

Name of the interviewee: Vanessa Robledo
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SV: Today is May 16th; I am here with Vanessa Robledo for the Latino Winemakers Project.
Good morning.

VR: Good morning.

SV: For the record, can you please state your name.

VR: Vanessa Robledo.

SV: And, Vanessa can you tell me what city you were born in, and when?

VR: I was born in Sonoma, California on May 16th of 1977.

SV: Sonoma, California and you are the what? Middle child? Oldest child? Youngest child?

VR: I'm number four of the nine children.

SV: Number four of nine children. And how was that growing up? Haha... Four of nine children. [1:00]

VR: Well, that's probably one of the most frequent questions that I get because I do have seven brothers and one sister. The oldest one in the family, my sister is the firstborn, so I was the fourth and the youngest of the girls. And so, I grew up really being a tomboy trying to fit in with my brothers so, but it was, I think it was very enriching experience for me to grow

up in my family, with the Robledo family because we I think it's always been important for all of us to be together and work hard and be able to build something for our future.

SV: Lets go back a bit, when you where, did you grow up in Sonoma? Where did you live in Sonoma?

VR: On [2:00] Arnold Drive, so I grew up in, I grew up part of my life in Sonoma. I think I was three years old when we moved to Napa. And then, from Napa is where I spent the rest of my life till I was, till I got married when I was 19. And yea so yeah, I grew up in Napa and born in Sonoma.

SV: Now, your father was working in the vineyards. Was he managing his company yet? Or was he working for other people?

VR: At that time, we lived at the Sonoma Cutrer vineyard on Arnold Drive, which is called Les Pierre. And it's famous for chardonnay; it's one of the top chardonnays in the country. And he developed that land in 1975, and at that time he said that there was just so much rock [3:00] in the land that it was very labor intensive and what they ended up doing is they ended up building a fence. So if you go to the property, you'll see still the fence of rock that they removed from the soil.

And I remember at that property there was a fig tree and we had I believe it was maybe four or five of my uncles who lived with us but they lived in the basement because they were vineyard workers and at that time I remember my dad was their boss and he was the youngest but he was their boss. I remember that because I used to, my sister and my mom would always be the ones making the food, and feeding everyone and what they would do is, all the man would be around the table and my dad would always be at the head of the table and all of my uncles and other vineyard workers would sit around [4:00] there. And my brothers and my mom would just be constantly be bringing food, heating tortillas and doing all these things for them to, so they could enjoy their meal because it was, dinner was really when they came together and of course all they talked about was work in the vineyards. But it's when the men came together to really have some time of peace and rest, because during the day they were always working.

SV: So, how many uncles where there?

VR: I believe it was about three uncles and two men that weren't related to me but they were like our family because they always looked after me and I noticed that they always took special care of me, I think it must have been they missed their own daughters, and they missed their children, so they were always very you know, attentive, specially one of my

uncles. His name was Eduardo, he's my grandpa's twin brother [5:00] and he used to always pick fig for me after work, and he used to feed me figs. And he was just, to this day I have so much. He ended up passing away a few years ago, but I have such a great memory about him because he had such love for me, and I know, I later found out that it was because he had a daughter my same age.

SV: So, did he talk about the family with you? Did he talk about life in México with you? Do you remember? I mean, you were probably pretty young.

VR: He never talked about his family, but he always used to call me la reina del congos so I always felt since I was very young, they all of my uncles used to treat me like a princess because I was the youngest of daughters of my dad for my dad and my mom and my parents were always helping you know my uncles, they were always [6:00] feeding them, they were always taking care of them in any way that they could even housing them. And umm so, they kind of you know, always felt like you know I reminded them of their daughters that they've left in México.

And so, but I did experience one time because every year we would go to travel to México and so my dad would pack a van and all the nine children would be in the van and we'd drive for three days from Napa to Michoacán. Atacheo was the Pueblo where my dad is from. And when we would, I remember pulling in to this, there was mostly gravel and coble stone and you'd see all the kids from the village running after our van and then as soon as my dad would park, my dad would get off the van, he never would stop to rest, he didn't even sleep [7:00] in the three days that we would drive and all the kids would be around my parents and my mom would bring gifts, and my dad would, you know, go in his pocket to give them money, so everybody loved my parents you know and so I always felt like it was such, it was great to see that they were always giving back to their pueblo, and the people in their pueblo, that was always very important to me.

And there was a time when, I was, when one of my uncles which is my uncle Eduardo that I talked about, I went to go visit him and I remember he yells out. I was playing with all these little girls which were my cousins and he yells out "Mi reina del congo" so I'm like, so happy and I'm running towards him. But there's my, his daughter runs in front of me, and he hugs her [8:00] and he was so happy and I just remember being so brokenhearted because I thought it was me, his "reina" and but that was his daughter, so that's when I realized, wow! He has a daughter and that's probably who he's always you know, felt that, he shared his love of his daughter with me, so I felt really privileged.

SV: Yeah, it's kind of amazing that you know a lot of these field workers are separated for such long period of time through their families, and braceros particular.

Did you see that with other family members? I mean, where there a lot of family members coming through to help work other than those two uncles?

VR: It was all of them, what I saw growing up were, it was all single man, and they left their families behind. My father [9:00] was very fortunate that in the 1971, he brought my mother over, and my mom was basically the one that took care of them with all the food, so that's why she became such an amazing cook, because every single day she would pack them lunch, she would have a little something for them to eat before they go to work. And then, create these amazing feasts, you know, at night for dinner and these people, one of the things that I realized is my family and all of the vineyard workers, they sacrificed so much to come here and to be able to work and sure, you know they were able to get paid and receive money from it. But I think it's important to realize what they leave behind and the sacrifices that they make to be able to work in this country [10:00] and you know, so it's, I think it's, for me it's sad that I really didn't understand until I got older but it is important, even my grandfather, he's had thirteen children. And he was always here working, and I was very close to my grandfather and I always enjoyed my time with him. He would always tell me jokes; he never talked about the family he left behind in México. My grandmother, or even his sons that were there and his daughters, but it was always, if they were to talk about anything it was just always happy. Happy things that were happy, there was nothing that made sad what they discussed at that time.

SV: And so, your grandfather, your father's father was a bracero and he came to California in the [19]50's and [19]60's? [11:00]

VR: Actually, it was my great-grandfather, my grandfather and also some of my great-uncles who came during the [19]40's.

SV: Okay

VR: So, and then in 1949 my grandpa said that was the first year that he started working in the vineyards. He was working and living in a labor camping Healdsburg, California.

SV: In Healdsburg?

VR: Yeah, in Healdsburg, California and he said that at that time they were picking everything from prunes, apples, I think even some type of, I think it was walnuts and that's when he first started working in the vineyards. And he said at that time, that it wasn't, there wasn't a lot of vineyards but little by little, he noticed that they started to develop more and more during that time. And then that's when they became master grafters. So, they crafted vines in Napa County [12:00] and in Napa. Napa County and Sonoma County. So, in both counties they have a tremendous legacy and my grandfather, he would drive,

every time we would drive down 29 in Napa. He'd point out all of the old vines that he had his hands on. And so, to me that was very special and meaningful because of the history of my family here. And, so that's always been really special. I, I know that for me, when they ask me, how did you know to stay in the business? Or do you love the business? And I do, because I have such deep roots in the wine industry. And so, it's very special for me to continue and work hard, because I wouldn't be where I'm at if it wasn't for my ancestors. If it wasn't for my great-grandfather and all my uncles and everything that they did to see, you know their granddaughter someday succeed in the business [13:00] and become owner of the winery and owner of the land and all that.

SV: I remember you mentioned in somewhere I read that your grandfather would teach you about the vines and you would teach him English, is that?

VR: Yeah, so my grandfather lived with us, he's one of the persons that we, that lived with us as well, and he, one of the things that I felt it was so special is that when I went to kinder -I didn't know any English until I went to kindergarten, so as soon as I started learning English I picked it up pretty fast because at that time my brother and I were the only Mexican-Americans in the class. So, everybody else spoke English and you had no choice but to learn it. So, we picked it up really fast and my grandfather ask me, so after dinner he would always take a walk to smoke his cigar in the vineyards and so, [14:00] I would follow him because I just, you know, my dad was always busy he had a huge responsibility so sometimes he wasn't in the best of moods. But my grandfather had a different personality, you know he loved joking, he loved making me laugh, so when he'd in his little vineyard walks I'd follow him and he said, he asked me if I would teach him English and he said, and I'll teach you about the vines because you have to learn that this is the family's future and if you take care of the land, the land will take care of you always. You will always have that, Vanessa. So that's one thing I recall, wow! You know, I'm going to be sure, of course I want to learn about it because I want to be just my uncles, you know, I want to learn about it and I want to work in it and I, little did I know how hard it was. Because, I have, when I was 8, I started working in the vineyards, but yeah, [15:00] you have, you know, that's why you see you want to be a part of it.

SV: So, you remember, what he taught you? Did he teach you how to use the tools? Did he teach you about the vines? Did he teach you about the grapes? Or?

VR: More about explaining that a vine is just like us. It's like, you know, it's like to being able to take care of it and nurture it and being sure that you know, everything from things that at that time I didn't understand. A plant needs water to survive, it needs nutrition, it needs you know, everything from suckering from the body down, so you remove the excess sheets from the body down. Because you don't want the energy of the plan to focus on those shoots, it has to focus on the top body of the vine. And you know, just how clusters develop and how they grow, sometimes you have to manipulate and move

around the clusters to be sure that one [16:00] isn't covering the other one so the sun can reach that one. So, you have to move things around and make sure that everything has to be in balance. Those are some of the things that he taught me. And he told me why there's wires, why the trellis system. How the tendrils go up like little hands and they hold on to the wire so the clusters can hang down. So, he taught me a lot of things that I'm thankful that I learned.

SV: Wow and, so you started working at age 8. Do you remember what vineyard that was? Who that was for? Or just some random contract?

VR: Well it's our family's vineyard, and so at that time, in the 1980's my family had saved up bought land people didn't want. So, my dad said that basically they just had a bunch of trash [17:00] and the property, 13 acres. And it being up to Napa, so at that time my dad hauled out like 13 trucks loads of trash. And as soon he moved all that, my uncles and stuff they helped developed the land and then my dad told us, this is going to be part of your land, you guys are going to work it. So, we did, every day after school, during our weekends, we were out there working in the vineyards. And that's really when we were thankful for that because that's really when we learned to appreciate our ancestors and also what my parents had done. Because both my mom, she was always helping my dad in everything. She kept the home, but she also worked in the vineyards as well. Even when she was pregnant, I remember when she was pregnant with my twin brothers, [18:00] her stomach was just huge and she was still over there tying vines, I mean tying canes and she is a very strong woman, so she's one of the people that I truly admire a lot, for her, for everything that she's done and achieved.

SV: It's quite amazing to be able to do that kind of work, especially with twins. I can't imagine, the work is pretty difficult.

VR: Yes, because you're working, people don't realize that you work in intense heat when it's super-hot and you have a deadline to finish because either bud breaks coming or whatever has to happen, in the season Mother Nature doesn't wait for you. You have to be sure that you get that work done; you only have a certain window to be able to complete it. And when it's freezing cold there's sometimes where I remember my cheeks felt like I [19:00] couldn't even move my face, my fingers felt like they were going to break off. I mean, I remember crying. All my brothers, they were like "yeah, let's do this" they were so competitive and I ended up trying, as the older I got I was a little more competitive but early on it was so hard for me to adjust to that life, but I'm thankful for it because if it wasn't for that I wouldn't have that appreciation that I have now for not only the land but also every drop of wine.

SV: Yea, if you're growing up with it, you sort of have to appreciate it and it sort of takes a backseat to everything else. So growing up in the older middle school and high school, did this take; was this center stage for you and your family?

VR: Yeah, it was all about. [20:00] I never really got a job. I think I did get a job in an insurance company once because I wanted to know what it was not to work in the family business. But it was all about the family business and us working together for one goal. Which is to be able to someday have our own winery. That was our goal, and to be able to produce it, it had to be a complete circle, so little by little we owned the land. Well, actually my family mastered the great growing part of it which is farming and taking care of the land and then to finally own the land and be able to grow grapes that were our own and then to be able to produce from that land which is the wine. So, it became a complete circle and that was always the dream of the family.

SV: Always, always even early on.

VR: Yeah.

SV: So, [21:00] do you remember while the land was being developed and the grapes were growing - did your father get help from some of the other folks he worked with or some other, was there a network that he drew from?

VR: Yeah, there was a lot of people that wanted to see my dad succeed because they saw how hard he worked. And he had neighbors that he'd go ask, can I borrow your tractor? They'd say yes, take it. And sometimes they wouldn't charge him, sometimes they'd charge him a small fee, but it was all about when it comes to people that understand what you do in your business they want to be able to see you, and this was people that were Italians that helped my dad a lot. The Italian community from Napa and Sonoma really gave my dad a huge amount of support. So, [22:00] yeah I think that's one of the reasons that my dad has been successful, I mean certainly there's also people, the other side when people don't want to see you, that you kind of are a little challenged by like how is a Mexican going to own land now? How is that? And it's a lot of hard work and a lot of sacrifice, that's how it happens.

SV: Yea thanks... That's sort of finely veiled discrimination. Pretty rampant wasn't it; did you feel that and see that in school as well growing up?

VR: You know, I honestly I never did, some of my brothers said they did, they saw it more than I did and sometimes I feel like I always had, you know some people say like a

glasses of rose or something, [23:00] rose colored glasses and maybe that was just the way that I handled things but I never felt that anybody. In business I think realizing what...when I was running my family's winery I realized that when I spoke about the bracero's in our family history, people I don't think it was prejudice I think it was more people were not aware of it, they never heard about it and they were shocked to hear that that happened in this country. And I think that was one of the reasons my dad came up with the idea to start the braceros and it was to honor his ancestors. In addition to that, so he came up with the idea to produce a wine called braceros and the label that's on that is my dad upstairs and I [24:00] think that was a very significant part of the Robledo family winery. Because that is the reason also that the Mexican president came to the winery, was because of the braceros wine and it was something that people and I thank also the Smithsonian for supporting that and for getting the story out there too in the exhibit because a lot of people, and I can honestly say and maybe 80% of the people in this country have either never heard of it or don't know enough about it, about the braceros program. And it's such an important thing to educate the people the history of what happened in this country. And I mean not only the wine industry, but agriculture all over throughout the country. So...

SV: Yeah, it's one of the reasons why I'm here is to look at the role of [25:00] Mexican Latinos in the wine industry and its pretty much built on the backs of Mexican migrant labor.

How many workers do you think are in the fields these days 2012, 2011 and how is it changed from when you remember or started the business to today? Has the population of workers shifted a little bit, or what kind of changes have you seen?

VR: Well, I've definitely from my understanding now, I've only been involved in Napa as far as the leadership part of Napa for maybe a few months because. The only reason that I got involved in it was because I heard certain things happening in Napa which was basically ICE coming and taking people from their homes [26:00] here in Napa, so all of that doesn't make any sense to me because it's a complete contradiction in my eyes.

There's a benefit of people walking out in Napa Valley and seeing all the vineyards perfectly manicured. Just beautiful. Why are they like that? Why are those vineyards manicured? And why is the wine so world renowned in Napa Valley? Because it has to do with the hand and the labor of the Mexican people. I know that there are other cultures other than Mexican that also work the vineyards but it's a smaller percentage. The majority of them are Mexican and so that really bothered me to hear that that was happening so what I decided to do is decided to educate myself more about what was going on and see if I there was anything that I can do. [27:00] I know that there's certain policies that have changed since then, but that for me was outrageous, I was outraged just upset and I couldn't believe that this was happening in Napa - today.

So yes, the population has decreased. They, I think, that people in the wine industry are realizing it and I hope that they really understand what the severity of what can happen if we don't have the labor force here. It's a very touchy subject because there are so many opinions and there is so many views that so many people have about this. But really what comes down to is that we do need, they need the work and we need their labor, that's what's important. I don't [28:00] know what's going to happen in the United States, what policies they decide to enforce as far as making it all work, but it has to. And I think that's one of the things that braceros teaches us is that it wasn't 100% beneficial to all the parties, that's a fact especially the Mexican people.

I mean, I have uncles right now, I think his in his late 80's early 90's and he was promised a pension and he never received not even a quarter of it. So, he's living off of his land in México that has been passed out through generations but in reality is that there has to be some kind of solution that needs to take place here because if we keep ignoring and there are all these feelings of hatred, there [29:00] has to be some kind of balance too. I don't know, I don't have the answers but, you know I think I would be supportive of people that can up with some kind of solution.

SV: Part of it is probably economics as well, so is there a labor shortage of field workers in Napa area for field work, for the wine industry?

VR: Yeah, well for my understanding it is. I mean, even last year there was a shortage. Last year we kind of had unexpected things happen with the weather. Because we had rain in a late season, which what happens is you get the rot, the mold and it claims your vines and there's nothing you can do about it. So, because of the rain a lot of the workers weren't working. So, they lost a lot too. It wasn't just us the growers or us the wineries. But the workers, [30:00] they didn't have anything to do so they migrated north to try to take advantage of that agriculture, find work and be able to get paid.

So, I mean in agriculture its certainly is unpredictable and that was a very sad situation for the workers and one of the things that I have heard that it is there is a shortage. Even with my family's business, because they have the winery, they have the vineyard management company and then the Robledo ranches and it's been difficult to find people this year.

SV: Yeah, that's what I've understand that it's been really, really hard. That there's always work but there's not enough workers.

VR: But if we continue these sweeps with the ICE it's going to continue to get worse. I mean [31:00] I'm not sure what their intentions are. What their long plan is for them to be doing breaking up families, I mean there's stories that I've heard that some of the people are pulled out from their homes. And they come in saying they're looking for someone

and it's not who they're looking for. It's just, to me it just seems unreal that's happening in this day and age.

SV: When you were at the front of your family's business in the late [19]90's early 2000's did you also noticed this worker shortage problem as well? Or it was—

VR: No, it wasn't. I mean there was some things that were going on as far as-- one of the things that we've always supported are farm worker housing. Which is, what they used to call [32:00] labor camps but now they call them farm worker housing for the vineyard workers and a lot of those places what was interesting is they were never fully occupied and what I learned was it was a fear factor it was something that they preferred to, either live with relatives where they would pack in a very small apartment and just pay a certain amount a month and just live there during the time. Versus accepting farm worker housing and living there for, basically free, because of fear. And so, back then those were the issues that I was dealing with when I was working in my family's winery. But there's always been certain things going on, but as far as a shortage, not like now.

SV: Not like now? Yeah, I know [33:00] farm worker housing has been a fairly large issue for a number of years in Napa. Did your parents, or your father when they first got to Napa, where they working? Living in the same vineyards? Or in a worker housing?

VR: My dad lived in a labor camp in Calistoga. He lived there with my grandpa. My grandpa, his entire time until my dad came to this country, he always lived in farm worker housing or labor camps. Yea, what happened when my dad came is, initially he lived in labor camps, but the thing about my dad is that he was so determined to make it. He was a type of person that when everybody went home, he would stay and he mastered all the tractors, so he ran over some plants, [34:00] and vines in order to learn how to work those tractors well. He was—this was a sixteen-year-old, seventeen-year-old boy or a young man. And so, what happened is that his employers saw that, and they said, we are going to start giving you responsibilities and when he married my mom, he was eighteen years-old, two years later he brought her to the United States. And by that time, my dad already had his employer had given him a home to live in Healdsburg, California and that's where my mom and dad started their life together and every other year, they started having kids, kid was born.

SV: yea... so, did you master tractors as well? Did you do everything in the field?

VR: I learned it but, was I as good as—I always tried to compete against my brothers but my brothers were always better than me in that part of it. [35:00] But I tried; I tried doing

everything that they did. But you know, I think it was a good experience but I never, I have to admit I was never as good as they were.

SV: Is there an aspect of the industry the work that you enjoy doing most of all?

VR: I think my favorite thing is definitely being out in the land. That's my very, very favorite thing. I love all the wonderful and interesting people I've met in my career, because it's been so diverse the people that love wine and the people that wine attracts. So, it's a balance and also being part of a legacy, being part of something that my ancestors started and I hope t[36:00] hat they are proud of everything that they were able to accomplish and I know I am of them.

SV: So, let's sort of take that, wine attracts a lot of people, a lot of different people. When you were running the family wine, what did you do? What did you change? What was your contribution to—?

VR: Well, it's interesting because the way the winery started, my sister married the winemaker. So, in 1997, my sister Lorena married the winemaker Luis Rolando Herrera.

SV: Rolando? That's the Mi Sueño wine?

VR: Mi Sueño wine. So, my sister and him started Mi Sueño wine at the same time Robledo started. My dad said, here's some grapes for you and my daughter and now we are going to start Robledo. And at that time, [37:00] my dad approached me, and he said, "Vanessa we are ready to start the winery, you're going to run it. So, learn everything you have to learn, but you're going to sell the wine".
At that time, I was helping with the other two companies. I was—

SV: The vineyard management company?

VR: Yeah, so I was managing the clients taking care of all the invoicing and all of the budgeting and everything else for the company. So, he told me he wanted me to focus on the winery. So, I did, I took classes and I learned everything I could. I asked questions from people that have been running wineries. What was the way to build it and umm I was really excited because Robledo Family Winer was going to carry our name and it was something that I could not fail in and I knew that.

So, I was determined to make the family business successful and one of the things that I knew [38:00] that had to happen is to include our culture and our food and to be able to share that with people. So, in everything that we did we had my mom cooking and then the furniture that we have in the tasting room we brought it from my dad's pueblo in México. It was all hand-carved, and since then they've expanded, they bought even more furniture. But at that time, it was just one table, the bar and the back bar and the benches, I mean the little chairs in the front. So, you know my vision and I know that what my dad always talked about is we wanted people when they stepped in Robledo to step into a little pueblo in México. It was like going to a different - traveling into a different time. So that was really the purpose of everything that we did then. And then including in the wine production, [39:00] since I haven't been there, they've expanded a lot in the varietals and all of those things. But when we first started, we only had the Chardonnay and the Merlot, and then we added the pinot later. And so little by little, we started adding the Seven Brothers, Sauvignon Blanc, so we wanted to also connect it with the family. We launched the wine club, which we wanted to introduce Padrinos with her the top tears of the ones that buy the most, uncles and aunts los tíos. And then second tear, and then the cousins which is the third tear. So, they are the ones that buy the least. And then we have--

SV: But they are still part of the family.

VR: Right, they are still part of the family. And then we had all of our events where all cultural. We'd bring in entertainment from México, we always had our harvest which is something that incorporated here. Our harvest party which we had to Aztec dancers come in [40:00] and do the dance for the gods to have a healthy harvest and things like that. So, all of that was really the vision and I think that we grew really fast in a very positive way, most of it, 80% at that time when I left was 2007, was 80% direct to consumer. If you were to come to our events since we started, extremely diverse. That was one of the things a lot of people in the wine industry had not seen because in a lot of what we opened the tasting room in 2003. So, we, at that time we were able to make history because it was the first tasting room in the country opened by Mexican vineyard worker, which is my father and my mother. And so, we received a proclamation from the city of Sonoma and we [41:00] had a huge celebration and it was great. But beyond that I think it was something that our family all came together, it was a vision that we all—it was our goal to be able to achieve that and to be able to see it full circle, it was an amazing thing for all of us. So, I mean I remember crying when we first opened it because I thought, gosh it's a lot of hard work, a lot of...you know traveling. I used to represent my family nationally. I traveled everywhere and told the story to everybody who'd listen. And a lot of times people would buy right away, they would just take an order. You know I was sometimes in New York and the distributor would say, "Usually it takes three times". They're putting the order right away and a lot of them, I remember people telling them the story and they [42:00] would start crying because it connected to their ancestors and what they've lived. And so, you know it's just a very special

experience for me because it was—I was so proud of my family you know and I'm thankful that I had that opportunity.

SV: Yeah, the pressure must have been amazing on you to succeed. One question I had was, you talked about the vision were its firmly rooted in Mexican traditions. Did you experience push back from either family members or others saying that, that was not the direction to go or... I'm just curious.

VR: We did have some people in the beginning that said, "You're not going to use your name, are you?" And we said, "Yes, we are." Because if you use your name, they are going to know that you're Hispanic [43:00] or Mexican and we said, well that's the point. You know so I remember comments like that when I first started which I honestly, I never had any doubt that our family was going to be successful. I always knew that everything the - opportunities and the doors that opened up for us, those were the right path that we were supposed to be taking. So, I mean I never had doubts, I never doubts for anything that we did, certainly sales weren't easy in the beginning because I would go into Mexican restaurants and they'd say we don't sale any wine here, we sale tequila. So that was challenging, things have changed now, they sale wine now. But I think that's part of learning what pairs better with what dish and all those things. But it was [44:00] an interesting journey in the beginning because sometimes I felt like, oh my gosh am I going to fail at this? But then I would get people who would order wine or re-order wine and all those things started to happen, so in the beginning I was very doubtful but little by little the doubts I would say yeah I know that this is the path that we are supposed to take.

SV: That must be an exciting story, do you remember, can you tell us a little bit about like maybe one of the first wine tasting events that you took your wine to. Was it local? Was it national?

VR: Yeah, I can tell you the first account that I walked in. It's called Wine Direct Selections in Santa Rosa. And he's still a client of mine, even in my new business. [45:00] He's name is Ron and I walked into his office, I was like this, shaking I was so scared because it was my first account.

SV: And how old are you at this time? About—

VR: I was 21. Maybe younger, no I'm kidding 21. So, I walked in his office and I showcased the wine and it was a chardonnay, a pinot noir and a merlot and I honestly didn't think he was going to buy. He called me the next day and put an order in of five cases of chardonnay and one case of pinot and one case of merlot. So, the day after you could just imagine I was in my office jumping up I was like yes! Yes! I was so happy and excited

because I had sold my first cases of wine and I think I remember calling my dad and my mom, so I was just [46:00] really happy with my sale.

SV: That's quite amazing feat at age 20 or 21, I'm not sure I would have the guts to do something like that. So, how about the winemaking part of it early on, will move on to where you are today but you were with your brother-in-law was a winemaker. Was there a vision, did you guys have the vision of what you wanted in the wine or did that sort of evolve?

VR: Yeah, I think it always it continues to evolve even now. But certainly, the vision was to express and to use the best fruit that we possibly can to produce the wine, after all it was going to carry our names so that for us was extremely important. Now, [47:00] our family all the acres that my family owns, a lot of those grapes were all sold to local wineries so the rows that were designated for the Robledo program, those were farmed depending on the quality that we wanted. Which was—because some of the grapes were sold to sparkling wine houses which means that the sugar level has to be lower, not like any stow wine. Stow wine has to be a little bit higher. So that's the reason that the farming was different in some of the vineyard sites. But really the vision was to express the fruit and showcase it the best that we can once people pour their glass of wine, and to be able to share it with their family, to be able to share it with their friends and to pair it with their food [48:00] and the wine it's like, it's a marriage with food really, it's what it is and it doesn't matter what a lot of wine writers say. There are certain rules of thumb, like you shouldn't pair really spicy food with red wine; more of the high acid white wines go better with spicy food. Some rules like that, that maybe people should follow but other than that it's whatever they like. It's not what the wine writers say or the high scores that you receive but it's about your taste buds and what you prefer and what you want to share with your family and friends.

SV: And that comes out I think, with the work you did with your family. So, let's switch gears a little bit. So, tell us where you are today. Where are you, what are you doing now these days?

VR: Okay...Now, I am in Napa [49:00] very different than Sonoma. I joined Black Coyote; it's going to be four years in October this year. And it's been very different because I started, or I was part of this winery in the last quarter of 2008 which is when the economy just went down and representing a high end brand like Black Coyote during that time was not an easy thing. So, I called all of my contacts that I had in Robledo and nobody ordered any wine. So, I figured okay. I'm going to have to take a different approach with this one. So basically, the only way I was able to survive is I asked Doctor Bates if I can have his contact list, if he'd try to sell his wine to his friends which he really hadn't done before. He hadn't done that before so that's how we were able to grow our sales so we basically [50:00] tripled sales in the past since I've been here. And we've grown our

wine club, we had 27 club members and we brought it to 200 plus club members throughout the country and it's been really exciting, fun for me to be here and just kind of returning back to my roots which is where I grew up in Napa, you know Sonoma is where I was born and its where my family opened the Robledo Family Winery but Napa has always been a big part of me too because I grew up here so, it's nice to be back.

SV: And so, day to day your job here at Black Coyote is managing the business side. Do you still get to go out to the field and do some of that stuff?

VR: Yeah, it's different when I was with my family [51:00] we owned all of our vineyards, so everything that I—all the land that I walked it was part of my family's. Now we buy all of our grapes but the important thing with the people that we work with, the growers that we work with, we work with nobody nothing other or less than the best. We always want to be working with the best growers, so we build really strong relationships with our growers. I am able to go out in the vineyards anytime I want. I can give suggestions on how the farming, but they are very reputable growers, so they know what they are doing, that's the reason we're working with them. There's not much that I can go out there and do other than go out and see and just to reassure myself that everything is going to be taken care of properly, and it is. And I think that's important too, [52:00] I think for my growers it's important for them to know what my goal is which is always to improve, I don't think I could ever stop making better wine. Last year we got the top hundred wines of the world, Black Coyote so its unexpected but very much appreciated because certainly our name was out there listed with the top hundred wines of the world and out of 16,000 wines it's not bad, so we are really excited about that.

And a small company like us, we only produce 600 cases so any third endorsement that we can get we are certainly happy with it. But I have to say that in my career I've just been so fortunate because I love what I do also and it's a blessing to be able to go to work every day and love everything that you do. And sure, there's like the stuff that I don't like so much which is legal compliance you know.

SV: Oh, come on. [53:00]

VR: You know I read taking care of all the reports and stuff like that. But we need to take care of that part too. But that's the only thing that I don't like about the wine industry because we are regulated by the federal government, the state and also the country.

SV: Yeah, that's a lot of red tape. Are you afraid to sort of mention who your growers are and who your wine contacts, wine makers are? We are just curious to who's out there and who's working.

VR: Yeah, we have a small little vineyard here in Coombsville it's called Angel Acres and we work with some really, really great growers there they are the Sutiees **and** then we have a small little vineyard that we work with in Yountville. It's managed by Bay View which is the Lard family and we also have in [54:00] Atlas Peak we also have Stage Coach which is managed by Doctor Krupp's and those are the three vineyards that we are working with right now. So, it's all cabernet but we use three different appellations really the showcase of different components and the different fruit profiles that each of the appellations bring so we merge them all together and it 100% cabernet. We don't add any other varietal in.

SV: So, how did the contracts work? Is it for a set amount of years? Year by year is it?

VR: Well, you can have an evergreen contract which that renews every year unless you give them notice and say that we are not planning to use your vineyard anymore. But for us, we pretty much do use it every year and one of the things that we make sure of is that what their goals are [55:00] for the future, it's not to produce from these vineyards because we want to keep consistent profiles in our wines which sometimes we can't help that either because mother nature throws you a curve ball with the weather but we do the best that we can and certainly the growers are committed to us and we are committed to them.

SV: Did you select them, or do they come to you, or they are already being used when you came?

VR: Yeah, what we usually- you know—before we select the growers we like to ask for samples and see what the performance of the vineyard has been, so we are able to taste and see if it fits with our program. And we have a consultant wine maker at Black Coyote, his name is Tim Milos which I adore working with Tim because he is very, first of all he puts up with me, you know and second of all he's just very motivated also to be able to produce [56:00] an amazing wine. He doesn't care about the scores, I like that. I like that you don't compromise because of what you think the wine writers are going to write about you. I think it's more about the style of what our clients and our customers love and that's really the way that we look at things at Black Coyote. We produce wine for our friends, family, and our clients and customers.

SV: Now, I know also that you do some other, you have some other passions that you sort of tagged team with Dr. Bates on at Black Coyote. Can you talk a little more about some of those other things that you do?

VR: Yeah, so I have three other investors here at Black Coyote, so their original founders was Dr. Ernest Bates, Mr. Jack Ruffel, Mr. Stanley Trotman and also, Dr. Olen Robinson. [57:00] And Dr. Olen Robinson is the one that is the only one that has not continued with the Black Coyote but he was one of the original founders. And, so with Dr. Bates he's the one that basically I met first out of all my investors and he has a foundation. It's a family owned foundation, private. And what he, he's very generous in with the community in San Francisco, you know he donates everywhere from the ballet to also he has a scholarship that he named under his mother for a nursing program at UCSF. So, he's very passionate about his community but when I originally began talking about what he's doing is, I asked him if since he lives in Napa, would [58:00] he consider contributing to the community here in Napa. And so, he was opened to listening and so I told him my thoughts and he was very accepting of that because he knows, he's a big advocator and promoter of education.

So, education, he's always helping and promoting that so that's the opportunity that I think that we have here is to, we funded a small preschool for 22 kids in Sonoma and most of those kids are children of vineyard workers and they don't speak any English so they start this program with not a word of English. Some of them have never even seen a book in their life. Some of the parents don't read or write even in their own language, so it's really challenging for these kids and to be able to [59:00] at least learn the English language so by the time they start kindergarten they are already where they are supposed to be. I think that was a huge opportunity for the Ernest Bates Foundation to get involved and be able to support it. And this was one of the first programs of its kind because the state of California is usually the one that funds it but the parents don't pay anything, and some of the preschools the parents paid at least a small portion or they paid something not it in this one. This one it's 100% funded by the Ernest Bates Foundation.

And, so it's really, I think when you go and you see the kids and you see the changes even the confidence, I remember going in at the beginning with these kids when they were in there two weeks. They wouldn't even look at you in the face, they would just being with their heads down and now you walk in there and they are like looking at you, talking about Obama, our president. [1:00:00] It's just amazing how quickly and smart these kids are and how giving them an opportunity and you know believing in them, they can just flourish into these amazing young little kids that want to make a difference. And the sad thing about their story too is that a lot of them become translators for their family, so they are going to grow up quick. And I can relate to that because I remember being the translator of my parents, doctor visits or you know, opening bank accounts and doing things like that at a very young age. So, you know it's not easy but at least they'll have that skill to be able to multiply that in within their family circles and help them that will be good.

SV: Yeah, is that probably one of the more pressing issues you think these days is farm worker education and sort of getting them on [1:00:01] their feet and sort of involved in the community or are there more other pressing issues that you guys are gonna try to work towards?

VR: Well, in Napa that's really what I've been trying to focus. What is the most important issue here that we need to help? And so, one of the things that I've learned is that there is, I think there are 16,000 youth under the age of 17 here in Napa County. And there really isn't a service to take care of them. 40, I think its 46% are Hispanic. Out of that 46% a huge portion of the population is connected to the wine industry or the hospitality industry, [1:02] whether their parents are either cleaning hotel rooms or they are working in the vineyards, or they are working in the seller in the back of the restaurants. So, that is a scary thought thinking about the numbers and realizing that unless we do something about it there is a huge achievement gap. There is a lot of kids that drop out of school, so I think for us, definitely we are focused on education and seeing where we are gonna invest our money and be able to help our community we are still looking at that because I've only been doing the research, really this year is when I started it. So, in Sonoma we are gonna continue to support the preschool, but here in Napa I think that there are pretty [1:03] similar issues that I think we are going to stay in focus on the education part of it.

SV: Yeah, it's interesting talking with some other folks who also came early on in the maybe [19]60's, sort of when they would go to school they were always the odd man out because they were Mexican, Mexican-Americans in all white school and sometimes they would have a problem. But it doesn't seem like much has changed since then.

VR: Well, the population is definitely grown. If you see now who makes up the majority of the students or half or close to the more than half is the Hispanic, it's the kids that come from Mexican or Hispanic background. So, culturally is to come into this country [1:04] and to just think that you are going to fit right in, it's nearly impossible because we have such different cultures, such different beliefs, that I think it's important that the people who have access to those kids and that are teaching those kids understand all of those kids, the challenges that these kids are facing. Because if there isn't that connection, I think that the gap just keeps getting wider and wider because, I mean remember growing up for myself. I learned so much about the American culture. But it was nothing like what I learned at home, it was leaving in two different worlds, really. You go home and still everything, you are only allowed to speak Spanish and you know, the girls have their place and the boys have theirs and it's just different. And then you go to school [1:05] and it's like, wow! This is kind of different, not bad, but it's different. And you know then growing up with my parents, they always told us, you can't lose your language, you can't lose who you are. So, it's kind of trying to create a balance, so I understand these kids. I understand how hard it is for them, and so I just want to do at least my part in being an example for other people to also support and help them.

SV: Have you seen a change in the type of work that Hispanics-Latinos are doing in the wine industry? Is there—has there been a shift recently?

VR: Yeah, I think so. I think the great thing that I noticed is you know you have a lot of Hispanics producing wine. You have a lot of them owning homes, you have some of them that have lost also because of the economy they've lost their homes, but you see [1:06] some families that have settled in well, and that are doing well, that makes me really happy. You also see them in high positions, whether it's a bank or you know other industries in Napa and Sonoma that makes you proud to be able to see that. And then you also see the generations following their family's footsteps, whether it's in a restaurant or a small business or store that they put in you know connected to the Mexican heritage or Hispanic culture. So, it's great to be able to see that, that that is happening. But isn't that everybody's dream? Isn't that what it's supposed to happen, or it's supposed to progress? Sure, there's other, there's the people that are having difficult times, and certain challenges that they are facing that it's not easy [1:07] but, I think that the great thing about America is that you have the opportunity. Sometimes it takes a little longer for some of us than others, but we can all get there, I think.

SV: Yeah, and to really become part of the, I mean everyone is truly part of the American experience, I guess.

O.K. well I know you have other appointments, so thank you for the time and we will continue this conversation at some other point.

VR: O.K. thank you.

SV: Thank you. [1:07:35]

End of the interview

