, yes, you know especially during my high school years. The school had a lot of activities, but the ones that I preferred the most were kinda missionary work in the local rural communities. In El Salvador, if you go like thirty minutes away from the city, it's totally rural. It's not like here that you hit the suburbs and you find things, like –. There, no, it's boonies. So you have a lot opportunity within a very short range, you know driving range, to be in the countryside and that's what we would do. You know, some of our summers were dedicated to that. You know, working in projects like helping building houses, fixing roads, bridges, things like that.

CN: Okay. So, primarily service projects rather than proselytizing then?

LA: Oh, none of that. But you don't need to do that in El Salvador. Ninety-five percent of population is Catholic. What are you gonna do? You know?

CN: Right, right.

LA: Make them more Catholic than what you are? [Chuckles].

CG: [Chuckles].

CN: Mm-hmm. Yeah, thanks for clarifying that for... okay... Any other follow-up questions for you?

CG: Are there any teachers or classes that stood out to you?

LA: Yes, I had my fourth grade teacher was a great influence, you know, had a great influence in me. She was a literature teacher and she develop in us the reading habit and which I benefit greatly from it, you know, at a very – but in El Salvador the educational system requires that you read a lot, more so than here in the United States. It has its pros and its cons. By the time you graduate from high school, you had read, probably, a very respectable reading list of classic readings, but you don't get to read the local literature, that's the down side of it. And my dad, my dad was a great influence in me as a teacher as well. I remember he took me to my first book fair. I was very little, I probably would say I was in second or third grade when he took me. And he insisted that we would learn how to read very well. And he would read to us for fun. Those two I remember as my best teachers.

CN: Was literature your favorite subject?

LA: Not always.

CN: Not always?

LA: Not always. I was very interested in social issues, so. But literature is very social, so that's why I, you know, pursued literature, you know, as not only as my hobby, but as my profession.

CN: And then, that was up to high school. What was your process for pursuing education after high school?

LA: I attend a Jesuit university in El Salvador, graduated as an economist there. And then I decided that I wanted to get a Ph.D. in economics and that's where I came to the United States, you know. But at the time, my mom was living here. She had a job as a nurse here and she moved, and I was there finishing school. And as soon as I graduated school we had a great uprising in El Salvador and so jobs were very scarce, so I decided to migrate to United States. My mom was already living here, so I – and to pursue my degree in economics, but it didn't work like that. So there were a couple of years there that I was learning English. I thought I knew English when I came here, but you know, you never know enough to go to graduate school. So, to gain more mastery of the English language, I decided to join the army and learn some English while being there, but they sent me to Germany. I wish I could have stayed here –

CN: [Laughter].

LA: [Laughter] – stayed here and learned a little bit more. I think my English is very bookish. You know, I wish I could have been in high school and learned, you know, what everybody learns in high school, and the cultural part, that's very important. I think I missed on that part. Yeah, so.

CN: Did you have to pick up some German, then, in the army?

LA: No.

CN: No.

LA: The army is one week, that's the training. One week of German, and no. Most of the times I was in the field, you know, surrounded by people who only spoke English, so no chance for me to.

CN: How long were you in the army for?

LA: Four years, seven months, and nineteen days. Yeah.

CN: [Chuckles] Not that you were counting.

LA: No.

CN: [Laughter]. What did you do when you were there?

LA: I was a supply sergeant. I – basically, what you do is you, you get everything that your unit will need for the deployment to keep it packed and ready to move. That's basically – I oversaw my unit's bunker with ammunition and that was very dangerous, you know but – And the food, you know the MRE's [Meals Ready-to-Eat], the tents, fuel, things like that. You know, so, it was a happy time. There wasn't anything going in Europe at the time, so we get to travel a lot in Europe, so that was great.

CN: Alright. Any other follow-ups before we move on? Okay. Describe some of your favorite religious or cultural traditions that you grew up with.

LA: The Day of the Dead is one of my favorite, you know, celebrations. It's not like here, that you consider that like a ceremony. There, it's just part of life. You do it, and it's slightly different there. It is, the Day of the Dead is a time in which you go and clean up the tombs. If they need some repairs, you do that. Of course, you place some flowers and that's what you do. You say a few prayers, but the activities when you leave the cemetery, you know, there's a, at least in my hometown, there's a whole, it's like a fair. You know, there's food, there's rides. It doesn't look like Day of the Dead; it's just a very joyful thing, you know. So I remember that one and the day of, we call it the Day of the Cross, basically coincides with our harvest. It's kinda hard because in the tropics, you get harvest every month.

CG: [Laughter].

CN: [Laughter].

LA: It's very abundant. But a month in particular, in May, when the new rains for the new year, they start. There's flowers all over the place and fruits. And people don't know what to do with all the fruits, so what they do is they place crosses in their backyards and they put all the fruit that they're not gonna use, that they cannot process, and they put it around the cross and the neighbors come with little baskets and they pick fruit. And you're free to go to other neighbor's house to pick up fruit as well. If you see it, more than a religious ceremony, it's a way of sharing things, you know, so -. Those are the two that I remember the most. You know? The other ones I didn't care much because they make me pray, you know -.

CN: [Laughter].

CG: [Laughter].

LA: [Laughing] My grandma was a very religious person and she made us pray all the time, you know, forced us, so that didn't go very well.

CN: What brought you to the St. George area?

LA: Work.

CN: Mm-hmm?

LA: I was living in West Virginia. I was a professor there in the University of West Virginia. And I thought - you know, West Virginia is very wet and sometimes very cold - I'm getting old and I decided that I wanted a more benign, you know, weather, and so I thought that this area will do that. Okay, yeah, but it has some extremes, you know, the heat, yeah, yeah. I realize. But, that was the motivation, so that's why we moved. You know, our idea was to finish here at our professional careers and then retire here.

CN: Okay. I guess, is there anything else you want to say about your professional career between where we were before and then coming here. Seems like that was a big chunk of time. Is there anything you wanna say about that?

LA: Yes, you know, after the army, I went to graduate school. I got lucky because then the army was giving a lot of money for college, you know. I was very lucky, now that I see my students and the amount of debt that they go into just to get, you know, a bachelor's degree is - I consider myself lucky. The savings I did and with the help of the army, I got through two master degrees. You know, I didn't have to go into debt, you know, for that. I didn't have enough for a Ph.D., so I decided to do two masters.

CG: [Chuckles].

- LA: So, I got a master's in economics and another master's in literature. And then I worked, I think, four years at a college in North Carolina and then I was accepted into Duke University and the University of North Carolina, both, but Duke was like forty thousand dollars more expensive [laughing] than North Carolina, so I decided to go to North Carolina. So I graduated from there.
- CN: Alright. Thank you very much. M'kay. How have your religious and cultural traditions changed since childhood or being in St. George?
- LA: They haven't changed that much, we still celebrate the Day of the Cross here and the Day of the Dead, and I wasn't a very religious person so that hasn't changed, you know. So I'm still, I continued being not a very religious person. I'm not a church-goer, I'm not, you know.
- CN: Is kinda of the way that that is done somewhat different here because of the setting. I mean, certainly, there aren't as many people doing those cultural traditions here, right? So, how is it different? Or is it still pretty much the same –
- LA: Oh, you do it – those, the only difference, from practicing those customs back home and practicing them here, is the amount of people that participate, because they're very domestic celebrations.
- CN: Okay.
- LA: So you can still – and indeed we have them. We haven't – we practice that at home. You know, I have a son and a daughter and they picked up that. It hasn't changed for me a lot.
- CN: That makes sense because they're very domestic. ...
- CG: Have you stopped doing anything to fit the local culture?
- LA: To be honest, I don't think I have. I'm a very – how could I put this – reserved person.
- CG: Hmm.
- LA: I don't go out much. You know, I have everything at home to keep me busy and happy, so I haven't changed, you know, I don't. Now, compared to the other place that I was before, in West Virginia, but compared to El Salvador I think, you know, I miss the beach. I don't get to go. Like there, when I'm home, I can go every week if I want to. But not here, so that has changed. So I have found other ways of finding relaxation here.
- CN: M'kay. Will you tell me about your work?
- LA: That's, along with my education, you know, work is the other thing that keeps me alive. I really like the contact with students, especially the students that return from missions and

have different experience to what they have learned around here. That, to me, is very exciting to see them, that they have learned that life can be organized in a different way. That, to me, is very important to the learning process. Personal growth. 'Cause that, that has been an eye opening for me. Coming from El Salvador to the United States, learning that life can be organized [chuckles] diff– it has been an eye opening. So I'm not very – I used to be very traditionalist, but if I see that other arrangements work, when I go home, now I'm more open. So, I guess traveling opens your eyes; basically, that's what it is. That's why I'm happy for them that they had the opportunity to go abroad and come back with new experiences, you know, so –

CG: I guess, for the recording, can you tell us what you do now?

LA: I teach at the language department [at Utah Tech University]. I teach the upper level courses in literature and composition, yeah, so. I had other things to do. I was department chair for a little while. I was the director of global studies and the director of global engagement for the university. And I had other things, like I was the chair of the service learning committee. Things like that, very nice appointments, you know I was the [faculty] senator for about three years, also. You know, I think I've been very engaged in the life of the university. That, you know, that to me, the university is my link to the outside world. My house and the university, that is my world, and the library, of course, so –.

CN: Okay, that helps a lot. Have you taught the same kinds of classes for most of your career, or is what you're teaching now different than what you taught earlier...?

LA: No, I was – When you get hired in higher education, you get hired because you're a specialist, so you keep doing what you know best how to do forever. I was hired here to teach, you know, literature and culture, and that's what I've been doing. But I have had the opportunity to use my degree in economics to create content for other courses in business or in economics. I teach a course in business Spanish, you know. It is quasi an introductory course into economics 101, something like that. So, I get to do other things, you know.

CN: Thank you. What has been your experience with the broader St. George community?

LA: I seldom go out and have relationships with other people. So, I think, in that sense, they have been minimal, you know. I see my neighbors, I wave them "hi" and that's it, you know. It's, the way people relate to each other here is very different than the way I'm used to. My neighbors there, they're like my family, I know what's going on in their lives, and if I can help them, I help them. But here, people are like me, very reserved. They protect their private lives a lot. You have to respect that. I expect other people to respect that, you know. So, that's why. I don't cross the street and go and talk to the neighbors. If they wanna come, that's fine, you know.

CN: What are your thoughts on the Latino or Hispanic community in the area?

LA: I mean, in general?

CN: Yeah, in general.

LA: I think they're, they're a vibrant bunch of people, hardworking, happy, family-oriented, you know. Through my wife, she's more social than I am, so I have met some of the community members and sometimes we go to gatherings with them, and to try food to cook, and things like that. I'm very happy. I feel, although everybody thinks that everybody who speaks Spanish is Mexican, okay. I don't feel offended by that. I would feel very proud to be a Mexican, there's nothing wrong with being a Mexican [laughter]. I would be very proud. But, I'm not. I'm not. But I enjoy the community, it's very diverse. The Latino community here is very diverse. You have Spaniards, people from South America, people from Central America, the Caribbean. It's amazing, really amazing.

CN: We've been enjoying hearing from all of them in these interviews as well. Are there a good number of people, specifically, from El Salvador? Is that a connection that you know, or really it is just that diverse?

LA: No, I don't – we don't have a group of Salvadorians who meet regularly. I know a few of 'em, you know, I buy pupusas once in a while and I get to meet them there. But, I don't go out of my way to socialize that way. Not because I don't want, it's because they have a different schedule to the one I have, you know. They work too much, I think. Yeah, they work too much. Sometimes they're busy during the weekend, which is when I have time for socializing, but they're working. So, it's that kind of thing. Where I live, I live in Washington, there's no – you cannot pinpoint a concentration, like a neighborhood, a Latino neighborhood, like you can or probably could in that area of town [St. George].

CN: Over by Sunset [Blvd].

LA: Yeah. That's not the case in Washington where I live, you know, so. And I think that I don't go to church here and that would have been my link to them, to the community. So I don't go to church here, so I haven't made those connections, you know.

CG: I'm interested, where do you get your pupusas?

LA: [Laughter].

CG: In a lot of these –

LA: Close to that area that you mentioned, that's where ...

CN: Tias?

LA: I don't know her name, you know.

CG: Okay.

CN: Might be the same one, on Sunset. It's where I get my pupusas.

LA: You mean the restaurant Tias? Yeah, I tried those –

CN: Oh, you were getting it from someone's house?

LA: In a house, there's a lady that, you know.

CN: Oh, okay. I was –

LA: But it's in that area.

CN: Yeah, thanks for clarifying that. Okay, how would you describe your relationship with white Americans?

LA: I think it's cordial, you know. You always find – it doesn't matter. I've lived in so many places. You know, the other day we were counting with my kids and my wife. We had moved seventeen times since I had been here in the United States, which is almost forty years. Seventeen times. So you get to see a lot of people, you get to know a lot of people, and we've lived in Europe. My wife went with me, we lived in Europe. I had traveled extensively in Latin America. With the exception of Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay, I've been to all the countries in Latin America. And you always find people that are different, you know. But if you put 'em in a scale, I have found more people in the world that have done good to me than people that have done wrong to me, so I consider myself lucky.

CN: Yeah, that's fortunate. Have you experienced racist or prejudiced behavior here?

LA: Like in all places. [Laughter] Why are you talking about it – yeah. There are. I live in the South for eighteen years and you get to experience it there and here as well. I mean, people are not saints here, they're not perfect, they have their moments, you know, so – but that's everywhere. This place is not special because there are especially racist people here, you know. They're like everywhere. But you learn how to deal with it. It's like when you're driving. If you see a rock in the middle of the – you're not gonna fight the rock, you just go around.

CG: That's a good analogy.

CN: Yeah, it's a good analogy. How has the area changed since you've been here?

LA: Well, I think the population has grown a lot, you know, you can see. And also the building. Washington fields, for example, has exploded. You know, when I came here ten years ago, you could barely see houses. You know, there were more fields and cows, and not anymore. You know, not anymore. One thing that worries me about that is how much we build and no consideration for the resources, the water. I come from a society where

the environment is very important. And I see here, the building is like frantic and you wonder in a few years what we gonna do water wise? What are we gonna do? I was talking to one of my neighbors and he tells me, “We’ll just keep digging deeper.” [Laughter] And I said, “Well, there’s a water table here, you cannot afford to do that.” “No, no, no. We’ll build deeper wells.” “Okay, good luck to you.” Yeah.

CG: Does that make you concerned about your retirement plans then?

LA: Yes. Of course. And I’m not staying, I’m moving back to the east coast.

CN: What changes have you noticed within the Latino-Hispanic community since you’ve been here?

LA: I don’t know. I don’t keep my finger in the pulse of the community, so I don’t know. But I can tell you the students I see here. A few years back, about four or five years ago, we had a night school. We started a night school here and the people were coming to the school were more like recent immigrants. Now, what we have – there has been a change in the population. Now, we get more people from other states who were born here in the United States, they come here to the University to study. They don’t come to study English, to this department, but to study Spanish or to study English or other things. So, that’s the change that I’m seeing, that younger Latinos –

CN: Yeah, so more second generation –?

LA: I wouldn’t say second generation. That’s a misconception here in this area. Even the title of your study “Here We Are.” “Aquí Estamos, We Are Here.” We have been here before the Anglos got here, you know.

CG: This was Mexico.

LA: Yeah, not only that, but you know. We were – we are, we have a presence where people acknowledge that or not, we have a presence and we have had a presence longer than the Anglos, you know. So in that, I would like to welcome you to our land [chuckles]. You know, welcome, be good neighbors.

CN: Well, and I personally have lived here for only about a year, so [laughter] definitely a newcomer in that sense. M’kay. Any follow-up questions you wanna put in?

CG: I mean, some of our Narrators have mentioned seeing more like public festivities and stuff in the Latino-Hispanic community here. Have you noticed that, or –?

LA: I know the church organizes a day, but I don’t. Since I don’t go to church I’m not too –

CG: Right.

LA: There used to be a festival in downtown St. George. I don't know if they have continued with that festival. One of the radio stations organized that one in years passed. I don't know if they're doing it. You know, so – I think, I don't know if that stat is correct, but the last time I check, between fifteen and seventeen percent of the St. George population were Latinos. I don't know if that is correct now, but it should have more presence, you know. It would be very interesting to learn why not, you know.

CN: Alright, last question.

LA: Good.

CG: Unless there's something else you'd like to –

LA: Nah.

CG: – talk about.

CN: [Laughter]. What would you like people to know about yourself or your community?

LA: Oh, not about myself, no. But about Latinos, I think they're very, they're a very welcoming bunch. They're very outgoing and I would like to see more interaction between those two communities, you know, there's two, like in the South. I don't know if you have had that experience, but in the South, in the very traditional part, there are two sections in town. The places where you are allowed and the places where you're not allowed. It worries if that will be the urban model that this town will follow, like segregating people by color, you know, which is pretty much – there's a concentration – I don't know, but I would like to see more interaction, you know. More communication.

CG: Communication in what ways; do you have any examples?

LA: Sharing community. Festivals for example, they don't have to be Latino festivals or white festivals, festivals for the people. And it's not that somebody's actively preventing this kind of events from happening, but sometimes you know the way, you're used to ways of behaving and you act like in the automatic pilot. And so let's be a little bit more conscious of one another, for example, and you know, inclusion benefits everybody, you know.

Oh, by the way, did you know that the Supreme Court did away with affirmative action?

CN: Mm-hmm.

LA: But, they made an exception. The five military schools in the nation, they're exempt from it. And you know why? 'Cause the generals went in there and made their case, they plead their case for how diversity has been a plus to them, they add to the function of the army and the readiness, you know. So, that's my plug for diversity.

CG: [Chuckles]. Well, thank you.

CN: Alright.

CG: There's nothing else you'd like to add?

LA: No. That's fine, thank you.

CN: Thank you very much.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]