

Mayor Bonilla Oral Histories BONUS Draft 1 20241008 - English

**Office of Legacy Management
BONUS Oral History Project
Interview of Carlos López Bonilla
July 16, 2024
Interviewer: Scott Snider**

Note: In this transcript, Carlos Bonilla and the interpreter's Spanish has been translated to English.

SCOTT SNIDER: This is an oral history interview conducted on July 16, 2024, by the Department of Energy Office Legacy Management. My name is Scott Snider, S-C-O-T-T S-N-I-D-E-R. And I will be conducting this interview today. And to start with, Mayor Bonilla, could you please — uh — tell me your full name and also spell it for me?

INTERPRETER: (inaudible) Mayor Bonilla, could you tell us your full name and how you spell it?

MAYOR BONILLA: My name is Carlos D. López Bonilla. Mayor of Rincón.

INTERPRETER: How do you spell it?

BONILLA: C-A-R-L-O-S L-O-P-E-Z, López, [00:01:00] B-O-N-I-L-L-A.

SNIDER: Thank you very much.

INTERPRETER: Thanks.

SNIDER: Uh — (inaudible) to start off with today — uh — talk a little bit about your early life — uh — and your background prior to any involvement with BONUS site.

INTERPRETER: Yes, so, let's start. And thank you. Please, tell us about your early life and how you were involved with the BONUS facility.

BONILLA: Well, I think all the people who live in our town know BONUS, one way or another. They know that — what happened with BONUS and why BONUS was built. Every — most of the — of the people from Rincón know about this. The first place — uh — BONUS — uh — was used to create nuclear energy. Nuclear power is used to make electric power. And it's the first source to generate that power system in Latin America. [00:02:00] And, mostly, people from Rincón know about BONUS. Is there anything else you would like to know about this matter?

INTERPRETER: Is there anything else you would like to know? He talked generally about — uh — the plant in Puerto Ri— in Rincón, and how everyone he knows a little bit about the nuclear plants (inaudible) answer the (inaudible).

SNIDER: Yeah, that would be fine. That would be....

BONILLA: Yes, what I intend to say more clearly is that BONUS, everybody from Rincón knows BONUS. So, they know where BONUS is located. BONUS is built in our town mostly with the goal of, to my understanding, preparing the world for nuclear plants using the nuclear plant to make electric power. It was a model.

INTERPRETER: (inaudible) general idea of what's purpose of building the plant (inaudible).

SNIDER: It's okay. Okay. [00:03:00] Okay. Describe — uh — the area of Rincón — uh — the people — uh — the community — uh — the environment.

INTERPRETER: Could you please describe the general area of Rincón, the community, its people, the environment?

BONILLA: Look, the people from Rincón are very fond of the beach, because we have so many beaches available. The people from Rincón are very cheerful — uh — at the same time — uh — they are people who are willing to help you and who welcome everybody who comes to live here or who spends time with the people from Rincón. The people from Rincón are very friendly and they always open their hearts to everybody else. And that's why today we have a lot, a number of people from North America who came to live with us in our city. And everything comes — uh — BONUS is history. In 1968, [00:04:00] the world surf tourney is celebrated in our town. And many of the people who came were North Americans, from different places of the United States. They came from Hawaii and different places of the world. And then, once they know Rincón, when they finish studying and retire, they came to live here. Currently, they live with us in our town.

INTERPRETER: [In general?], about how is the people, (inaudible) friendly, and how people (inaudible) came to the surfing tournament in '68, and they went back to (inaudible) because of the tournament. When they retired, they came back to live (inaudible) retirement (inaudible).

SNIDER: [Awesome?], great. Uh — please, describe — uh — your involvement with the BONUS site — uh — if you could.

INTERPRETER: Yes. Could you please tell us about your involvement with the BONUS facility? [00:05:00]

BONILLA: Okay. Since I arrived here in the town, we've received visits from the Department of Energy of the United States. We've developed — uh — a work friendship. And when — every time they've come because of any job that is being done or for any inspection, well — uh — many times, they have invited us to go and be with them so that we can spend some time together and see the facilities. At the same time, we know it more because the Electric Power Authority built a BONUS museum, and it is a very interesting museum. Very interesting because — uh — when BONUS was opened as a museum, people can appreciate how a nuclear plant would operate and see — they can make a full tour of the nuclear plant and learn a lot about what nuclear energy is. And so, we got to that point [00:06:00] (inaudible) in the year 2019, we got to submit a proposal to get that museum open to the public. A few activities were carried

out where people would go, visit it, they would be given knowledge about how the BONUS plant worked. At the time, a tour would be made and people would love it. And we wish that BONUS plant (inaudible) today was turned into a museum, could be opened to the public someday.

INTERPRETER: (inaudible). For example, when they come from the Department of Energy to inspect, [and the plants?], that they have a relationship with them, and PREPA, (inaudible) the museum, and the people are very curious (inaudible) [very?] about the nuclear plant. So, we proposed in 2019 for them to (inaudible). [00:07:00] People are very interested in learning about the nuclear plant, and when they go there, they really like the museum, and learning about [that it's a virtue?].

SNIDER: [Awesome?], [that's great?]. Uh — what is the impact of the BONUS site on the community?

INTERPRETER: And what is the impact of the BONUS facility on the community?

BONILLA: Uh — actually, currently, because it is not in operation, because — I think to people seeing BONUS — uh — they see it as a structure there, as if it was dead at the moment. Because nothing happens with it. That's how I see it. That's why I'm interested in getting its doors opened [and seeing?] what there is in there. Because — uh — people — so that people can [00:08:00] learn, as I learned there, how a nuclear plant works. Because they explained to me, I visited it. Now I understand, for instance, I've vis— I know what a reactor is. The reactor is not there anymore. All those things, well, I learned them at BONUS. Because they took me and showed me how BONUS operations work. And it's something that scientists, well, the young people who [get up?], who want to become scientists, have the opportunity to learn there at BONUS.

INTERPRETER: Right now, people — and this is how I see it, as well — with people in the communities see it as a building that is just there, that closed, and it is dead. People see it is not in operation right now. What I think, that it should be opened to the public so people can go there and learn about its [00:09:00] operation the same day I did when I went there, and people explained to me how it was [operating?], and I learned about it. I think it would be a good idea to keep it open for (inaudible) to go there, to learn about what its operation, and also for young people that maybe like to become scientists, [in addition?] it'll be a good experience for them to learn about its operation, (inaudible) open (inaudible) access to (inaudible).

SNIDER: [That's?] (inaudible). Uh — you've mentioned earlier — uh — about it. (inaudible) You've mentioned earlier about — uh — that it was the first — uh — nuclear facility in Latin America. So, what was the significance for the community and Puerto Rico as a whole to have that first nuclear power plant here on the island?

INTERPRETER: You've mentioned earlier that it was — uh — the first nuclear plant that was built in Latin America. [00:10:00]

BONILLA: Mm-hmm.

INTERPRETER: What was the significance for the community and for Puerto Rico as a whole — uh — of that fact, to have that first nuclear plant in Latin America, to have it built here in Rincón?

BONILLA: Look, (inaudible) what I know about that is that lots of people came here to prepare themselves there to learn the system that they wanted to set up here. And it was a system that uses nuclear power — uh — through the heating — cooling of the reactor with water and generate electric power. And I think, well, that a lot of countries created later what we had already tested. And, well, it was useful to them for many years. Basically, what [they came here for?], well, with this BONUS plant, is to carry out an investigation project. And to us, [00:11:00] well, I can't answer for the people from that time, because I don't know what they thought at the time. The — the people from that time. Indeed, there are people who still talk to me, they are old people who tell me they worked there, at the BONUS facility, that they are very old now. And they talk to me about the facility. But they talk to me in a favorable way, they don't talk to me — uh — about the project in a negative way. So, now, I can speak to you for us, the people who are here now, the people who've seen BONUS, the people who've known BONUS for as many years as my age is or fewer, because that's the way we've seen it.

INTERPRETER: Yes, I think that when it opened, (inaudible) other countries came to learn, to (inaudible) training [here in your?] plant, so it was an experience for other people to come to learn how to do it, so they (inaudible).

SNIDER: Right.

INTERPRETER: And I cannot talk to you about that time, because I am [00:12:00] younger than (inaudible), but for my generation, we see it that way. And also, I have met people who come talk to me, who were able to — they're old now, and they were able to build a new — in their facilities, and they talk to me in a positive way. They don't have anything negative to say about it. So, they still see it as a positive experience, and they were able to work in the construction on that month. And we see it as an experience for other people to come, and [this is the ten years?] (inaudible), and learn from this experience (inaudible).

SNIDER: Okay, great. Um — describe if you can — uh — knowledge you have — uh — about the transfer between environmental management to the Department of Energy Legacy Management. What was that like?

INTERPRETER: Yes, could you describe to your knowledge [00:13:00] what the transfer of what used to be environmental management now transferred to the Department of Energy to the Office of Legacy Management was like, (inaudible)?

BONILLA: Well, I don't — excuse me? Could you repeat it?

INTERPRETER: Yes. Uh — could you describe for us what that transfer was like, if you happen to know it, between what used to be environmental management now transferred to the Office of Legacy Management of the Department of Energy.

BONILLA: Well, look, honestly, I don't know about that part. I can't tell you because I don't know about it.

INTERPRETER: Sorry, I don't know about that. (inaudible) —

SNIDER: Okay, (inaudible) —

INTERPRETER: I'm sorry, 'cause I don't have the knowledge.

SNIDER: Okay, that's fine. (inaudible).

INTERPRETER: Sorry.

SNIDER: Um, you — uh — what was it like — uh — for you — uh — or was the area like growing up near the site?

INTERPRETER: Yes, as you grew up when you were raised here in Rincón — uh — what was it like to grow up — uh — [00:14:00] near this [site?]?

BONILLA: Some people would hear, well, that it was dangerous. Uh — other people got used to live with it. Uh — I remember — as far as I remember, I take it to the city. I lived in the countryside; I arrived in the city when I was eight years old. But I only knew about BONUS when I was around 12. And when — uh — I know about it, it is because of surfing. When I — we are taken to beaches to see the competition. We see what is there and it's then that we start to get information about what BONUS is. But, well, it was — to me, I think, well, the village accepted it and was able to live with it to this day. [00:15:00]

INTERPRETER: (inaudible) some people saw it as it was something dangerous, and the other people simply got used to it, and — uh — it was (inaudible) the rural area from the town. And I came to live at the center of the town when I was eight years old, and —

SNIDER: Okay.

INTERPRETER: — then I learned about the facility when I was 12 years old, and when they had the surfing tournament, and when I went to the beach, that's when we saw the facility. That's when I learned about it.

SNIDER: Oh, okay.

INTERPRETER: And we were interested (inaudible) people and (inaudible).

SNIDER: Okay, okay. So, over time, over the course of your life — uh — how has the impact of the BONUS site changed?

INTERPRETER: Yes. Over time and over the course of your life, how has the impact of the BONUS plant changed?

BONILLA: Yes. I think people learned to live with it. [00:16:00] There's no problem, there's no situation, there's n— people think it is a safe place already and that there's no problem whatsoever. And we entered there. I entered there. Tests were run and everything is fine. And people are unconcerned.

INTERPRETER: And people have accepted it. Uh — everyone's used to it, and we don't think that it is dangerous. We think it's safe. And I have been inside the plant, and I see that it is safe. So, people (inaudible) don't have any problem with....

BONILLA: Yes, because I've been inside. I've been inside and they run some tests on us when we come out. And it's normal. And I did it for people to know there's no problem (inaudible).

INTERPRETER: Yes, I have been there, and when we exited, they do some testing on us, and they tell us that it is safe. And I did it so people could see that there's no problem about it, that it is safe, it is okay.

SNIDER: (inaudible). Great. You've mentioned it and we know it that Rincón is known for its surfing. Could you describe more about the local community and culture when it comes to surfing?

INTERPRETER: You've mentioned it and we know it that Rincón is known for its surfing. Uh — could you please describe more about — uh — the local community and culture when it comes to surfing?

BONILLA: Well, we have a cul — we have local culture. (inaudible) who surf for a living, and then there are groups of people from Rincón and there are plenty of people from many places, both from the world and the United States, who joined us and share with us the love and joy for that culture. Meaning the music, surfing, the competition activities. [00:18:00] And that continues up to this day. And one of the most important meeting and activity spots is the BONUS [site?], where that ongoing activity is held in our town. And living here is wonderful. I — I love to live in Rincón. Uh — I was born in Rincón and I've spent all my life in Rincón. I'm delighted to live in Rincón. So, there's no problem whatsoever. And we can [set our town in motion?].

INTERPRETER: We do have — uh — many people locally who are surfers, (inaudible) surfers that are locals, and also we have many people who come from the United States, and all over the world, and (inaudible) their passion about surfing. And we do have that culture of surfing and (inaudible). And in the many of the — many times, where (inaudible) people (inaudible) other to go surfing, (inaudible) [00:19:00] (inaudible) [once when?] (inaudible), and (inaudible)

I'm glad I was born and raised here. (inaudible) it's really a very good place — uh — to live, and (inaudible).

SNIDER: How many surfing championships have you won?

INTERPRETER: How many surfing championships have you won?

BONILLA: Oh, no, I don't (inaudible). (Laughter)

SNIDER: I'll take that as no — none?

BONILLA: No, no, no. None. None. I — but I did do something that will remain for future generations. Right now, we are in a reconstruction process. We built a gallery that is called the Surfing Gallery. It's near here (inaudible). Because we gather the whole history of surfing in our town and the surfing championship, which we carried out a partying activity again, where we invited the people who won that competition and they came back 50 years later. And they are senior citizens now. [00:20:00] And we created that. We don't surf, but we built the gallery or museum of surfing.

INTERPRETER: I don't surf, but (inaudible). (laughter) But I did create a gallery or a museum for surfing, and so people can go there, and they collect the history of surfing in the town. And we had a (inaudible) surfing (inaudible), and [they use it?], and when we created a gallery or a museum, we invited — uh — the surfers who won that competition 50 years ago, and they came back —

SNIDER: Oh, yeah?

INTERPRETER: — yeah, see the history and the museum.

BONILLA: [That's our history, indeed?]. But there are photographs, I don't know if you have them, changing the subject — right? — of what — that I've seen them, but couldn't keep them, of the history of the dome when the BONUS plant is built [00:21:00] and how the nuclear reactor [was passed?] this way, along the — in front of this town, in front of this street. All those pictures exist. But people have them and have put them away. Because — uh — there at BONUS, I think there's just a video about the building of BONUS. But there are photos about when they to— when they bring the reactor to Rincón.

INTERPRETER: I know that there is a video in BONUS, about the building or the construction of the reactor in — but some people do have pictures, and I know they have them, and they keep them. [They save them?]. I don't have them, but people do have pictures of (inaudible), uh —

SNIDER: Okay.

INTERPRETER: — when they were transporting the reactor on its way to the plant [on his?] —

SNIDER: Oh.

INTERPRETER: — [on his?] street (inaudible).

SNIDER: Oh, okay, great.

INTERPRETER: So, there are pictures (inaudible) historical moment.

SNIDER: Excellent, awesome. [00:22:00] Uh, growing up — uh — and then obviously in your position — uh — as the Mayor of Rincón — uh — what are your — uh — describe any memories of the clean-up of the site — uh — over the years.

INTERPRETER: Yes. Uh — as you grew up and then as the mayor of —

BONILLA: Yes.

INTERPRETER: — Rincón, could you describe any memories you have of the clean-up of the facility.

BONILLA: Look, as for the clean-up, I don't [remember what it was like in the past?]. I do know that on several occasions, when I was the mayor already, they came and performed a number of tasks there. Basically, downstairs, in the basement. Uh — that's what I've heard. Because I didn't see it. Firstly, they sealed the basis downstairs with concrete. Then, they came and carried out several clean-ups. They contacted us. At a given point, [00:23:00] the Department of Energy came to us. And they went and carried out the necessary clean-ups. And, yes, they've come year after year. And we haven't been contacted again in about three years. But before, every time they would come to conduct an inspection, they would get in touch with us. And we would know they were there, that they were working so that there was no concern about the — among the community [because there were people working?] and they would ask themselves, "What is going on at BONUS?" Uh, and then we would [guide them?], "No. The bases were being cleaned. Or they are putting concrete," etcetera, etcetera. That. That's what I (inaudible).

INTERPRETER: I don't know about the past, but being the mayor right now, that — from the Department of Energy, they found (inaudible) plants (inaudible) the years, and when they come to visit, to — [when we need?] a cleaning, or we need inspection, they contact [our person?]. [They let us know?] even that. [00:24:00] So when people see it moving, [people?] moving around, they don't get worried. They (inaudible) let us know (inaudible), so when they call us and they are worried because they are seeing people working there — uh — we can let them know that they are just — uh — cleaning, or they're keeping the place, and making sure that it is safe. And I did know that when they — as part of the [deal?], they poured concrete to seal the (inaudible), and I know that the — that kind (inaudible) and [cleanly?]. But every time that they come — I think the last time that I saw them was maybe three years ago, but periodically, they come, like, to do the inspection — uh — to do something, and they always contact — uh — the mayor's office so we can let people know not to worry, they are just making sure that everything is safe.

SNIDER: Excellent. Is it common for — uh — visitors [00:25:00] to Rincón — uh — to inquire to your office about the site or its history?

INTERPRETER: Is it common for visitors to Rincón to ask you, the mayor's office, about the plant (inaudible)?

BONILLA: Yes. When they see it, they ask us. And if they come here, "What was that?" People from different cities who come to visit us and ask us, "What was that?" Because they don't know there was a nuclear plant here. Yes. And we guide them and tell them it is not operating, but that it was in operation once.

INTERPRETER: Yes, it is common. People — uh — come to visit. They ask me, or they come here to ask me, when they see the building, and you explain to them that it was a nuclear plant, that it is not in operation right now but it was in operation before, and it is not operating many years, and they come [asking?] (inaudible).

SNIDER: Okay. [00:26:00] And have you ever had — uh — situations where you had to maybe reassure people that it is safe?

INTERPRETER: Have you ever had situations where you had to maybe reassure people by saying to them, "Yes, this is a safe place"?

BONILLA: Uh, thank God, no. No, uh — okay, [when I started here?] — uh — people — something came out that somehow would talk about a significant amount of cancer cases in Rincón. But nothing could ever be established, such as a study or something that states that there's a high incidence of cancer here. Never. That has always come to nothing. So — you know? — we can't say otherwise. I mean, there's no evidence at all. Uh — people talk, but — mention it, but [00:27:00] there's nothing that (inaudible) that be (inaudible) [some environment?] (inaudible). So, I don't understand, because we have not had — uh — any problems to date.

INTERPRETER: [Concern?], no, but some people do talk about the high, you know, rate of cancer, and in, uh — some people may be worried about that, and we talk about it, but there is no evidence that it is related. We don't have any concrete evidence (inaudible) [relationship?] or [insert?]. Uh — we — [there isn't?] validation about that, so, you know...

SNIDER: Is there anything else you would like to tell us — uh — about the site?

INTERPRETER: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the site?

BONILLA: About the site?

INTERPRETER: Mm-hmm.

BONILLA: That when I saw how it was built in the video, I was so impressed. The first time I saw the video that — when they built BONUS, I was very impressed. [00:28:00] It shows the mayor

at the time, who was Manuel García, whom I m— I saw him when I was a child. And the governor, Luis Muñoz Marín. That impressed me a lot — right? — and it's something that impressed me when I saw BONUS. Something that also made an impression on me about BONUS is when I learned about BONUS operation. What BONUS was used for. Uh — and that impressed me a lot. I saw it was something experimental basically, which I understand that — that the goal was fulfilled, which was giving birth to that you guys were just talking about, which is generating electricity from nuclear power. And that was fulfilled. Uh — so, that I understand that maybe, to my understanding, BONUS accomplished its mission. It is there. Not — it is built — turned into a museum, that I think it should be opened to the public and people should learn more about BONUS. [00:29:00] And it shouldn't be a dead thing. I mean, something that gave the world the opportunity to grow — uh — by generating electricity with nuclear power. And all that.

INTERPRETER: (laughs) When I saw the video, we learned about the construction of the plan, I was very [impressed?] when I saw the construction and I saw the mayor at the time, that I saw him when I was a child, and also the governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Muñoz Marín, he came. I saw both of them on the video. And that really — it created an impact on me. And also, there — that that — I would like the — for the — for the building to be open to the public, because right now it is like a building that it is dead, but it — if you could open it for the people to come to learn about it, because I understand (inaudible) that was proposed, that was turning nuclear power into [00:30:00] electricity, they were able to achieve it. And so, I think (inaudible) progress for everyone, and I think that it will be better to have the building open so people could come and learn about — uh — (inaudible).

SNIDER: That's my — uh — final question. Thank you very much.

BONILLA: Are those the questions?

INTERPRETER: [This is what I think?].

BONILLA: Thank you for coming.

INTERPRETER: Thank you for coming.

BONILLA: You guys know we're here at your disposal in Rincón. And, well, we are interested in all things BONUS. I don't know if you guys know that in front of BONUS a project is being carried out that will get — it starts here, in the village, in the — in the town, and it ends at BONUS. The turning point will be there. A bike path that — you can get from the village to BONUS on foot or by bike.

INTERPRETER: [00:31:00] We are here always, [this position?], and we're at your service and to help you in any way that you need. And I don't know that — if you are aware that we are building a project right now, and that it is going to be a lane for bicycles and people to walk, or bicycle from —

SNIDER: Yeah.

INTERPRETER: — here, from the (inaudible), and to BONUS, and [may?] return. And so, we are working on that project right now.

SNIDER: Excellent. All right.

BONILLA: Thank you. And, so, well, enjoy your stay in Rincón. How long are you staying here?

INTERPRETER: Thank you, and enjoy your stay here in Rincón.

SNIDER: Oh, we're —

INTERPRETER: How long (inaudible)?

SNIDER: Uh, we're here until Thursday.

INTERPRETER: (inaudible).

BONILLA: You leave on Thursday?

INTERPRETER: (inaudible).

BONILLA: Okay.

SNIDER: Yes.

BONILLA: So, well, please, know we are here in Rincón at your disposal, okay?

INTERPRETER: Uh, we're here to support you in any way [that you need?].

SNIDER: Okay. Thank you very much.

BONILLA: Yes.

INTERPRETER: (inaudible).

SNIDER: You've been fantastic.

BONILLA: Thanks. Thank you.

INTERPRETER: Thanks.

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