

Interview Subject: Luis Garcia, MB Fire Chief, Legislator

Date Recorded: 5-5-12

Location: MDPL office, Art Deco Welcome Center

Date of Birth: 11-8-45

Luis Garcia first came to Miami in 1956 when he was eleven with his parents as tourists. He remembers being impressed with Lincoln Road, the big hotels and the estate houses. They came for the Orange Bowl parade. He was impressed seeing a movie in Cinerama at the Sheridan Theater. Shortly after they returned to Cuba the movie "A Hole in the Head" came out with Frank Sinatra. Luis remembers telling his friends in Cuba that that is where he had been, South Beach.

Four years later, the family fled Cuba after Castro came to power.

Luis describes the life of the exile and the struggle his family went through to earn enough money to live. Luis' father had been a prominent lawyer in Cuba but never again achieved that status. His father bused dishes, delivered milk and worked at a cafeteria and eventually became a paralegal. Luis' mother, who had been a housewife in Cuba, worked at a cafeteria as a dishwasher. Luis worked at a pool boy at the Di Lido Hotel after school for \$1 an hour. By everyone working, they managed to make ends meet.

He loved South Beach. You could walk everywhere. He loved going to Miami Beach High School and describes how much more accepted he was there than what he had experienced at Miami High School on the mainland, where he was called a "Spic." He describes going to dances every Friday night and then walking to Wolfie's afterwards or a romantic stroll on the beach in the moonlight.

He married young and started a family soon after. He worked for Publix, drove a truck for Pepsi Cola. A neighbor convinced him to try to become a firefighter after he got his citizenship. He became the first minority in the Miami Beach Fire Department and was one of the first minority paramedics in the state. He was the first firefighter from Miami Beach to graduate for the National Fire Academy. He worked hard, kept taking tests

to upgrade his status until he finally became Fire Chief for the City of Miami Beach.

He talks about some traumatic experiences, particularly the death of a colleague on duty, Donald Kramer, whom Luis tried to save but didn't succeed.

There were also light moments, like having to attend to Luciano Pavarotti once when he was in town to perform.

He remembers the Mariel exodus from Cuba as a particularly tumultuous time on Miami Beach and a huge fire at the Fontana Hotel at 26th and Collins in which nine people died. He was also Fire Chief when Gianni Versace was murdered in front of his estate on South Beach.

He talks about how he got involved in politics, first as a liaison to City Hall as Assistant Fire Chief. He said the city was very intrusive in the work of the fire department and he speaks very pointedly about the City Manager at the time, Sergio Rodriguez. Luis decided to retire because of the interference and run for the Miami Beach Commission. He told Rodriguez that he was going to win the race and fire him as soon as he was installed in office. After Luis won, Rodriguez announced he was leaving. In 1999, Luis entered office and spent 7 years on the commission. He later ran for the legislature and won and spent 6 years representing Miami Beach in the legislature. He was the only Democratic Cuban in either chamber.

Luis talks a great deal about his political career as a conservative Democrat, the nastiness of politics, and what is required to survive.

He spoke about his time working with the Miami Vice television show. He worked on his days off (during his fire department days) as the stand-by paramedic. He had a great time. Miami Beach then, he said, was a forgotten destination until Vice came along and polished the diamond in the rough. "Miami Beach had to grow up to look like how the show portrayed it."

He also speaks about his friendship with Morris Lapidus, late in the famous architect's life. Lapidus, he says, had a flare for the dramatic, a frustrated actor. He praises his architectural work and says the man made a lifelong impression on him, as great people do.