ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

DENNIS VASQUEZ SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO JUNE 20, 2020

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY AUDIO FILE #BRVB062020 – DENNIS VASQUEZ

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. Additionally, this interview was conducted online. Due to equipment issues, responses from Mr. Vasquez were sometimes muffled to the point of being unintelligible when he turned away from the computer microphone while still speaking. These instances are so noted in the transcript. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Mr. Vasquez made no modifications to the draft transcript. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Mr. Dennis Vasquez begins by describing the course of his career with the National Park Service, beginning in 1977. He describes his work on standardization of the National Park Service brand, including standardizing signage, brochures, text fonts, and exhibit presentations between 2002 and 2004. Prior to that, according to Mr. Vasquez, NPS branding was not standardized except for the use of the arrowhead, but even that was not standard as to dimensions or colors. He describes his conversation with Midwest Regional Director Ernie Quintana when Mr. Quintana invited him to become the superintendent for Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in 2004. Mr. Vasquez shares his first impressions of the site and the staff. He describes the efforts to increase visitation to the newly-opened historic site.

He also describes the activities of the Brown Foundation to get the site up and running and in support of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site after it opened. Mr. Vasquez also describes the process by which the Brown Foundation received its annual stipend from the National Park Service. He offers his opinion on how the surrounding community and the Topeka community at large viewed the site after it opened to the public. Mr. Vasquez details changes he made to staff during his tenure. He finishes the interview detailing the course of his career with the National Park Service after leaving Brown v.

Board of Education in 2009.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

Donald Meeker, National Park Service Director Fran Mainella, Midwest Regional Director Ernie Quintana, Deputy Midwest Regional Director David Given, Richard Kluger, Steve Adams, LaTonya Miller, Katherine Cushinberry, Lydia Baez, Nicole McHenry, Treva Harris [Sykes], William Batetta, Cheryl Brown Henderson, Zora Neale Hurston, Representative Jim Clyburne, Little Rock Nine, Andrew Young, Senator Bob Dole, Deborah Dandridge, Jim Loache, Cheryl DeShazer, Sherda Williams, Linda Rosenblum, Thom Rosenblum, Juan Williams, George McDonald, Secretary of the Interior [Kenneth L.] Salazar, President [Barack] Obama, National Park Service Director John Gardner, Brent Shuttlesworth, [Representative] John Lewis, Don Williams, Dorothy Cotton, James Bevel.



Dennis Vasquez, 2020

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**DENNIS VASQUEZ**

Interviewer: This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Dennis Vasquez, former park superintendent at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. The June - the date is June 20, 2020. The interview takes place online.

So, Mr. Vasquez, as I’m sure you know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park System, both physically and administratively. Oral histories are one way to get information that might not otherwise be available from documentary evidence, and often isn’t available from documentary evidence. We try to get as much information as we can from as many different perspectives as possible in order to craft a robust narrative of the developmental history of the park. This will be used by future park administrators to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments. However, I should inform you that not all the information we gather will be included in the final Administrative History. That depends on how the information advances our understanding of park development. But I do want to say that we appreciate that you are giving your time to share your experiences of the development of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site to further this project.

So, let’s start with – I ask all of the respondents to start by stating their full name and spelling their last name for the transcriber.

Vasquez: Yeah, my name is Dennis Vasquez, and the spelling of my last name is V as in Victor, A – S – Q – U – E – Z.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what we’re going to do is, first we’re going to start with the history of your work with the National Park Service, and then we’re going to go specifically to your work with the Brown v. Board site. So, when did you start with the National Park Service?

Vasquez: So, I started with the National Park Service in 1977 as an eighteen-year-old college student. And I started at the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. I lived in El Paso. I was in the University of Texas – El Paso. I was taking Biology, and, after my Freshman year in college, I started working as a seasonal co-op student intern at White Sands. And, after graduation, I got a permanent job at White Sands. Then, from White Sands –

Interviewer: Okay. And what were you – what was your position at White Sands?

Vasquez: I was a interpretive ranger. Kind of a generalist ranger, in those days. It was a small staff.

And then, once I graduated, I became a supervisory park ranger there.

Interviewer: Okay. Is that the same as the Chief of Interpretation, or –?

Vasquez: No, it would have been a – the – I would have worked under the Chief, and I would have supervised the other park rangers. Then, from there, I went – I went to Yosemite National Park and worked in the Yosemite Valley, and I was a supervisory park ranger in the interpretation division in Yosemite Valley. Then, I went to Joshua Tree National Monument, then. It’s a national park now. And I was a – moved up another step up the vine. I was, like, the interpretive specialist and supervised the interpretive operation there. And, while I was there, I got a Law Enforcement commissioning and Fire Fighting credentials and all that. And I –

Interviewer: Okay. Is there a lot of fire – excuse me, is there is a lot of fire out in Joshua Tree? Vasquez: Not in Joshua – not in the park, but, you know, we – I was on fires around the state.

Yeah. And then – and then I went to Sunset Crater Volcano, outside Flagstaff as a District Ranger – kind of a unit manager for the whole [unintelligible] at the park there, and oversaw all of the – all the, you know, operations there. And then, from there, I went to Big Bend National Park as the Chief Naturalist. I was a Division Chief, at that point. And then –

Interviewer: So, you were – you were a Chief Naturalist?

Vasquez: Yeah, that was just like there’s a Chief of Interpretation; at that time, they called it the Chief Naturalist at Big Bend. Then, from there, I went to the Albright Training Center, which is at the Grand Canyon, with the National – two National Academies for the Park Service. And I was an instructor there for – at the Albright Training Center for a couple of years. I was the Natural Resource Training Manager for the Park Service. Then, from there, I got my first superintendency at White Sands. I went back to White Sands National Monument twenty years later as the superintendent. So that was a nice, kind of, a homecoming. And then – and then, from White Sands, I spent a year and a half –

Interviewer: And what year was White Sands – I’m sorry, what year was White Sands? Do you remember?

Vasquez: As the superintendent, I was there from 1997 to 2000. Interviewer: Okay. I’m just trying to figure out where we are in the chronology.

Vasquez: Yeah. So, yeah. So, each of those previous stints was you know, two to four years, or whatever. And then, from White Sands, I went to Bandelier National Monument as the superintendent after – there was a major – it was a big catastrophe. It was the Cerro Grande Fire. It was a major fire event there, and I went there after that fire to sort of – it was a prescribed burn by the Park Service that went out of control, and it caused – it caused quite a – quite a devastation in the – in the town of Los Alamos and –

Interviewer: Oh! That – oh, that fire! (Laughs)

Vasquez: That fire. Yeah. We burned two hundred and thirty-five homes and part of a lab and –

Interviewer: Yeah, I remember reading about that. Yeah.

Vasquez: Yeah. So, I went in there after the – they moved the management team out of there, and they brought me, and I built a new management team. So, that was a challenging job for a couple of years. And then, from there, I went to the Harpers Ferry Center in West Virginia, and I – the Park Service created, at that time, the office called the Office of NPS Identity, and it was – we were trying to – believe it or not, we had not standardized the arrowhead or business cards or our publications. And now, everybody sees the black band and this certain type and it’s just very – the graphic standards are very well identified.

Interviewer: So, it’s – it was a branding – it was a branding problem?

Vasquez: It was a branding – it is a branding effort. So, we did – the office existed for about two years. So, there was –

Interviewer: When did you go there?

Vasquez: I went there in 2002. And so, from 2002 to 2004, I was – I worked there, and it was – so, there were two senior graphic designers and me – you know, an experienced, you know, Park Service field person with the team, but also the salesman – the marketing manager for the graphic designers to get people to, kind of, buy into it out in the field.

Interviewer: Okay. So, let me just stop for just a minute. This was in 2002 to 2004. You were standardizing the presentation of the National Park Service to the public through standardizing how they did the brochures, how they did their signs, all that stuff?

Vasquez: Yeah. Yes.

Interviewer: Before that, there was no standardization?

Vasquez: There was an arrowhead we would normally use, but, like, the colors were not standardized, the dimensions were not standardized, so we standardized all of that.

Interviewer: The sign?

Vasquez: Signs. I did the sign standards for the National Park Service. There were brochures. I mean, every park had their own newsletter format, you know. We were trying to establish the standards – standardized all of – all of that and the websites, and the – so, we did that for those years. And then, at that same time, I was a –

Interviewer: Okay. Are you the one who is responsible – are you the one who is responsible for picking out Fruitiger?

Vasquez: Oh! So, we had – we had, you know, Fruitiger and NPS Rawlington were the two – were the two types, and NPS Rawlington was actually developed for the Park Service. Donald –

Interviewer: Ugh! Yeah, you drove me crazy! (Laughs)

Vasquez: Yeah. Donald Meeker was the designer. So, yeah, it was a – kind of a very different project. But, yeah, we caused a lot of frustration out in the world with that type. And then – and then I – and all – while I was there – I went in for about a six-month period. I went in and I worked, off and on – and every week, I spent a few days a week at the Washington office. It was not far away – just a train-ride away. And I worked as a communications Special Assistant to the Director. That was Fran Mainella, at the time. And so, I did a lot of advance work, speechwriting, and, you know, just communications work for the Director. And then, at that point, which was 2004, now – so, the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown decision was coming up, and I had – I had a – the Regional Director, at the time, of the Midwest Region in Omaha, was Ernie Quintana, and the Deputy was Dave – David Given. And I got a call from Ernie Quintana, and he says, “Hey, Dennis, how’re you doing?” He says, “Hey, are you ready to get back out in the field?” And I was. And I said, “Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. Ready to get back out in the field.” He says, “Hey, we’re moving some superintendents around, and I’m wondering,” he says, “are you interested in the Brown v. Board story?” And I said, “Yeah, Ernie. And in fact – and this is – in fact, I had just recently –” the Harpers Ferry Center had a great library – a resource library for information about all the parks, and I had just – knowing that Brown

v. Board was coming up – it was big national news, the fiftieth anniversary, and we were, sort of, building towards it, so I went to the library there, and I pulled up this (holds up book, *Simple Justice* by Richard Kluger).

Interviewer: Yeah. I have that book. (Laughs)

Vasquez: Yeah. So, I went to the library. You know, it was right next door to my office I was working in, different building. So, I walked over there, and I looked to see what they had about Brown v. Board. This was before I got the phone call. And I took – I picked up the book. I brought it over, and I read – and I was reading the book. And I had it on my desk at the office. And Ernie says, “Yeah, are you interested in the Brown v. Board story?” And I said, “Hey, Ernie. Funny,” I said, “I just checked out this *Simple Justice* book. It’s the definitive history of Brown v. Board.” And I said, “It’s a big book! But I’m – and I’m just getting started with it. Yeah, I’m very – I’ve always been interested in that.” He said, “Well, would you like to be the superintendent there? We’re going to move some people around” And he says, “We’ve got somebody there who’s been very good about the planning, the development of the park, and it’s going to be a great park. A lot of money’s gone into it. But we’re looking for the operations person, somebody who [unintelligible] to come in and get this thing going operationally, and, you know, hire staff and, you know, do interpretation, be active in the community, build partnerships, all that.” And he said, “Would you be interested?” “Hey, Ernie, I would – I would love to.” So – and he says, “Well, they’re having the anniversary on May 17th, and it’s going to be a big thing. So, we’re going to let the superintendent enjoy that and be a part of that. And then, after that event, we’ll move you there.” So, I – so, that summer – I think I arrived, actually, either on, you know, the third or fourth or fifth of July of that year.

Interviewer: Okay. And you were following Steve?

Vasquez: I was following Steve Adams, yeah. And I didn’t know Steve before, but he had, you know, coordinated the development of the museum. Yeah, and it was a – he did a lot of – a lot of important foundational work there.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you came to the park right after the Grand Opening – after the president had been there, so all of the restoration and rehabilitation of the building was done, all of the interpretive exhibits were in there, correct?

Vasquez: Yeah. Mmm-hmm. Yes.

Interviewer: And your bookstore was stocked, and you were ready to – you were ready to roll, at that point, right?

Vasquez: Yeah. So, the park was, you know, about six weeks old when I got there.

Interviewer: Right. From being – six weeks after being opened. Actually, it was actually ten years old!

Vasquez: Yeah, well, the park had been around – yeah, the park had been around for quite a while, but – yeah, it had been established long before that.

Interviewer: Right. So, what – so, what were your first impressions?

Vasquez: Oh! So, my first impression – well, because, again, just from my history there, I had mostly worked in large, Western parks. So, I knew this was going to be different. And I knew – and I’d never been to Kansas before. And so, I arrived, and it was a, you know, two-acre park, and a school – you know, a 1920s schoolhouse [unintelligible] that brick schoolhouse. I said, “Okay, this will be a little different!” And it was right – you know, right in the middle of town, just a few blocks from, you know, the center of downtown. And I said, “Okay, well, this will be [unintelligible].” But I was very, very excited about the story, and so – and, walking in, I was very, very impressed because, you know, as a Park Service person, I visit museums – Park Service museums, and am just interested in history, as well. And I visit museums all over the country. And I walked in, and I said, “Wow! This is a – this is –” I’d never seen a museum like this in a National Park. This is – my first impression is, “This is the – this is the finest museum in the National Park Service.” And the – and it – and it was, then! I mean, you know, I haven’t – I haven’t been there in quite a while, but, when we opened it up, it was –

Interviewer: It was top of the line?

Vasquez: Yeah, I mean, it was! Yeah, it was – it was – you know, a lot of money went into it. The budget was much larger than most park budgets to open up, and so, you know, the quality – the quality was very [unintelligible – muffled].

Interviewer: So, did the – did the exhibits and everything conform to the branding that you had developed in the previous two years?

Vasquez: Yeah, it did. Yeah, the sign outside was right on – you know, right on target. Yeah, the branding was all done well, so it was obviously a National Park Service unit. So, anyway – so, I was just impressed with the museum. I mean, it really blew me away. The – you know, the main auditorium and, you know, each of the exhibit spaces, the bookstore.

And then, you know, the floors are so shiny. And [unintelligible – muffled] they may still be. And then, walking upstairs, I saw the office space. And the superintendent’s office was, you know, the nicest superintendent’s office I’ve seen. So, I said, “Yeah, this – I can – you know, this – it’s going to be a great working environment”. And so, I was very, very impressed and very pleased. But I was – you know, it was a new area for me, as I – you know, a biologist that, at this point, is an experienced park manager who’s met lots of, you know, challenges. And so, this is going to be a different kind of a challenge.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the staff? How did – when you first got there, what did you think of the composition and expertise and attitude of the staff?

Vasquez: Yeah, so, it was – it was a small staff and [unintelligible – muffled] a big staff, you know. It was not a very big staff there. So, but the staff was a very basic, small staff. LaTonya Miller was a key person on the staff. She was, kind of, in the – public affairs specialist, maybe, was her title. But she had been for – she had been there for at least, a couple – I don’t know – two or three years, and she had been, sort of, the face and voice of Brown

v. Board before they opened. Steve was more of a behind-the-scenes manager, taking care of the planning and the design work, all of that. So, LaTonya was very well-known in the community and was a very good representative for the Park Service and the Brown v. Board story. So, I was very impressed with her, you know, professionalism. And there were – there was – you know, Katherine Cushinberry was the administrative officer. Lydia Baez was administrative assistant. I think Nicole McHenry was there. Yeah, she was probably pretty new. She was an interpretive – interpretation ranger. And there were a couple of maintenance folks. Treva Harris was the Chief of Maintenance then. So, it was pretty small. You know, I don’t think there were many more people than that. It was a very small staff. So, I knew we were going to have to add a few more staff. So – you know, so, we built – we built positions and brought on a few more staff before I left.

Interviewer: Okay, when you first came to the park, did you have – what were your expectations for your work there? What did you expect to need to do? What did you expect to accomplish?

Vasquez: Okay. Well – so, I knew that the relationship with the Brown Foundation was going to be a central part of that – the Park Service’s presence there. And I knew – and I knew that we had an opportunity to manage a different kind of park. We had the opportunity to tell a story that was – had relevancy every day. We didn’t – we weren’t interpreting a historic, you know, moment or a historic event, but, either we could go from the – there’s a direct line from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution to 1954, the Brown decision, and then everything that followed after that. You know, the civil rights movement.

Interviewer: And still does.

Vasquez: And still – yeah, of course! Yeah, I mean, turn on the TV and read the – you know, read the – read the news, so – yeah. So, I knew it was going to be – is a very relevant – a place to be very relevant, and – or we could express our relevancy. (Park staff member interrupts interview.)

Interviewer: Do you need to stop for a minute. Vasquez: Yeah, just for a minute.

(Interview recording paused, then restarted) Vasquez: I wanted to answer –

Interviewer: So, I’m turning the recording back on.

Vasquez: Okay. I think I wanted to answer – maybe a different direction, too. You said, Deborah, what were the challenges I was –?

Interviewer: Well, what were your expectations? We’ll – we can get to challenges.

Vasquez: Okay. So, my expectation was, there’s going to be, kind of, a new and exciting opportunity. First of all, it’s a brand-new park. I had – I had never opened up – stood up a park, so I was – that was going to be a challenge just administratively, you know. And then, also, we had this world-class museum that we wanted to, you know, bring people in to, to experience, but then – but then I – but then we – but then we also – I also knew that this story – you know, there were five other – four other communities, you know. So, there were four, like, other communities that we needed to bring into the story here and represent this, not as just a Topeka story, but a story that included four other communities. And I knew there was going to have to be some outreach and some interaction within those other communities. And that we had a chance – you know, this is a – you know, 2004, so the world of technology was different, but I – the whole area – the whole idea of distance learning and – it was just, kind of, emerging, so that was going to be another [unintelligible] where we – as a Park Service thing, it was going to be brand new to the Park Service, this whole kind of distance-learning type of activity.

So, I knew – I knew we might have a chance to do some interesting things with the technology. And, you know, the building itself, while it was a – you know, an old school, it was loaded with technology, so – which was a good thing and a bad thing. It’s a – it’s – yeah, there’s some – technology is not always your friend. Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you get – did you get instructions from the Regional Office or the Director before you went – things that they were expecting? Or did you get any directives from them?

Vasquez: So, I – I’ll tell you, I had a phone conversation with one of my supervisors in the Regional Office, probably before I started with the – or maybe just as I – well, probably before I arrived in Topeka, and there were a couple of things. He said, “We are –” he said, “We have a couple of staff members there that we think have a good future with the Park Service. We’d like you to take them under your wing and groom them.” I mean, [unintelligible] and supervise these – he said, “take those folks under your wing and groom them and we see that they have a good future in the Park Service.” That was one. And then he said, “And we need for you to have a good relationship with the Brown Foundation.” I said, “Yes, sir, I will do that.” And I did that. And, you know, this was before – I didn’t know the Brown Foundation or anything about it before then. [Unintelligible – Vasquez moved away from the microphone].

Interviewer: You’re fading away.

Vasquez: I said – I said I didn’t know much about the Brown Foundation before, but I quickly got – had a chance to – you know, to learn about their pivotal role in establishment and [unintelligible] of the park.

Interviewer: Okay. So, they – their instructions to you were make sure that these rising stars continue rising and maintain good relationships with the Brown Foundation, basically?

Vasquez: Yeah, it was – yeah, those were the – actually, those were the two things, now that I – yeah, I remember. There was two things, and those were the two things. “Yeah, okay. I could do – sounds like I could do that.” Yeah.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. What were the biggest challenges when you were – while you were there? How long were you there?

Vasquez: So, I was there for five years. Interviewer: Okay. From 2004 to 2009?

Vasquez: 2009. Yeah, I arrived in July of 2004, and I think I left in August of 2009. So, just over five years.

Interviewer: Okay. And, over that time, what would you say was the biggest challenge to achieving the – your goals or achieving what the Regional Director had tasked you with?

Vasquez: Yeah, well, so, what we found was that there was a lot of interest, of course, when we first opened up, a lot of, you know, local interest, of course. It was the new – you know, the new – the new place to visit. But one of the challenges – and we addressed this in a lot of ways. One of the challenges that – was that – and I don’t know what the visitation is now, but, you know, we never – it was never a highly-visited park. And we were not getting a lot of return visitors, or we felt like we would have a difficult time getting the return visitors. You know, after they’d seen it once, they might not come back for a while.

Interviewer: Right. They’d say, “Okay, I’ve seen that?”

Vasquez: They’d bring family – yeah. So, we – so we tried to create reasons for people to come back. So, we – and, you know, the Brown Foundation was instrumental – was very involved in this, but, I remember, myself and William Batetta, who was the, sort of, Chief of Interpretation, I guess, at that time – we wanted to bring in, you know, art exhibits and film screenings and music things and, you know, spoken word activities, and, you know, lots of things. And so, we spent some money on these – you know, like, the museums – temporary museum walls, and, you know, we were going out and searching for relevant museum exhibits, like traveling exhibits. And we’d bring them in. And then we had a pretty active, kind of, marketing there, locally, you know, with the Topeka-Kansas City communities to bring people in, to advertise – bring them in to see these events. You know, we did plays there, we did music events there. The stage, you know, lent itself very well to that. So that was a – that was a – that was a fun part of it.

We would – we’d set up at the beginning of the year – and this was a meeting that I would have with Cheryl Brown Henderson, you know, whenever that was. And we would, like, project out for the next year. And we would say, “Okay. Yeah, in February we’ll do this, in March we’ll do this.” And then we would start working towards setting up those events. And some of them were, you know, from outside, and some of them were, like, local. It was, like, working with the local public library on The Big Read event. We did a Zora Neale Hurston, the *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* you know, Big Read in the city there. You know, things like that. So, we tried to involve community – we tried to involve community organizations so that there was some buy-in and they would bring, you know, their audience. So, that was the – always a challenge, just trying to come up with creative, interesting events and activities that would draw people to come back to the park. And –

Interviewer: So, you’re – so, you’re saying – you’re saying that the biggest challenge you had was to get people to come to the park – or, at least, get them to come again?

Vasquez: Yeah, well, that was – you know, that was a challenge. And then, with National Parks, it’s not so much about how many people show up [unintelligible]. We want people to have a – whoever shows up, to have this high-quality experience after they are there. But they can’t have that experience if they don’t show up in the first place. So, we were trying to get people to show up. That was part of it. The other challenge was, how do we take our story, which is relevant everywhere – how do we get our story, the Brown v.

Board story and this American story, out into – you know, [unintelligible]. So, we developed products. And we knew we would have to organize activities outside of – you know, we visited – I know I visited South Carolina, Clarendon County, and they had an organization there, kind of like their Brown Foundation. It was called the Briggs-DeLaine- Pierson Foundation. So, we met with them and school board members there from Clarendon County Schools. And Representative Jim Clyburn was there, as well. And we developed a – like, an education kit, a video and a workbook and other materials that was packaged in a nice cardboard box. And the Brown Foundation had produced that.

You know, we’d worked together on that. But we delivered a number – you know, a bunch of those, and in person, and that would – and, again, we just were trying to meet the plaintiffs from the other communities and connect – and connecting them our story and giving them an opportunity to – you know, to, within their own communities, you know, to work on their programming but also to be connected to the National Park Service, you know, with the weight that the National Park Service can bring to anything.

Interviewer: Okay. And what was the – what was the Brown Foundation’s mandate in all this? What were they supposed to do for the park?

Vasquez: So, the Brown Foundation, they – in about – so, the roles – you know, they had a – you know, Cheryl Brown Henderson was a very effective and powerful leader, and well known, and could bring a lot of people to Brown v. Board National Historic Site or connect us with a lot of people. So, that was – that was very important. And then, I was – you know, I was looking through my notes – actually, Deborah, I have a – I’m like, a note-taker. So, these are my – these are my Brown v. Board notes (indicates papers on

his desk). So, I didn’t look at – through all of them, but I, kind of, skimmed them, but – and I saw a note there from February 18, 2006, where Cheryl and I talked about roles between the Park Service and the Brown Foundation. And it’s – and my note – quick little not that I made to myself was that “the Foundation will initiate and support programs, but they will no longer – they will no longer be in product development and delivery. The Park Service would do that.” So, they were going to initiate and support. So, again, in these annual meetings, we would say, “This month” – you know, we would always have a big event in May, for the anniversary – so, the big anniversary event, we’ll bring in the Little Rock Nine. You know, the big anniversary event, we’ll bring in all the plaintiffs from all five cases. We’ll bring in Andrew Young, we’ll bring, you know, whoever – whatever it was. And then we would have, you know, the – monthly, some idea of what a program might be like. And it could be an art exhibit. It could be a – you know, a play or a music event. You know, they would –

Interviewer: So, they were – so, in 2006 – by that time, they were tasked with supporting your efforts, but not producing materials?

Vasquez: Yeah. So, they – so, they received a – you know, Congressional funding. I forget what that was called. But they were one of a group of non-Park Service – you know, Park Service partners who received funding through Park Service channels. So, it was somewhere on the order of, you know, three hundred thousand dollars a year, and that would – that would help promote these events. You know, it might be travel, bringing in – you know, it’s difficult – it is more difficult for the Park Service to bring in – you know, to manage the travel and the lodging for – you know, for a group or for individuals. So, the Brown Foundation would do that. They would – and, because of Cheryl and her connections and her ability to connect with lots of people, we were able to – you know, she would make the contacts, schedule things, then we would do the – you know, the logistics and the programming, and the – you know, produce the programs and, you know, whatever other materials, whatever, related to that event.

Interviewer: Okay. So, by that time, the Park Service was doing the production of brochures and educational information? Was that what – was that –?

Vasquez: Yeah, the brochures, and –

Interviewer: Was that because you were wanting to be sure that they met the standards that you’d set up in 2002, 2004, for presentation, or was it because you wanted –?

Vasquez: Yeah, that was part of it, yeah. Because we wanted – because we wanted – yeah, we wanted it to be National Park Service events, but everything was done – you know, almost everything was done in partnership with the Brown Foundation, so everything was, kind of, co-build, you know, Park Service and – National Park Service and Brown Foundation. And, at that time, the Brown Foundation office was just on the other side of the superintendent’s office, so Cheryl and I were, you know, next door neighbors in the office, there. And she didn’t come into the office every day, but she was there most days. And so, we – you know, we would have formal, kind of, sit-down meetings and then – but, we had a lot of informal, you know, hallway interaction, as well. So, we

developed that kind of – and it was always a business professional relationship, you know. It never – it was – we kind of always maintained that, which was, you know, I think, a healthy thing to do. But – and then – so, we would, you know, kind of, feed off each other, but we would always, sort of, manage each other, as well. I might go off on – with some, you know, big idea, and she would, maybe, bring me back to a little more of reality. She might go off, and I might, you know – so, we really – it was kind of an interesting dance, there, I guess, for a little while.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Would you say it was a symbiotic relationship?

Vasquez: Yeah, I think it was. And, yeah, I think we – you know, she respected that I had come to the site – what – I got a sense that she respected that I came to this position with a lot of Park Service experience and that I was not, you know, a rookie superintendent. And I

* and I – and I had great respect for her. You know, not just for her family’s history with
* connected to this place, but for her ability to get her – you know, she had a certain charisma and a certain ability to bring people in, and she was – yeah, she was quite a – quite a, you know, sometimes, a force of nature. You know, it was pretty interesting to work with her. Yeah.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. But I just want to – I want to try to clarify. From your note, was that a change from the previous way things had been? Had the – had the Brown Foundation been doing the production of –?

Vasquez: No. So – yeah. So, I don’t think we had been clear before. They were producing things.

We were producing things. They were not always, as you said, following our graphic standards, or our, you know, uniform standards. So, we were – you know, they were producing things; we were producing things, and there might have been some redundancy or overlap or, you know, just a lack of efficiency. And so, we – so we decided, “Okay, you-all initiate and support. We’ll be the staff on site. We’ll produce the products. We’ll deliver those products.” And that product could be a – you know, an education kit. Or that product could be a distance learning activity. So, that was – and so, that – well, I guess, before then – so, that’s, like, a year and a half into the relationship. I think it was probably not so clear before that, and that might have been the cause of some, you know, either lack of understanding or lack of clarity. And I’ve always said, and I still believe it – I still say it – that most issues or most places where, if something is not working right, it’s because there’s a lack of clarity and accountability. So, who’s doing what? When are you doing it? There has to be some accountability. And then there has to be clarity of what the task is and what the roles are for all the parties involved. So that seemed to me like a meeting where we helped to define what – helped to develop some clarity and some accountability about our relationship.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s slightly change the subject. How did you feel that the surrounding community, both the immediate neighborhood and the larger Topeka community, felt about the park at the time that you arrived?

Vasquez: Well, there was a great – there was a great amount of pride in the – you know, community pride about opening the park. You know, the National Park Service is in town! And, again, the National Park Service had been there, but now it’s all been –

Interviewer: Right. “Now it’s finally open?”

Vasquez: Yeah. So, I think there may be a sense of, you know, relief, or whatever it was, that finally this place is open. And then, when it opened, again, it was – it just – it was a spectacular museum. And I haven’t been there recently, and I know that, sometimes, with IT exhibits, there’s – you know, there’s some issues, so I wasn’t sure how the exhibits would age, but, when it opened, it was as fine a museum as there was in the country. So, there was a lot of excitement in the community and in the region. You know, in our region – you know, Kansas City is part of our, you know, regional outreach, so we had a lot of interaction with Kansas City visitors and the Kansas City, you know, like, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and – you know, all of that was – that – we had a close relationship with those sorts of venues there. But that’s just – I think the community – there was a sense of pride, but then, I think there was also a sense of, you know, kind of, reflection on the history, so, maybe, not everybody was proud of that history. But now it was, you know, being told in a national way, because we tried to tell it not as a – just a Topeka story, but as a national story, and the exhibits there were, you know, events all over the country over that period, and they didn’t focus just on the Topeka – the Topeka story part of it was – it was very small, you know, as far as what – with the presentation. It was a – it was a national story of, you know, kind of, universal – you know, teaching universal lessons.

Interviewer: So, was there any kind of pushback about the fact that it wasn’t just about Monroe School and Brown – the Brown family, that it was – and Topeka, that it was – that you were telling a national story, not just – not a specific story about Topeka?

Vasquez: Yeah. No, there was no pushback in the community. I think, you know, maybe, the fact that it wasn’t just the Topeka story helped to deflect, maybe, some of the – some of the pain it might have been – you know, because it’s not just about this community and, you know, we’re looking like, you know, we were segregationists. It’s a – it was a national story, but we’re telling the – that story here in this school that was directly related. I think, maybe, that was a – you know, that was – I think that was welcomed or well- received in Topeka. But what we wanted to be sure of is that, again, in these other communities, whether it was in, you know, Delaware, or, you know, D.C., or Clarendon County, we wanted to be – we wanted them to be sure – to be assured that their story was also represented. It wasn’t just the Topeka story; it was the story of all five cases.

So, we – I know the exhibits went to great lengths to express that, and, through our outreach, we – you know, we tried to bring in those other communities as well.

Interviewer: Okay. And what about – Sumner School was originally the – I guess, the poster child until Monroe School was selected as the site. So, did you have any dissatisfaction from people who were supporting Sumner School that it wasn’t included in the site?

Vasquez: You know, Deborah, I don’t remember I – that might have come up, but I don’t remember that as a –

Interviewer: It wasn’t a big thing?

Vasquez: I don’t remember that as a big issue, not at all. And I visited the Sumner School and, you know, had a chance to tour it. It was closed at that time, but – yeah, I don’t remember. I knew – I went there just for historian – just, you know, for historical purposes because I just wanted to see it and walk the halls, but I don’t remember there – I don’t remember there was a community concern about that, as I – as I recall.

Interviewer: Okay. There was a group called the Sumner – Brown v. Board-Sumner Legacy Trust that formed. Did – were they formed when you were there, or was that later?

Vasquez: They may have been there when I was there or before I was there, but I [unintelligible] visited them. You know, I think – you know, what I think we did – okay, here – we worked with – it might have been the local historical society, and it might have been, like, the Chamber – I’m just trying to think who the people were – but we tried to – and then, we had a map, and it – that map actually may have been there before I got there, but it was a map of all the related sites that could be done as a walking tour. Then, when I was there, we developed it as a walking tour, so Sumner School had been on there, the Post Office, District [unintelligible] Building would have been there, us, maybe the – I think there was an old, historic house not too far away –

Interviewer: Yeah. Right. Some baseball player had lived there? Okay.

Vasquez: Yeah, it got – yeah, anyway, I – look, I’m not recalling all these places. But we tried to connect all these places on a map and tried to do a walking tour. And I think we even – maybe, even organized a – I think there was an organized tour one time, and we had people, like, standing on the corners, doing some living history that, you know [unintelligible – muffled] to the site. And then they – and then the event ended at the National Historic Site. And I think we did that one time. We did that. I was just trying to connect all these other places that were part of the story. So, I don’t know if that – I do not recall if that group was around, but, I remember, we tried to connect the Sumner School in our – in our – in our – you know, our telling of their Topeka story.

Interviewer: Okay. It sounds to me like, after your discussion in February of 2006 with the Brown Foundation, that they were functioning very much like a Friends Group, since they were – their function at that point was to be supportive of your activities rather than to create things on their own. Is that an accurate description?

Vasquez: (Pause) Yeah, I think it was much – it was a Friends Group in one respect, but I think it was much more than that, because they were very much an operational partner.

Interviewer: So, a Friends Group Plus?

Vasquez: They were – they were – yeah, I don’t – yeah, definitely. And they were – they helped us – we would do an annual work plan, so that was usually a joint effort to develop that.

And it was necessary, because, you know, they brought resources and opportunities

that – you know, kind of, beyond, you know, the Park Service’s capacity, in many respects, but –

Interviewer: Okay, so they were a partner?

Vasquez: And they brought – they were partners. Yeah, I would say they were managing partners.

The Friends Group aspect was part of it, but they – it was much more than a Friends Group. And I have – I have worked with Friends Groups, but this was much more than a Friends Group.

Interviewer: Okay. I have talked to a couple of people who were of the impression that the Brown Foundation was an equal partner with the Park Service in managing the site. Would you say that was accurate?

Vasquez: (Long pause) Yeah, I would say it was a near-equal partnership. I would say that (long pause) – yeah, well, here’s the thing. You know, Cheryl Brown Henderson and others – you know, I think there was an attorney that did – a professor at the law school – I forget his name, but he was very instrumental – you know, they wrote the legislation that created the park. So, you can’t – you can’t discount the importance of that. There would not have been a park – and then they – the community and the Brown Foundation lobbied, seriously lobbied [unintelligible] to form the park and developed a close working relationship with Senator Dole, Bob Dole, who was a key figure in the Senate at that time, on the Appropriations Committee, to get the park authorized and to get a very – it was a very well-funded project to open that park, and it continued to be a well-funded park for the – for the staff and size and visitation of the park. So, in that respect, you know, you can’t under – you can’t discount the enormous role that the Brown Foundation played in establishing and getting the park open. And I wasn’t there when the museum was being developed, but I know the Brown Foundation and, you know, Cheryl Brown Henderson and Deborah Dandridge probably specifically reviewed, you know, every exhibit, every video, every – you know, every – you know, every panel there. So, they got – they were – as far as the development, they were very – they were, you know, equal or maybe, in some cases, the leading partner in the development. And then, when we came on board, they were, of course, still – I mean, when I came on board to, kind of, mount an operational mode, you know, they were not going to have the staffing and the – you know, they were not going to be able to manage and maintain the building and all of that, and, you know, there was – there’s an administrative side of running a park, too. So, we – you know, there’s – it’s – you know, it’s a part of a bureaucracy, and there’s systems. So, we were – you know, we had to manage through those systems, and they didn’t have to do that, you know. So, we – you know, so – and that’s – that was – they were able to focus on programming, and, you know, they had their own, sort of, outreach, but – yeah, so it was still – yeah, so I think that, certainly, the early days, it was probably, you know, equal partnership, and, maybe, the Brown Foundation, maybe, as I say, a lead partner in the development. But, once we got opened up and operational, you know, we were out there looking for exhibits as well.

We were out there looking for programming opportunities, and we brought – I think we – that probably, at some point, we brought as many ideas and program events to the

table as they did. But, then, that’s when we said, “Okay, well, you know, you-all are good at this and that, but let’s spend your money on this, and we’ll spend the Park Service money on the logistics, the support, the – you know, the – yeah.” Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. When you came to the site as the superintendent – you already said that the staff was small – did you find that the administration of the park, the processes of administrating it, were in good order, or did they need work? Were people following your – the procedures for, for instance, reporting credit cards or making bank statements?

Vasquez: (Pause) I – yeah, I think (pause), again, I’m trying – you know, I don’t recall, like, any specific – because there would have been, like, internal audits. I mean, you know, we would do it. I know our Omaha staff would come down and do audits. I don’t recall –

Interviewer: Right. So, you didn’t find any –?

Vasquez: No, no. There were no – and there were – yeah, there were no – and I remember, there – we would always – in those days, we would do operational reviews. So, there would be a team that would come down from Omaha and they would look at, you know, the different aspects of park operations. So, I remember, clearly, Jim Loache, from the Omaha office led a – an operational review, and it was a standard sort of event to have happen. And they would bring a team of different experts. And I don’t recall any, like, serious findings of any sort, during that time. There was some – there was always some – it was always a little challenging, because, again, the Brown Foundation would get money through a different channel, but it would come through the Park Service, and – but the money was held in Omaha, and then, on a quarterly basis, the Brown Foundation would have to submit an invoice, I guess. And they would submit it. You know, I guess, I would sign it. It would come to our – the Park Service administrative officer across the hall, and then I would sign it, and then it would go up to Omaha, and then the contracting office would review that. If it met the – you know, the conditions of our agreement, then they would get their quarterly, you know, allowance, whatever – allotment, whatever they called it. And I remember – I remember I had more than one conversation on how we were handling that, and – because it was so different, and I don’t think any other park in our region had that kind of a relationship. You know, there are lots of Friends Groups and lots of partners, but not this one, where there’s Congressional funding going to the partner. So, I think there was a lot of extra scrutiny there, and so, I think there was a lot of extra discussion. And I remember having – and I didn’t understand, because that was new to me. I’d never dealt with that before. So, there was probably some coaching that they had to do for me as we – I can remember, “What do we do, and why are we doing this?” I mean, it was just a different relationship that I – that I had not managed before. But I don’t think – you know, there was no investigation or no, kind of, remedial, sort of, activity or action that was required.

Interviewer: Okay. Was Katherine Cushinberry there during the entire – your entire tenure? Vasquez: Yep. Yes, she was. Yeah, she was there when I got there, and I think she was there when

I left. And then, she moved on to the East coast, somewhere, after - afterwards. I – and

Katherine was very – you know, I think she was a very good administrator, and she, you know, would keep me – I mean, part of the administrative officer’s job is to keep the superintendent –

Interviewer: In line? (Laughs)

Vasquez: In line, yeah. And so, that’s a key – that’s always a key relationship between the administrative officer and the superintendent to make sure that the superintendent’s not, you know, getting in trouble or doing things. You know, I did – I did have one instance. And I’m trying to recall exactly how it was – how it happened, but there was one instance where, I think, I had made a commitment to some organization about our assistance – and, again, this was – we had lots of partners and lots of – lots of activities going on, and we got invited to a lot of places, and there was some activity – some program that was – it seemed like it was a good fit, and I remember making a commitment of some amount of money to – you know, that that would be the Park Service involvement and, you know, maybe, we’d host an event or something. And then, I think I – I know I was counseled by the Regional Office to bow – “Hey, Dennis, that’s not our – you know, you have to go through these procedures. You have to do this.” And so, I think, there was, for a year, maybe, a letter of reprimand in my file, and then I – then I – you know, I was always a pretty – when I was a younger superintendent, I was a pretty – I was pretty fast-moving. Sometimes, I got ahead of myself. Yeah. (Laughter)

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. So, it sounds like the situation for the operations administration of the park was in good order. Did you have to make – or did you decide to make – any changes during your tenure that affected how the park was managed?

Vasquez: Yeah, so, a couple key things. After I was there for a little bit – I don’t remember what the year was, but, you know, I – because the staffing at that time was administrative staff, two people, this public outreach person, LaTonya, Chief of Interpretation. It was a small staff, so it was just, you know, a couple of people under him, working the – you know, the front desk, you know, greeting visitors, and then two maintenance people, I believe, and then Cheryl DeShazer, who was our IT, AV person, who was key in keeping all the high-tech exhibits going. And, you know, she was a – you know, she was just critical in making sure the park, the museum, was operational all the time. So, you know, all these challenges –

Interviewer: Let me just – let me interrupt that for a minute. Sherda Williams was complaining that she had – during the period when the government shut down, she had made an offer to an IT person in October – in – right after Thanksgiving, and they – because of the shutdown, they didn’t show up until March. And so, to me – to an outsider, that doesn’t sound like a big deal, but you’re saying that not having an IT person on site at that time would have been critical to not having someone to keep the – to keep the exhibits going? Is that accurate?

Vasquez: Yeah. So, Debye, are you – have you been – have you been to the site? Interviewer: Yes.

Vasquez: So, okay. And I don’t know if they took you into the – it’s upstairs, this room, which is, you know, the brains of the whole building, with wires and –

Interviewer: Oh, we didn’t see that. No, we didn’t see that.

Vasquez: Okay, well, if they open up this door, there is (laughs) a great big, like, a – like, a big – Interviewer: Like a jungle?

Vasquez: Yeah, but it’s a big rack of, you know, AV equipment – you know, DVD, whatever they are, now. It’s, you know – whatever it is. What – and then wires – and then there’s, you know, a million wires going out in every direction to every room in that building, and so, if something – there was a – you know, so, we would turn it off, and then we would turn it on, you know, in the morning. Turn it off at nighttime. And then, some – sometimes, something might not kick in, for whatever reason. So, then you had to track down, “Oh, this machine’s not doing this, or this machine’s out of sync with whatever.” So, Cheryl was – Cheryl DeShazer, who was there, I think, the entire time I was there, was the person who knew how to manage all of that. And, when something went out – like a projector would go out or a – the wire would – whatever – sometimes, an exhibit might be out for, you know, a little while until it was repaired or replaced. So, that was – that was – you know, again, I was there for the first five years, and, over time, you know, there were a few things that would, you know – you know, you’re running these projectors non-stop for eight hours a day, you know, almost every day of the year. So, yeah, things get – the machines aren’t meant to run, you know, like that. So, we were replacing equipment, we were buying bulbs, and these were expensive, you know, special bulbs for some of the projectors, so there was a high cost of maintenance there. You know, higher than – I mean, you know, much higher than, you know, most parks.

So, if they didn’t have an IT person – if they didn’t have an IT person there for months, I can’t – I can’t imagine what the museum would – how it would operate. Yeah, it would be like –

Interviewer: Okay. So, IT was an – that was a critical – okay. Thank you for clarifying that. That’s interesting.

Vasquez: Yeah, it would be like a movie theater without a projectionist.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay, did you – I’m sorry. Go on with your description of things that you changed.

Vasquez: Okay, so something I – so, when LaTonya moved on – she was the public affairs person, and she had been, again, the face and the voice of the park, and I said, “You know, I can – I can step up and do that. That’s kind of a superintendent’s role.” I said, “What I really need is an education specialist. I need a –” We didn’t have that position on board. So, I hired Linda Rosenblum, and then I – it turns out that Linda Rosenblum’s husband is Thom Rosenblum, and I find out he’s a historian. He’s been doing a lot of work in Mississippi, a lot of Southern history, and a, you know, PhD historian. So, then I created, also, a historian position, and I said, “Okay, you know – you know, if any park deserves a historian, it should be Brown v. Board.” So, we brought them on, kind of as a – as a, you

know, two-for-one deal. So, I got a historian and an education specialist, and I think that helped move the park forward in our outreach – in our, you know, educational outreach, in our popularizing of, you know, distance learning programs. And also, with Thom on board – he just started digging and finding stuff in the basement of the – you know, 501 – you know, U.S.D 501 was the school district involved. He got into their basement, and he spent, you know, weeks and months looking at, you know, documents from the, you know, ‘40s and ‘50s having to do with all sorts of things. And, you know, he went – he was at the courthouse. Anyway, so, Thom – and then, I think – yeah, he spent time in D.C., and Tom and I traveled together a little bit, you know, looking for stuff, and so, I think, bringing them on – I think, one thing it did, it helped – I think it helped our relationship with the – with the Brown Foundation, because they saw that we were professionalizing our staff and that we could now provide – we had a capacity that we didn’t have in the first, you know, year, first eighteen months, first two years, whatever it was. So, I think – yeah, I think that helped our relationship. And then it also just helped our ability to do this outreach, which was, I think, an important part of that park.

Interviewer: Okay. Was there a product that was the result of all this research? Or was it just – it informed your –?

Vasquez: I don’t – I don’t know – so, I know Thom wrote a – you know, a short booklet for – you know, kind of, for a popular, you know, use on – (pause) Gosh! I have it on the shelf. Now I forget – it was about – I think it was about teachers and education in Topeka, you know, during that period, I believe. And then, with Linda, yeah, we produced – again, with the Brown Foundation – we produced videos and – I can’t remember the titles of them now. But we produced different videos. *Fair is Fair,* I think, was one of them. And Linda and I would go out to these [unintelligible – muffled].

Interviewer: Okay. Something about being kind?

Vasquez: Yeah, it was a cute little – yeah, a cute little – and then Linda was doing a lot of outreach, and it was, in those days, like, a big innovation for the Park Service to connect to schools, you know, all over the country, and that – you know, that was, like – that was the – you know, we were breaking ground in the Park Service with those sorts of distance learning activities. And I think – I think it – yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, so, you – Linda was – was Linda in charge with – of your distance learning efforts?

Vasquez: Yeah. So, as the education specialist, she was in charge of that, yeah. And she was a very active, highly productive employee. And then, I think, after Brown v. Board, she went to the Washington office as an education specialist there.

Interviewer: Okay. And what did – what did you do for distance learning? I am familiar with the start of distance learning in the Park Service at Homestead – at Homestead. So, once it moved out into the rest of the Park Service, what – how did it function at Brown v.

Board?

Vasquez: Yeah, there was some sort of a platform, and I don’t remember what it was called.

There was some sort of platform that we adopted or started to use that was connected to schools, you know, around the country. So, Linda became familiar with the use of that platform and how to schedule events and, you know, all that sort of thing. And so, she had a – you know, she developed – I don’t know if was PowerPoint or whatever it was in those days.

Interviewer: Yeah, presentations of some kind?

Vasquez: Presentations, yeah. And then, those were – some of those, we would send products, whether it was, you know, videos or workbooks or whatever, as well. So, there was, you know, different delivery systems, I guess.

Interviewer: Okay. And Linda was in charge of that and did the presentations and that kind of thing? Vasquez: And Linda was in charge of that, yeah. So – and, you know, we worked with the Brown

Foundation on that because, you know, we always wanted to make sure we were representing the story with the proper amount – with – you know, accurately, of course, but with the proper amount of, you know, respect and sensitivity and all that sort of thing. And so, the Brown Foundation was always our – as far as our – our filter, you know, for that. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, did they review what you did before you were – before you sent it out?

Vasquez: Sure. Yeah, very much so. Yeah, they were involved, not just in the review, but probably in the development and in, maybe, providing, you know, content or directing us to content.

Interviewer: Okay. Were there any times when you had to navigate difficult or tricky situations, delicate situations related to park development or administration? Were there any –?

Vasquez: Well, you know, it’ll go back to that – just that funding with the – with Brown Foundation. That took me a while to figure out, and I actually don’t know if I ever felt like I’d figured that out, but that was always – that was kind of a – kind of a regular thing that was not especially –

Interviewer: (Laughs) That was tricky every year, huh?

Vasquez: Yeah, it never – it never seemed to – and, maybe, things changed, too. I said, “Well, that’s not what we did last year!”, you know, so we – it was, “Well, now,” – you know, “now we’re trying to track it this way.” So, it might have just been that, and that’s kind of the nature of bureaucracy anyways, you know. It – once you think you’ve got it figured out, they change the rules on you. So, that was – that – I don’t think I ever felt comfortable with, but I don’t think I’d call that a challenge as just, you know, an administrative – you know, it’s –

Interviewer: (Laughs) A little rough spot in the administration?

Vasquez: Yeah. And, again, because it was not a typical, you know, Park Service sort of a relationship.

Interviewer: Now, did you have any budget issues? What about budget issues? Did you have any budget issues?

Vasquez: No, the park was well – honestly, the park was well-funded. Again, we – the park had been well-funded in its development, and there was a – the base budget for the operations when I was there, was adequate – was, yeah, adequate – maybe even a little bit more so to manage that – to manage that – the function there, you know, in the museum in Topeka. I mean, there was –

Interviewer: Okay. Steve Adams – this is kind of going back to when you first got there, but Steve Adams mentioned that, in the installation of the interpretive components, there was some sort of an impasse between the installer and the Park Service, and he left before that was resolved. Do you recall that at all? (Pause) Because I asked him about it, and he said you – I’d have to ask you because it wasn’t installed – it wasn’t installed by the time he left, so you would probably know what had happened. (Pause) The contractor refused to install it?

Vasquez: (Long pause) Huh.

Interviewer: No? It must not have been a major thing! (Laughs)

Vasquez: Yeah. Well, there was one of the rooms – so, I’m not sure. Did he say what it – what – you know, what room or what the exhibit was?

Interviewer: He did not.

Vasquez: Okay. Because there was one room there – all the rooms were full, you know, downstairs, and there was one room – and I don’t know what they’ve done with it since, but it was kind of an empty room, and there was, like, a reflection space [unintelligible] educational gathering space. It was kind of on the left as you go in the front door. And there was a – there were some spaces to sit down and maybe some, like, kind of, computer monitors or something, like, for research, for people to dig down a little bit. I think that’s how it was organized. And I don’t think that was, like, a – I don’t think whatever was supposed to be in there was ever finished. So, I – yeah, actually, I don’t –

Interviewer: That doesn’t ring a bell with you, huh? (Laughs)

Vasquez: That doesn’t ring a bell. Yeah, I’m kind of searching. It doesn’t ring a bell. Yeah. Interviewer: Okay. Alright. That’s alright. No problem. You were there – you were at Brown v. Board,

weren’t you, when Nicodemus Historic Site was – you – became mentored by Brown v. Board? Is that correct?

Vasquez: Not – no, we – no, they got their own superintendent, and we didn’t have, like, a management relationship with them. But I visited Nicodemus in – and, actually, Sherda Williams was the superintendent at Nicodemus when I was – when I was there. So, I visited Sherda and the park a couple times. At that time – I don’t know if it’s still the case – but the superintendent at Brown v. Board was the State – the Park Service State Coordinator for Kansas, and there were five national parks in Kansas, so it wasn’t a

supervisory relationship. It was just, if the Park Service needed to be represented somewhere, it would be – that superintendent would be – and, you know, it was in the state capital, so that made sense. Alright? But in that – but in that role, I did try to coordinate meetings among the Kansas park superintendents, and I tried to visit all of the sites, just so I had an understanding of, you know, the site. And where the – where it might be helpful, I would, you know, advocate or help out in some way. But I did visit Nicodemus, but there was not in a mentoring relationship, no.

Interviewer: Right. Oh, I see. Okay. It was not in a mentoring relationship, okay. Alright. We’re about down to the last two questions. And so, the first of the last two questions is, of all the things that you did at Brown v. Board while you were there, of what are you most proud of doing? What do you think was the best thing you did to advance the administration and development of the site?

Vasquez: It – so, I think the decision, early on, that, in order to make Brown v. Board relevant on a – you know, on an ongoing basis, we were going to need to bring in programs or take our programs out. And it wasn’t just going to be – we were not just going to manage a museum in downtown Topeka. And we had to be actively engaged locally, in the community, but, as the superintendent, I felt like I had the – under the auspices of the National Park Service, I could go anywhere and talk about the Brown v. Board story. So, I went – you know, I went to the U.S. Supreme Court. I went to Howard University Law School. I went to South Carolina – went to South Carolina. I went to Birmingham. I went to visit with others who were telling, you know, civil rights stories – you know, similar stories or had similar, you know, challenges or, you know, how are we going to – how are we going to collaborate to make these stories relevant and to reach, you know, a broad audience? So, you know, I was trying to elevate the role of this small park in a – in a – you know, in the Midwest. I was trying to elevate it to keep [unintelligible] it on a national, you know, level. So, we brought in people. And we brought in Andrew Young and Juan Williams and the Little Rock Nine – eight of the Little Rock Nine came – plaintiffs, you know, who were now adults, right, from the – who were children during the ’54, you know, court hearings. We brought in those plaintiffs to Topeka – a big group of them, you know. It was – and it was like – I - it might have been the first time that that had happened, where people from Delaware met the people from, you know, South Carolina [unintelligible]. And it was just interesting, you know. You know, a lot of [unintelligible]. We had meals together, they did the museum together, and we had a big banquet to honor, you know, the whole group. So, anyway it’s – so, what I think I did was I – again, because of my Park Service experience, I came with a kind of broad perspective. I’d worked in the Washington office. I’d worked in big parks around the country, and I knew the – I knew the Park Service. We were big players, and we were welcomed places. And I – and I wasn’t shy about inviting myself places or inviting people to come visit us. So, I think I brought that – you know, that Park Service stature to Topeka. And not – and I’m not saying “me” – but I’m not saying me, personally, but, you know, the – I’m proud of the way the – and I knew it wasn’t just me –

Interviewer: Yeah, of the Park Service?

Vasquez: Yeah, of the Park Service, because, you know, it’s – D.C. – we had the historians from

D.C. come visit us. We had – you know, we had a lot of people come visit us and put on programs and so that was a – yeah, so it – so, it was – I wasn’t afraid to do that outreach and to think big and to – you know, to –

Interviewer: Okay. You went there to – you expanded the footprint of the – of that small park in the middle of Topeka?

Vasquez: Yeah. That’s a good way of saying it, yeah. Thank you for that.

Interviewer: Okay. After you left Brown v. Board – we didn’t finish out your career, so – you’re retired now, correct? Alright, so, what did you do after you left?

Vasquez: Yes. Yeah, so after – so after I left Brown v. Board – so, I was there five years, and then I – and I’ve always kept track of things, so I knew that there was a – some legislation going through Congress to – it was called the National Museum – no, the National Museum of the American Latino Commission Act. And it was going to create a commission to study the creation of a National Museum of the American Latino in Washington, D.C., like the Smithsonian Museum. And I – and I knew that the previous time a museum commission had been formed – that the Park Service had – it had staffed that commission. And so, like, the African American Museum in – on the Washington Mall – it was staffed by George McDonald, a Park Service employee, who was a good friend of mine. And he told me, “Hey, Dennis, you ought – you ought to track this Latino – American Latino Museum Act, you know. Someday, there’s going to be a commission, and they’re going to need somebody to run this commission.” So, I had briefed my boss, Ernie Quintana, who, at that time, was the senior – Hispanic, senior Latino, in the Park Service. I said, “Hey, Ernie, we ought to pay attention to this, because the – you know, this might pass, and there might be a commission, and they might ask the Park Service to run it again.” So, sure enough, the commission was – the Act was passed by, you know, both houses of Congress, and the – Senator Salazar from Colorado was the lead in the Senate on this, and, in the legislation, it says that “the Secretary of Interior will manage this commission.” And then, during the Obama administration, Secretary – Senator Salazar became Secretary of the Interior Salazar, so he was now running this commission. And then – so, in April of 2009, just after the 2009 inauguration of President Obama, Senator – Secretary Salazar asked the Park Service to get this commission up and running, and he asked for somebody from the field and wanted a senior manager to come in and run this commission. So, they – so, I was asked by the Park Service to come in. So, I went in, and I ran the commission for – so, it was the National Museum of the American Latino Commission. So, we had three years and three million dollars to put a study together – like a Feasibility Study on the creation of this museum. And we drafted legislation, and we had public meetings all over the country and produced a really nice plan, report – and report that we delivered to the White House and the Congress a year ahead of schedule and under budget. So, that was good. And so that – so, that legislation has been introduced every – in every Congress since. It’s never got out of committee, but, this year, it actually got a hearing, you know. So, there was a hearing, and witnesses, and all of that. So, it’s gotten farther than it’s

ever gotten this year, but it’s been a – we produced the report – finished the report in 2011, so it’s, you know, nine years. But I think it took the – I think it took twelve years from the time that the African American Museum Commission finished their report and delivered it to the time the doors opened. Yeah. So, we’re still – we’re not on track, but, someday, there will be a National Museum for the American Latino on the National Mall, and I – and I helped – I helped to move that forward.

Interviewer: (Laughs) And you look forward to visiting that, right?

Vasquez: I’ll be there, when they open. And when I was there – and then, after that – you know, I’m from west Texas, so I’d been back East, and in Kansas for ten years now. And then I – there was a job opening – a superintendent’s job opening at Guadalupe Mountains in west Texas, a big, desert park, a wilderness park. And the job was open, and I told them – I asked – in D.C., I asked Secretary Salazar, and I asked Director John Gardner. So, I said, “Hey, I’ve finished the report. I’m ready to leave. Just send me back out to the – send me back. I want to be a superintendent again.” So, I was sent back out to the field, and I was superintendent at Guadalupe Mountains for about four years, and then, at that point, my wife said, “Okay, what’s the plan? We’re – we’ve got to have a plan!” We didn’t have a house; we didn’t have a place to – you know, to land. “What’s our landing spot?” So, she ended up getting a job in Santa Fe, and I said, “Honey, just take that job in Santa Fe. We’ll,” I said, “we’ll – I’ll finish up here at Guadalupe Mountains, and retire and then I’ll go live up there.” So, for two and a half years, she was in Santa Fe, and I was in Guadalupe Mountains. And then – but, fortunately, the job at Petroglyph National Monument opened up. That’s in Albuquerque. So, our house is kind of in between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. So, she was going in one direction, and I was going the other direction. And then I worked at Petroglyph as the superintendent for four years, and then retired, you know, just over a year ago. I didn’t stay retired long, and now I’m working for the State Parks as the Field Operations –

Interviewer: (Laughs) You just can’t stay away from those parks!

Vasquez: Yeah, so I’m the Field Operations Chief of New Mexico – for the state parks of New Mexico. It was sort of funny. Actually, the pinnacle of my career was in D.C., and I was a GS-15, kind of, top of the scale, and then I took a downgrade [unintelligible – muffled].

Interviewer: You’re fading out again.

Vasquez: I said I took a downgrade to go to Guadalupe Mountains, you know, at my request. And then, because I wanted to live in my house with my wife again, I took another downgrade to go to Petroglyph. So, I – so, I kept telling people, “If I don’t retire now, I’m going to be a GS-3 again, you know?” (Laughter) So, I [unintelligible] I took a little – at the end of my career, took a couple downgrades, but it was all – it was all worth it, and I ended up having a very, very fortunate and very good career.

Interviewer: Okay. Now, my last question is, we’ve talked about a – quite a lot of things. Is there anything I haven’t asked you about that you would like to talk about?

Vasquez: You know, here’s what I’ll say. I’ll say the – you know, obviously, the Brown v. Board story is current and relevant every day. And we see that in the news. And you can’t – you can’t deny how relevant it is, still. So, I think that’s still an important park. It’s the only park that tells the story of a Supreme Court case, so that’s another distinction. And, on a personal basis – well, I – and it – Brown v. Board – that case – it verifies or validates what America is and what – and who Americans are. So – and we – it’s always good to remind ourselves about that. But then, on a personal level, I would say working at Brown v. Board – and, you know, I just told you my Park Service history, the – and it was – I had a – you know, I had a spectacular career. But Brown v. Board was special because, really, in many ways, I was there longer than I was anywhere else. I started a park there. I opened a park and got the program initiated. I met – personally, I met some of my heroes. I met Brent Shuttlesworth. I met John Lewis. I met Andrew Young. I met Don Williams. I met Dorothy Cotton. I met James Bevel. I met a lot of civil rights leaders who I grew up admiring. I met the Little Rock Nine. Yeah. So, it was a great – it was a great opportunity.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, I think that’s a good place to stop, and I really appreciate you spending the time with me to tell me all this stuff and certainly clarifying some of the other things that other people have said. So, I’m going to turn off the recorder.

Vasquez: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

SUPPLEMENTAL INTERVIEW

Interviewer: Okay, Dennis Vasquez has another piece of information he wishes to share. Go ahead, Dennis.

Vasquez: Yeah, so, Brown v. Board, you know, I realized what a tremendous opportunity it was, and I – and I was – I wanted to see how the public reacted to the message but, also, to the way the message was delivered, to – which was – I wanted to see how they responded to the story of Brown v. Board, and I wanted to see how they responded to the way it was delivered through this multi-media – you know, set of multi-media presentations. And I – so, I would – when big groups would come in – you know, either school groups or other organized groups, or I – or I saw a lot of people in the parking lot, I would kind of walk through the museum. And I wanted to see how people were responding to it and if it was having the intended effect, or if there were other things that we hadn’t considered. I kind of wanted – so, I would, sometimes, just walk around and, maybe, kind of, sort of, eavesdrop on how people were – what they were saying and witness how they were experiencing it. And I remember, there was a group – and it might have been an elder hostel group. It was a group of older folks that had come in on a – on a bus, I think. And I said, “Well, I’m going to go down and just see how that’s going.” So, I walked into one of the rooms, and there’s a – an exhibit there, called, “Pass

It On.” And it’s a – kind of a modern – like a music video that doesn’t have a specific message. It doesn’t – it’s not, like, text, it’s just a – you know, music with a – this image of a person running and handing this baton on, and the baton goes on, and it goes on and, kind of through – historically, it – and, at the end, they sort of hand it to you and say, “Pass it on.” And it was – it was very effective. And I saw young people, you know, respond to that. For some people, that was – for the younger people, I thought that was, like, their favorite exhibit because, you know, it was done modern and in youth –

Interviewer: Catchy?

Vasquez: Yeah. And so, I saw this group of older – and I’ll just say they were older, and they were an all-White audience, there. And I – and I stood behind – there was some seating, and there were two older gentlemen, but I stood behind them as they were watching this, and, as they – as the music ended – they sat there and, you know, were attentive the whole time, and, as it ended, one of them turned to the other and said – and I could hear it – again, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but I heard what he said. He said, “This is not your grandfather’s national park.” (Laughter) And I thought, “Yeah, this is not!” So, national parks are a lot of different things, but Brown v. Board was a different kind of national park, and the story was delivered in a – in a different way. And it expanded, I think, the way – the dialog that we could tell in national parks. It expanded our reach and our ability to talk about the Constitution every day, to talk about, you know, the founding of the country, to talk about the issue of race throughout our history, and we could connect that, you know, to everyday events. So, working at Brown v. Board – I think it – you know, people who came in – it expanded their views on what the National Park Service could do. And it – and it expanded our way of telling stories. So, that – I think that was an important part of the Brown v. Board National Historic Site experience, and it certainly was an important part of me, as – coming from a very traditional Park Service background to see how that we could tell stories in the National Park Service. It wasn’t always about a place. It wasn’t about the Grand Canyon; it wasn’t about the tallest tree or the highest waterfall. It was about a story, and that’s what the National Park Service was now doing. We were – now, we’ve always told stories, but, here, the park wasn’t a place; the park was the story. And this is the place that we chose to start telling that story. But I wanted to share that because I remember that made a – that kind of triggered a – it tripped a switch for me. “Oh, I kind of now know what we do here.” You know, our clean and new National Park Service experience, kind of expanding the way that the Park Service tells stories.

Interviewer: Okay. Right. Okay. Alright. Well, thank you, Dennis. Vasquez: Yeah, thank you. Thank you for letting me add that.

END OF INTERVIEW