

Professor PlaBarby Oral Histories BONUS Draft 1 20241008 – English

Office of Legacy Management  
BONUS Oral History Project  
Interview of Fernando PlaBarby  
July 17, 2024  
Interviewer: Scott Snider

*Note: In this transcript, Fernando PlaBarby and the interpreter's Spanish has been translated to English.*

**SCOTT SNIDER:** This is an oral history interview conducted on July 17, 2024, of the Department of Energy Office of Legacy Management. My name is Scott Snider, S-C-O-T-T, S-N-I-D-E-R, and I will be conducting the interview today. To start, [Dr. Pla?], could you please tell me your full name and then spell it for me in Spanish.

**FERNANDO PLABARBY:** My name is Fernando PlaBarby, F-E-R-N-A-N-D-O, Bla, B-L-A — (phone rings)

\_\_: Scott, can we stop for a second?

**SNIDER:** Yeah, just — we can stop right there, yeah.

**INTERPRETER:** We're going to (inaudible) one second (inaudible) phone is ringing (inaudible) on silent.

**PLABARBY:** Yes, yes, yes. Let me see.

**SNIDER:** That's okay. [00:01:00]

**INTERPRETER:** Sounded like it was from (inaudible).

**SNIDER:** Yeah, no —

**PLABARBY:** The phone from Atlanta, Georgia. (Laughter.) I don't — I don't know anyone in Atlanta, Georgia.

**SNIDER:** [Your insurance?]. Your insurance (inaudible).

**PLABARBY:** (Laughs.)

**INTERPRETER:** Because do you have it — do you have it on silent?

**PLABARBY:** No, but I can put it on. I can put it on.

**INTERPRETER:** Please.

**PLABARBY:** Yes, of course.

**INTERPRETER:** Put it on silent so that (inaudible) call back.

**PLABARBY:** He's trying to sell something. (Laughs.)

\_\_: We'll keep that. We'll keep that.

**SNIDER:** It's fine, it's fine.

**INTERPRETER:** (inaudible)

**SNIDER:** We'll just pick it up where you were saying your name and stuff.

**INTERPRETER:** Start again with your name and (inaudible).

**PLABARBY:** My name is Fernando PlaBarby. Fernando, F-E-R-N-A-N-D-O, Pla, P-L-A, Barby, B-A-R-B-Y.  
[00:02:00]

**SNIDER:** Fantastic. First question I'd like to ask is just tell us a little bit about — uh — your life — uh — your background prior to any involvement with the BONUS site.

**INTERPRETER:** To start, could you talk a little bit about your life and your experiences before your involvement with the BONUS site?

**PLABARBY:** Well, I studied mechanical engineering in the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus, back then, the University of Puerto Rico. I stayed there for another year after I graduated and I graduated in electrical engineering. And one day, on a trip to San Juan, I stop at a gas station in Aguadilla and I bump into [00:03:00] a childhood friend of mine who worked at what was back then known as the Puerto Rico Water Resources Authority, and he tells me that they're looking for students for the nuclear master's program for the nuclear plant in Puerto Rico. I was already on my way to San Juan, I went to the Water Resources Authority Office, I applied to participate in the program, I was accepted, and that's when I started the master's program back at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez campus. And when I finished all of my classes, two semesters and one summer, I went to [work?] at the BONUS plant in Rincón.

**INTERPRETER:** So he — uh — went to school in the University of Puerto Rico, the Mayagüez campus, he studied mechanical engineer and then he spent one more year studying electrical engineer, so he had those two degrees. One time he was — uh — on his way to [00:04:00] San Juan and he stopped to Aguadilla at a gas station and he met a friend, a childhood friend, that was working at that time for what we know now as PREPA. And it me — they mentioned — they were talking and he mentioned that they were looking — uh — for students to complete a master's in nuclear science for the plants in Puerto Rico, that — uh — PREPA was looking for that. And so, when he went to San Juan, he applied, he spent two semesters back in Mayagüez in the Mayagüez campus of the University of Puerto Rico, two semesters and one summer and that's how he got to be part of BONUS.

**SNIDER:** Awesome. And just staying on that topic — uh — could you describe — uh — your involvement with the BONUS site over the years?

**INTERPRETER:** And now, could you describe a little bit about your involvement with BONUS during the years you worked there?

**PLABARBY:** Well, at the beginning, [00:05:00] I went to a training to operate the plant. And that took — I don't remember how many, several months. And then, I did a practicum and I was assigned — for a time I was assigned to the operation section, an operation section of the plant. And I went to work — I worked in shifts, learning how to operate the plant.

**INTERPRETER:** So — uh — at the beginning he was training for operation for several months. Then he went up to practice and he was assigned one section of the operation. He was — uh — participating in the different shifts — uh — during the day and night, learning, basically learning how to do the job of operating the plant.

**SNIDER:** Okay. From your perspective, [00:06:00] what — uh — what's the impact of the BONUS site on the local community?

**INTERPRETER:** From your point of view, what is the impact of the BONUS plant on the surrounding community?

**PLABARBY:** The impact back then?

**INTERPRETER:** Mm-hmm.

**PLABARBY:** Well, it brought a lot of people to work in the Rincón area. So it was a big help to the town economy. There's always fear when you talk about nuclear things in town. Fortunately, as far as I know, there wasn't any accident that affected the town. So, the impact was curiosity, but yes, [00:07:00] it helped the economy of the town because there were a lot of people working there.

**INTERPRETER:** So — uh — the (inaudible) brought a lot of new people to the area, to be working there so that helped the economy. It was definitely a positive impact. But obviously when you're talking about anything nuclear, there's a little fear.

**SNIDER:** Yeah.

**INTERPRETER:** Fortunately, there were no accidents that he knows of. So — uh — aside from the curiosity that it created — uh — the impact was positive because it was an economic boom — um — to the area, to that particular area.

**SNIDER:** From your perspective, what was the significance — uh — for the community of Rincón — uh — and Puerto Rico as a whole, to have the first nuclear power plant in Latin America right here on the island?

**INTERPRETER:** Since BONUS was the first nuclear plant in Latin America, [00:08:00] what did that mean for the people of Rincón, for the townspeople here? That that happened (inaudible).

**PLABARBY:** Well, that represented a point of pride for the town, having the only nuclear plant. I don't think it was as important that it was in Latin America, but it was at least the only one in Puerto Rico. Well... There's always that fear of anything nuclear, but in general, I think the impact on the community was that it brought more people to the community.

**INTERPRETER:** So —

**PLABARBY:** The company that designed it [00:09:00] was working here. So, a lot of the personnel were foreigners. Foreigners to Rincón, I mean, okay? (inaudible) so it brought a wave of mostly North Americans.

**INTERPRETER:** So, it's definitely a point of pride. But not necessarily because it's the first one in Latin America, but because it was the first one in Puerto Rico. So, that was significant. Obviously, there were doubts, there was fear, but in general, it was a positive thing because it brought so many other — so much more people to the area. And because the design company of that area of BONUS was working here, it brought a lot of people from the mainland. Um — so we have a lot of population that came in from the United States because of that project. [00:10:00]

**SNIDER:** Great.

**PLABARBY:** There was, and I think still is, a big hippy colony (laughter) in Rincón.

**INTERPRETER:** Could you say that in Spanish?

**PLABARBY:** Yes. There were a lot of American hippies that came to live on the beach here. And those people came with money but they put it in the banks here in Rincón, so they helped the banks too. Because they were — we used to say that their parents didn't want them in the United States and they sent them here to live on the beach with [Chao?]. (Laughs.) That was the joke. That was the joke. But there were a ton of them, a ton. They were from North America and they came to surf.

**INTERPRETER:** So, there were a lot of young American hippies coming in here, right? [00:11:00] Because they were attracted by the beach —

**SNIDER:** Yeah.

**INTERPRETER:** — and they brought a lot of money with them. They used to say as a joke, the parents don't want them over there in the United States so they send them here to live on the beach (laughter) and then they came with money and they put that money in the ba— in the banks, in the local banks. So that means that — you know — the banks also benefited and they came — came here to surf.

**PLABARBY:** There's a very good surfing facility here in Rincón.

**SNIDER:** Yes, yes.

**PLABARBY:** Well, excuse me. You have to understand me in Spanish. (Laughs.)

**INTERPRETER:** You have to understand him in Spanish. (Laughter.) (inaudible) you're supposed to (inaudible).

**SNIDER:** Sorry. I — when I was in college, I had the choices of languages and I took German (laughs) so — cause that's my extraction, is my family's originally from Germany.

**INTERPRETER:** What he learned in college was German, not Spanish, because his family came from Germany. [00:12:00] So, that's why he doesn't know Spanish.

**PLABARBY:** My grandfather came from Germany.

**SNIDER:** Oh.

**PLABARBY:** (inaudible) part of my last name.

**SNIDER:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Can you describe — uh — again, just this is all a personal perspective — uh — the relationship between PREPA and the Department of Energy, and, from your observation, how that evolved over time?

**INTERPRETER:** How do you view that relationship between PREPA and the Department of Energy and how that relationship changed over time (inaudible) remember?

**PLABARBY:** I can't comment on that because I don't know.

**INTERPRETER:** He doesn't have any information —

**PLABARBY:** I don't have any knowledge of that.

**SNIDER:** (inaudible).

**PLABARBY:** I don't have any knowledge of that.

**SNIDER:** Can you describe — uh — just the area of Rincón — uh — the people here, the community — uh — the environment?

**INTERPRETER:** What's the area of Rincón like? [00:13:00] How would you describe it in terms of the people, the community, the environment? How (inaudible)?

**PLABARBY:** I would describe Rincón as a small town that lives on local tourism and where a lot of North Americans have come to live, too, that have helped the economy a lot. It lives, as I mentioned, from tourism; it has good restaurants, it has good beaches, good facilities, it has good hotels and that helps sustain it. It's really well organized. And the name [00:14:00] of the town is just about the best name a town could have because we truly are in the corner [Rincón] of Puerto Rico. (Laughs.) You don't get here because you're passing through. You only get here because you're making a point to come, okay? You might go through Aguadilla, you might go through Mayagüez, but Rincón, you come through here because you make it here. So, it's a really welcoming town and I come here a lot, mostly to enjoy the restaurants.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he would call Rincón a small town that lives from tourism, both from the people in Puerto Rico that come here, but also the people that have come here from the United States and have stayed to live and have also helped the (inaudible). It's an area where there are marvelous restaurants, beaches, facilities, hotels, everything is very well organized. And the name [00:15:00] Rincón, which in English would be "corner," is very — is the best name it could've been given because we are truly the corner —

**PLABARBY:** (Laughs.)

**INTERPRETER:** — (inaudible) of Puerto Rico. You are never gonna get here just because you were passing by.

**SNIDER:** Right.

**INTERPRETER:** If you use the main roads, you're gonna go to Aguadilla and Mayagüez, but in order to come here, you really have to (inaudible) it. You want to be here.

**SNIDER:** Yeah.

**INTERPRETER:** And it's a very welcoming town, and he comes often to enjoy the restaurants and the life here.

**SNIDER:** Did you ever find yourself working with PREPA with your background and education, did you ever find yourself having to answer questions about — from just residents here about safety because of the facility dealing with radiation? Uh — was — did that ever — would you — were you ever put in that position? [00:16:00]

**INTERPRETER:** Were you ever in the position, when you were working for PREPA or when you were working for (inaudible) where the residents asked you questions about safety, about the plant, about radiation? Those concerns that you (inaudible).

**PLABARBY:** No. I was never put in that position.

**INTERPRETER:** (inaudible).

**PLABARBY:** I didn't have — I didn't have contact with the community. I didn't have — officially.

**INTERPRETER:** Could you repeat that?

**PLABARBY:** I didn't have an official relationship with the community. So, I was never put in the position where I had to explain the safety of the plant to the town. That wasn't my position.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he was never in a position professionally to be in contact with the people of the town. So, he was never put in a position of offering any explanation or answering any questions about safety — um — radiation in the plant. It didn't happen. [00:17:00]

**SNIDER:** Okay. Uh — next question: Did you — I'm making an assumption — uh — did you grow up here and can you talk about what it was like — uh — growing up in Rincón and also growing — uh — up and living your life — uh — near the site?

**INTERPRETER:** Were you born and raised in Rincón?

**PLABARBY:** No.

**INTERPRETER:** Where were you born and raised?

**PLABARBY:** I was born in San Juan and I grew up there on a sugar mill in Toa Baja until I was 16 years old. My dad was an engineer in the sugar mill. When it came time to leave for college, I came to Mayagüez and I stayed here. I adopted Mayagüez as my home, and I've lived here with a few exceptions, [00:18:00] like my military service and postgraduate studies, my doctorate. That's why I went to the United States.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he was not — he was not born in Rincón and he was not raised here.

**SNIDER:** Okay.

**INTERPRETER:** He was born in San Juan and then he grew up in a sugar cane plantation, in a central — in a manufacturing central in Toa Baja, which is in the north of Puerto Rico. His father was working there, so he was raised there. And then when it came time at 16, 17 years old to go to university, he went to Mayagüez and he adopted that as his adoptive town.

**SNIDER:** Okay.

**INTERPRETER:** That's where he has been — he has spent his life except for the time, for example, when he served in the army, that he left, and when he went to complete his Ph.D. in the United States.

**SNIDER:** Okay.

**INTERPRETER:** But the rest of his life has been in Mayagüez, not — uh — not in Rincón. [00:19:00] And you had a second part to your question.

**SNIDER:** Oh.

**INTERPRETER:** To that particular question.

**SNIDER:** Oh, about his — well I want to know about his background on (inaudible).

**INTERPRETER:** But you — but you mentioned how was it to grow up in Rincón, but you —

**SNIDER:** Oh, yes.

**INTERPRETER:** — he didn't grow up here.

**SNIDER:** Oh, yes, yes, yes. Well, I mean, if he didn't grow up here around the site then we can just — yeah. We'll just — we'll just skip past that.

**INTERPRETER:** Okay.

**SNIDER:** Is there any — uh — particular moment or memory — uh — or event that — involving the BONUS site or your years working — uh — with PREPA that really sticks out that you remember?

**INTERPRETER:** Is there any moment that sticks out in your memory in terms of the time you were collaborating on the BONUS plant or working with PREPA that you could talk about? [00:20:00]

**PLABARBY:** Well, I wasn't working on the BONUS plant for very long, because I was called to work in the army. I had to serve. Besides being in the section of operation in BONUS, for a time I was in analysis, theoretical analysis, and I had to take trips in a small plane to San Juan (laughs) from here. But I have good memories, and I can't think of anything in particular. It was a very good experience, and when I finished my military service, the plant had shut down. So, the project had ended.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he was not at BONUS for a long time. [00:21:00] Actually, he — uh — had to leave because he had — uh — to complete his duty in the army. He spent time in operations and also a short amount of time in the theoretical analysis division. Um — he remembers traveling — uh — because of the job in a small airplane to San Juan.

**PLABARBY:** (Laughs.)

**INTERPRETER:** He remembers that. But overall, it was a good experience. And after he — uh — did his — completed his army service, the plant had closed, so he lost the opportunity to come back to the job.

**PLABARBY:** Yes, I was in the army for three years, the last one I was in Vietnam.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he spent — uh — three years in the army and the last year was in Vietnam.

**SNIDER:** Okay. How many years — uh — [00:22:00] uh — were you involved with PREPA?

**INTERPRETER:** How long did you work for —

**SNIDER:** (inaudible) — oh, sorry. I ha— no, no, no, no, (inaudible). The — if you ask his exact title, exact title and how many years he was involved with PREPA.

**INTERPRETER:** What was the name of your position when you worked for PREPA and how many years did you work with PREPA?

**PLABARBY:** Let me explain. When I applied to join the program and they paid for my studies, I was employed by PREPA. But what was the name of that position? I don't know. I mean, we were a group of 10 people. There were 10 of us, okay? But I got a monthly paycheck from PREPA that — sorry, every 15 days. The Puerto Rico [00:23:00] Water Resources Authority is what it was called. And I was in the BONUS plant until about November of 1966. So, I think I started in August of '64 with the authority and finished in about November of '66. The first year, I spent the summer in the university and the rest here. First in training and then in plant operation. I had the experience of powering up the reactor. I had the experience of synchronizing the generator to the system of — all of the experience that I had that I can remember, they were all nice. [00:24:00] But that was when I graduated from school, from high school in engineering, I'd taken ROTC and I graduated as a lieutenant in the army. And I had to serve.

**INTERPRETER:** So — um — when he applied for the position for — uh — when he met his friend that he applied for a position, he was completing his studies but he was on — he was an employee but he would not know how to call that because he was in actuality studying. There were 10 people that were chosen to complete — uh — their degrees under the auspices of what became known as PREPA and that was called Fuente Fluviales at one time. Um — so there was no title in reality there, but he was getting a check every 15 days. [00:25:00]

**PLABARBY:** Yeah.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he was an employee, but he was studying and training. And then when that happened, he started with that in August of '64 and — um — he was training at the university, and then he ended his part in BONUS in November of 1966. So, he did get the experience of working with a reactor — um — and synchronizing and doing several things. But then, because he had graduated as a lieutenant also from the ROTC when he was in school, then he had to leave to serve in — uh — the army. So, when you were working doing operations, did you have a title? Did you have like a position, had they given a name to your position?

**PLABARBY:** They said something training, at the end — but I don't remember the first word. [00:26:00] Um — something in training. Because it was to be able to take the exam to operate the reactor, but I never ended up taking it because I went into the army.

**INTERPRETER:** So, he doesn't remember a position name. He knows that it was something, something in training.

**SNIDER:** Okay. (Laughter.)

**INTERPRETER:** And he was supposed to then take a test — um — after completing that training, but he was never able to get the test, to take the test because he was called by the army.

**SNIDER:** Okay. I have one last question. The future of the — uh — BONUS site from your perspective — uh — what would — there's a museum there now. What would you like to see in the future at the site? More public access — uh — what's your thoughts on that?

**INTERPRETER:** What do you think should happen with BONUS in the future? How do you imagine its future? Right now there's a — there's a museum [00:27:00] there in the space, in the [location?] of BONUS. What do you think should happen with that facility? Do you think it [should be available to?] the public? How do you see it?

**PLABARBY:** Well, from what I understand, the facility can't be completely open to the public because the cleaning that was done there wasn't for that. Of course, it could be cleaned again. Yes, there's a museum; I've been there a few times. Um — but that's a place that the municipality of Rincón wants to keep for itself to make it attractive. And I understand that PREPA has it (inaudible) pass, like a pass for them. (Laughs.) So, I don't know — I don't know what they can do [00:28:00] with that. Um — yes, I'd like for people to be able to enter the facility because you can enter now, but it's not that easy to get in. A group can request it, request permission, they're given a pass. But a family can't just go on a Sunday and get in. Um — I would like it to be open to the public and for people to come and that there be a talk explaining what it used to be to the public. And what they should explain really well is why it closed. Because there are a lot of different theories. And I think they're all wrong. (Laughs.) A lot of jokes around town. I think it should be opened to the public, [00:29:00] but I understand it's not ready for that.

**INTERPRETER:** So, what he would like to see is have it open to the public, but he does not believe that — uh — it was, uh — when they cleaned it, it wasn't prepared for that, for having the public come in. Um — he has visited the museum. He understands that the site, that there's kind of a conflict between the municipality that wants the area — you know — to be more attractive. But also PREPA has it for — as a guarantee of their bonds that they administer. So he doesn't know how that would work. Um — if you want to go right now, you can and you can request, but it's not that easy. It's not just open to the public. Um — he would like it to be open to the public with a tour, [00:30:00] with somebody that would explain to the visitors — uh — the purpose of the project. And he would also like the question that people have in mind answered, which is why did it close? There's a lot of rumors, there's a lot of theories. He believes that the rumors and theories are wrong, are not the right answers. So, he believes that the public would be interesting in having that question answered, cause there's a lot of rumors and gossip about it in Rincón.

**SNIDER:** Yeah. Excellent. Okay. Dave, do you have anything else, or? We're good? All right. [That'll be a wrap, then?].

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