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Interview

with

ISABEL RUBIO

August 17, 2006

By Sarah Thuesen

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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TRANSCRIPT: ISABEL RUBIO

Interviewee:	ISABEL RUBIO
Interviewer:	Sarah Thuesen
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START OF CD

ST: Today is Thursday, August 17th, 2006. My name is Sarah Thuesen. I am with the Southern Oral History Program at UNC. I work on the Long Civil Rights Movement project, and today I'm here with Isabel Rubio in Birmingham, Alabama. Thanks so much for sitting down with me today and taking some time to talk with us.

IR: You're so welcome, Sarah.

ST: I thought first we'd start with just a few questions about your background, so I could learn a little bit about you before you got involved here with the Hispanic community in Birmingham. You grew up in Mississippi, is that right?

IR: Right, from McComb, Mississippi, which is in Pike County.

ST: What did your parents do there?

IR: My mom stayed at home, and my dad was an architect.

ST: Did they both grow up in the South, or how far back did your roots—?

IR: My mom was born in New Orleans, lived in Saint Louis for a while and Mexico City for about eleven years, and then returned to New Orleans as an adult. Then she married my dad and moved up to Mississippi. My dad was born in Mississippi and

lived most of his life there.

ST: You had mentioned, I believe, to me on the phone that you were in the first class, was it, of your school to integrate—.

IR: Yes. When I started first grade, that is when the federal government had said, "Everybody get in. You can't wait anymore." So we were in the first class to go to school with African-American kids and white kids. That was 1971.

ST: Oh, yeah. You said first grade?

IR: Right, so I was I guess six.

ST: What sort of impression did that experience have on you?

IR: I didn't really think anything about it. [Laughter]

ST: There wasn't a lot of conflict in the town at the time—?

IR: Not any that I was really aware of in terms of—. I mean, about that time a private school opened, but of course my father didn't send me there. But I didn't really realize until later it had sort of opened because of integration.

ST: Do you think that growing up, you thought about issues of race or ethnicity differently because you had some Hispanic background?

IR: I think that mostly I have always—. I mean, you I guess are aware of differences just because they're different, but I've always thought that you can't ever treat anybody differently because they're poor or because their skin color is different or for any reason. My dad was a very fair person and was always inclusive, and I guess that's just what I grew up with.

ST: Um-hmm. Did you, at the time you were going through school, ever talk about these issues with friends of yours or—?

IR: I don't know that we talked about it outright necessarily. Certainly situational kinds of things would come up. I can vividly remember our school dances. They would be totally segregated. Looking back, I guess I didn't really even think about the fact. Maybe it crossed my mind, but it's not something I really thought a lot about like where are the African-American kids having a dance? What are they doing? But I do remember in senior year that people would have parties after football games and so forth. I had a party at my house, and I announced the party coming back from the football game a weekend or two before that on the bus with all the band. And I said, "Everybody is invited to my house." It was of course only African-American and white, but it was definitely racially mixed, and was the only party that I remember going to my high school years that was. Actually, one of my girlfriends who was African-American spent the night that night at my house, which was not an issue for my dad or anything like that, but I didn't see that happen in other situations that I wasn't as much in control of.

ST: You grew up all of your growing up years in Mississippi; is that right?

IR: Right.

ST: And then you left to go to college in the mid-eighties?

IR: I stayed in Mississippi to go to school.

SR: Oh, uh-huh.

IR: My first degree is from the University of Southern Mississippi in history.

SR: Where you involved in any activism in college?

IR: None, none. After college, there was the anniversary of the death of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman. They were the guys that were killed in Mississippi who were buried in the dam. A friend of mine and I went to Philadelphia

for the anniversary where all these civil rights leaders came. I've always had a strong interest in the Civil Rights Movement. I think it's because of the town that I grew up in, which was a very racially divided town during that time. So I was very interested to be a part of that. I think it's sort of you get on a road in your life and one choice leads you to the next place, and it just sort of meanders in that manner. I certainly believe that everything that happened in my life has led me to do the activism work that I do now, the advocacy work. But it really didn't start until I realized that it was social work that I needed to be doing in terms of helping my brothers and sisters in humanity that might not be as fortunate as me. That is the step that led me closer to doing what I'm doing now.

ST: Was there a particular moment or event that really made you decide to go into that kind of work?

IR: A lot of it was just plain process of elimination, just really coming to the understanding that I felt like my purpose here was to give back to people, as somebody who had an opportunity to have things and have privilege and opportunities that not everybody had. I was very aware of that and of my moral responsibility to turn around and give back. But it was more of an evolution. It wasn't any sort of a eureka moment. But in the late eighties, I guess, early nineties, when I moved to Birmingham and really started to pursue social work, that really came into fruition.

ST: What sorts of social work were you doing here in Birmingham?

IR: I worked for the child welfare agency.

ST: Were you working largely with a Hispanic population?

IR: None. None, not at all. It was predominantly African-American, some white folks as well.

ST: So at what point did your interest, then, in working on Hispanic issues develop?

IT: There again, it was sort of an evolution. I worked for the child welfare agency for a little over a year between internship and actual job. Then I had the opportunity to go and work at the university on a demonstration project from the federal government that later turned into the early Head Start program. It was during that time that—and this was ninety-five, I guess—some things in my life were changing in terms of reconnecting with my Latino roots in Mexico, and beginning to visit family more and having a friend that lived on the Texas-Mexico border and going to visit him. The internal part of feeling like—. It began to point me in that direction in terms of my interest in working in community. At the same time, Birmingham was beginning to change, and we saw a lot more Latinos come to Birmingham.

So as that grant wound down and we were sort of looking at what is the next thing we're going to do, a lot of things were happening. I began to talk to people who were also seeing this happen and who were interested from the standpoint of not letting people fall between the cracks and become marginalized. It took many years, I guess, really—. I can't remember, Sarah, when the idea came in my head, except that sometime I guess probably in late ninety-seven, but then really took a year and a half or so of talking to folks and seeing what community interest was. I was still working at UAB doing social work. Finally in 1999, when it was beginning to become a big topic for conversation—the Latino community in the Southeast, period—a bunch of us got together. We held a community meeting that was attended by a really incredibly diverse group of people, from rural community members to immigrants who had been here for a long time to serve

as providers, and sort of like white professionals, black professionals, established community professionals. That's what really set the ball rolling to do the work that I do today. I continued to work for UAB for another two years, but that sort of led us to where we started.

ST: HICA—am I pronouncing the acronym correctly?

IR: Yeah.

ST: It was officially founded in ninety-nine, right?

IR: Yeah. When we had the meetings in April, then we filed our articles of incorporation in June of ninety-nine, and did our by-laws and all that, and chose a board. So that was ninety-nine.

ST: What were the original main goals of the organization?

IR: To be a coordinating resource, and it didn't take us too long at all to realize that we can coordinate with other people, but to say we're going to coordinate a community is just—. We don't have that right, you know?

ST: Yeah.

IR: But also to address primarily like the language issue through an interpreter service and to also just provide resource information. Both of those things we did. We have a resource guide that's published in Spanish that we have made three editions of. We built a community interpreter network, interpreter service, and ran that for about four years, including bringing training to the area and that sort of thing. But last year, we phased it out and actually sort of gave it away to an entity that wanted to take it for profit. We felt like we're a social service agency; we're not an interpreting service. We are spending too many of our resources, human resources, trying to run a business, which is

not really our mission. We phased that out so we could remain more true to the mission, which is improving the lives of Latinos. And also, we felt like if there's a way—. We raised the awareness of community members about the need for professional trained interpreters, people know how to get that service, they know where to get that service, it exists. So we've sort of done what we needed to do for that.

ST: So now you're trying to focus more on solely advocacy issues—.

IR: Well, advocacy is sort of like the community approaches us and we go out into the community. It's sort of a back and forth thing in terms of people coming to us because they have questions, needs, need information, what have you. We go out into the community to do educational stuff, but we have a responsibility past just—. When people come to us, when we go out we find out what the issues are, so then of course we do have the responsibility to advocate on behalf of things that we can change that will improve lives for Latinos. So advocacy supersedes—. It's a part of everything that we do. We couldn't do that only. We have to do the other piece, which is bringing just the actual service delivery and working in coordination with the community.

ST: Um-hmm. In talking with lots of the community members, what are some of the big issues and concerns that you most often hear about?

IR: Well, problems associated with immigration in terms of how that impacts people's lives is a huge issue. That impacts access to healthcare, which impacts being able to drive the car, which impacts being able to drive and get to work and making money, and just the whole domino effect of that. Language access is difficult because so many people don't speak the language. While there are resources for interpreters, it's not realistic to think that people can use interpreters in every situation of their life. So that

continues to be a huge barrier. But also just the real lack of understanding on both sides of—for immigrants, and of course we're just speaking about Latino immigrants, the way to do things. And that yeah, it doesn't matter what your status is; you can still call the police if you've been a victim of a crime. You have that, and if you do call the police, you need to follow through with reporting. Basic sorts of things of that nature that just require education, but if people don't know these things, they aren't able to participate fully in their communities and live free lives.

ST: Um-hmm. I know one of your overarching goals is to integrate the immigrant community more completely into Birmingham. What does an integrated society look like to you? What are the real priorities in doing that? Schools, what institutions do you see as really key in helping immigrants integrate into the larger community?

IR: I think that you have to have agencies and organizations like ours that can deal with the transitional nature of what it means to integrate. There is integrated, but there's the process of integrating, and you have to have supportive services in there that can make that happen. That means school systems need to have adequate resources to hire bilingual staff or ESL teachers. I don't believe that we need to teach our children in schools in Spanish or their native language. This is America; our language here is English. But there is that transition period where you've got to have supports in place for kids that are coming into the system. That's something that's really, really important. But at the end of the day, I would say that the perfect picture of an integrated community is one that's inclusive, that appreciates all of the differences and the cultural nuances that all different immigrant communities bring. We love to go to New York, at least our

family does, because you can go to New York and eat food from anywhere around the world. You can't expect that to happen in Birmingham, Alabama, necessarily. You're going to be able to go eat Ethiopian food or something. But it's nice to be able to maintain cultural aspects that enrich the community. I guess also it's important for there to be that understanding among people and tolerance.

ST: Right. In working on these issues, who have been your strongest allies within the city, either in terms of government agencies or other nonprofit groups?

IR: The nonprofit community's been very supportive, particularly the United Way. They've been supportive because they've given us money, but they saw early on the need to reach out and be there for our community, so they have been very supportive and many of the other just nonprofit agencies as well. I really have to say that across the board, the business community in some ways is a harder sell, because I think that they maybe don't quite understand and speak a different language. Even though we might both speak English, it's still a different language. But in Birmingham anyway, I've had a fairly positive experience. There are the people that are not welcoming. I do believe honestly that comes from fear. They tend to have loud voices, but I in no way believe that they are the majority.

ST: Is it fair to say you feel like your opponents are somewhat isolated voices rather than recognizable groups?

IR: Most definitely, most definitely. I don't know; I haven't come face to face with the KKK. I would imagine the KKK probably is not real interested in what we're doing and it wouldn't line up with their principles. And then there is a chapter of the Minute Men here in Birmingham, which is maybe they're the same people that go to the

KKK meetings. They were all white when I went to check them out. But aside from some very conservative radio talk show hosts, I haven't had any direct, you know, from a group. And they're not even a group; they're individuals.

ST: Did you actually meet with representatives of the Minute Men?

IR: No, but I went to their rally.

ST: Oh, really.

IR: Just to see what it was like.

ST: What were your impressions or observations?

IR: It was the KKK gathering without sheets, because it was all white people.

ST: That was here in Birmingham?

IR: Um-hmm.

ST: When was that?

IR: I guess it was in May.

ST: Oh, yeah. Um-hmm.

IR: The only people of color were the photographers and stuff for the media that were there.

ST: Still talking about other groups in the city, how helpful and supportive has the more traditional civil rights community been in terms of civil rights organizations within the city?

IR: We have got very good relationships, particularly with the Civil Rights Institute. I think, quite frankly, it's a question that I ask myself. You have the NAACP, SCLC, those organizations, and I just don't know—.

ST: You don't want this on tape, is that—? [the recording is briefly paused]

IR: In terms of working with some of the African-American groups, as I mentioned, the Civil Rights Institute has been very open. I think one of the issues that we face here in Birmingham, and I think one of the issues that we struggle with nationally, is that there's still in many ways open wounds from the Civil Rights Movement from the sixties. It was such an important time in our history, and it made such a difference in the world that we live in today. It's always been my feeling that where else in the country would we do the work that HICA does *but* in Birmingham, Alabama, with our history, because we have our eyes so wide open to that. But quite frankly, I wonder if some of the organizations that were so important and did such great work at that time have evolved and kept up with the rest of the community. In a way, and unfortunately I've heard—. It breaks my heart, because some people still feel like, and I've heard comments to the effect that well, we haven't finished with our issues yet, so how can we deal with the issues of the Latino community?

I don't see it that way. I see it as an issue of all of our community. I'm not certain it was Martin Luther King that said justice for one is justice for all. So it's not a question of black or white or we have to finish the issues in the black community before we work on the brown community. It's something that if we can all work together on it, then everybody's glass is half full. So we work very hard. It's interesting because here in Birmingham the leadership in some of these other organizations—. I do see a slow change, particularly in the SCLC, in bringing some new younger leaders in, and I think that's important. I know we had at our April 9th rally around conference immigration reform, we had a member of SCLC who started his speech by saying, "I wasn't even born in 1964." I think that's what's important for the longevity and sustainability of the

African-American civil rights groups, to maintain their relevance and to build bridges across ethnicities and across races, is that we've got to have younger people be engaged in those organizations. We want to do it. It's very important to me, working for this organization and for the community that I do, that we walk hand in hand with all of our people of color, and with everybody, not just people of color.

ST: Right. Do you just in general find that a younger generation of non-Hispanic folks is more receptive to some of your issues? Do you think in other words it's more a generational difference?

IR: I think it's a generational difference. I also think that it's a world view issue. I think that you can look at—the immigration issue is a very good one. For the most part, the people that I've encountered who are just so hard-line immigration are folks that I would consider to have a fairly narrow world view. I think that that's true for just maybe race relations, people who just haven't had life experiences that push them to see things differently.

ST: Um-hmm. Getting back to this question of what does it mean to promote Hispanic or immigrant issues in the South, are there ways in which you think the history of the South is both a burden and a help?

IR: We talk about that a lot in Alabama. We talk about that a whole lot, and the whole world has the image of the fire hoses and the dogs, and even forty years later, people still think about that. Alabama bears that cross on ourselves, too. I can't think of the phrase I'm trying to pull out of my head, but a chip on our shoulder, if you will, in a way. I think that that's trying to evolve as generations move forward, but—. I'm sorry, I sort of lost my train of thought. Can you give me redirection? [Laughter]

ST: Well, I'm just curious how you felt that the South's history, and Birmingham's history in particular, really sort of shaped the terrain in which you work. Do you more often feel it helps your cause or—?

IR: Well, I do. Like I said a minute ago, I didn't know when I moved from McComb, Mississippi in Pike County, which, by the way, in 1964 burned more crosses in churches, in church yards and so forth, than any other place in the whole country.

ST: Really?

IR: Yeah. That was the legacy of the place that I grew up. I didn't really think, until I got to Birmingham, about the significance of being here, but as all of these feelings and perceptions emerged and unfolded in my life and in who I am, I thought that there is something bigger behind all of this and the responsibility that I have that we have to do better this time. We don't have a choice, and I think that people are sensitive to that in Birmingham and open. For the most part, Sarah, everybody that I meet is open and receptive to the growing Latino community and sees the opportunity to do things differently.

ST: Getting back just for a minute to this question who has been an ally or an opponent, what about labor organizations? How have they factored into your work?

IR: Unfortunately, it's neutral, because we have not at this point—. We know Al McCullough, and we've talked on the surface with various folks from unions, but we have not worked to really develop those relationships. It is something that is very important to me to do going forward, very important to do, and we plan to do it. We don't have a relationship at this point for any negative reason; it's just been that we've just had our hands full. We are at a staff of four people right now, but coming into this

year we were at about two and a half. I started the organization, I was the only person. It's just been a growing thing, and there are always so many more things that we want to do.

ST: Sure.

IR: But I value building that relationship.

ST: Um-hmm. I want to talk just a little bit about the rally that was held in April. You were one of the lead organizers of that, is that right?

IR: Well, we suggested that it might be something that we would want to do community-wide. It was not an event sponsored by this organization. A lot of people came together to make that happen, and a lot of organizations were behind it. But we provided the infrastructure that it could take place in, in terms of lots of different ways. We're certainly connected with organizations at the national level, so we could stay on message with what the national message was and really work in lock-step with what was going on nationally.

ST: Were you surprised by how big the outcome was, or were you anticipating even more—?

IR: We didn't really know what to expect, but we were very, very pleased with what happened on April 9th.

ST: You had about four thousand?

IR: About. I don't know how to count that many people, but that's what people said. So we were delighted, and it was mixed. We had members of the Anglo community there; we had members from the African-American community there. We were very pleased. And we're planning another event on September seventh. That's

what this meeting is about tonight.

ST: Oh, wow. Another rally?

IR: A rally. Not a march, but just a rally.

ST: Oh, yeah. In recruiting members of the Hispanic community to work on immigrant issues, have you found any differences in terms of level of interest between men and women? I'm just curious.

IR: I remember being at the park on that Sunday, April 9th, and the first people that showed up were like ten women. We tend to see more women here in our office just because of the kind of work that we do. I don't really know if I would say that one gender over another is more ready to step forward. I think our community as a whole is ready.

ST: Are there any divisions within the larger Hispanic community that you've had to work through in terms of different sentiments about how to approach some of these issues and debates about immigrant rights?

IR: You mean with other formally organized groups?

ST: No, I'm thinking more ideological differences within the Latino community here locally, any differences of opinion about strategies and goals and—.

IR: Yeah, sure.

ST: Any big differences come to mind?

IR: It was interesting when we decided to—. I was on the phone with Helen Rivas, who I think you're going to talk to, and it's like, "Helen, all this is going on all around the country." I think this is right after the L.A. march where they had half a million people, and it's like, "Helen, maybe we should do something here." Quite

frankly, HICA has been so focused with trying to handle the volume of people that just come into our office every day and call our office that we haven't done—. It's changing, but up until like the spring, we haven't done as much proactive stuff as I want us to do. We're moving in that direction. In terms of like opportunities to get community involved, we haven't really done anything until this April 9th attempt. So Helen and I were talking on the phone, and she is on the computer and we're writing an email that we send out to some key people.

Well, what do you know? By the next Tuesday, another group is having a little event down in the park, Lynn Park, which is great. They were able to get like two hundred and fifty people out, but it felt to us a little bit opportunistic, because we know that this is a group that doesn't do anything around immigration reform, but just sort of seized this moment as an opportunity to be in the spotlight. My organization, HICA, we were there, but we didn't participate in that as organizers because philosophically we didn't believe in the way it had sort of come together. After that happened, we did all sit down; that group came into the fold with us in terms of planning the April 9th event.

But moving up into the planning period, we had a very difficult time with the local radio stations, because they said, "Well, the day of action is going to be April 10th and that's Monday, and we've decided that for our community, and we have talked with the folks in Washington that—. And they said, 'Look, you do what's best for your community in terms of whatever day you want to have this.'" So we said, "OK, well, we think it's better to have it on Sunday instead of Monday. We don't want people to miss work, to put their jobs at risk, blah blah blah." So we had gotten to our rationale. So when we went to our radio stations—. I'm not clear because I didn't do all the inviting.

We all invited people if they were invited to some of the early planning meetings. Actually, they were.

But at any rate, it proved to be just incredibly difficult to get them—. I don't listen to that radio, but from what my husband told me, they were saying, "Ah, the event here isn't the authentic event. Go to Atlanta for the event on that Monday." So we were talking to the Atlanta organizers about are you having it, what's the information, just so we could know. It's like, we don't even know if we're having it. So we know from Los Angeles the power that the radio has in terms of turning people out, so that was really, really huge in terms of that division. We had the newspapers on board with us, and we had one radio station out of the three, but that would have been sort of the biggest moment in the history of the evolution of the community to date, that you've had this real sort of like confusion and sort of misinformation out there.

ST: Just to be clear for the record, was that a Spanish-language radio station?

IR: Yes. I'm speaking all about Spanish-language media.

ST: Um-hmm. So you felt they were in some ways maybe not giving your plans the publicity that you had wanted.

IR: Right, and undermining it in the sense that they'd be creating some fear in the community, because the Latino community depends on local radio for a lot of their information. In the system that the local radio has, if there is a work place—. What do they call it? If there's a raid of a job site or something by immigration, that information will be on the radio like wildfire. The community takes it almost as gospel what the radio says. So it's very hard, but I'm really proud of the turnout that we had, and I think that we were very clear and very pointed. It was not a HICA event. HICA was one of the

organizations that helped, but it was in no way a HICA event. It was a community event. So I think that we were successful, even in the face of some of that confusion and difficulty. Quite frankly, it brought some of us who have been doing this work who might not have always agreed, it brought us to a table that was very good and positive for us in terms of the evolution of our relationships.

ST: Oh, yeah. Anyway—. [the recording begins a new track] OK, I know you need to be wrapping up anyway, and it looks like we may be running a little bit low on the time on this particular flash card. So, I wanted to ask you just a couple of wrap-up questions. You have children, right?

IR: I do.

ST: I don't know if they're old enough for you to talk with them about your activism really yet or not, but I'm curious what you'd most like your children to remember about the work you're doing right now.

IR: Well, my children are involved in the work that I do.

ST: Oh, they are.

IR: Yeah, they were at the rally on April 9th. And my nine-year old—my twelve-year old carried one of the front banners with some other young Latinas. And my nine-year old has been volunteering here this summer. She takes her work here very seriously. And for me mostly it's not what I want them to remember it's what I want them to know and who I want them to be—people who are compassionate and sensitive to the community that they live in and understand their responsibility to contribute and give back. And to see that as a mom and as a woman that we can do whatever we want to do. It never occurred to me growing up that I was limited by my gender. I never want my

girls to think that they're limited because they're women. Not that I feel like I'm a supermom that does it all because I certainly am not. And not that I even set out to—I never even thought about running a non-profit agency. But, you know, what I hope that they learn is that you follow your dreams and you follow your heart and you follow your convictions. My dad told me, and it used to drive me crazy, "Do what you love Isabel." Great, Dad, so know I have a degree in history, now what do I do? But, you know, if you really do that, it will lead you the way that you're supposed to go. It will you to where you're supposed to be in life. And I just hope that my girls, I hope that I'm a good example and a good role model for my girls. I take them with me everywhere just because sometimes I have to, and I think it's important for them to know what their place is in the larger community.

ST: Well, was there anything you had wanted to bring up that I haven't asked you?

IR: I don't know. I can't think of anything. I mean I can probably be like one of the other people that doesn't haven't a meeting to go to and talk, talk, talk.

ST: Sure.

IR: This is important to me, and I really appreciate you talking to me about this. We're going through a process right now of archiving a lot of our stuff and so it's important to keep this stuff for the future.

ST: Right. Well, I appreciate you sitting down with me. Thanks very much.

IR: You're welcome.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock, September 2006