Professor Pla-Barby Oral Histories BONUS Draft 1 20241008— Original

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

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, doctor Pla-Barby, could you please tell me your full name and then spell it for me in Spanish.

FERNANDO PLA-BARBY: *Mi nombre es Fernando Pla-Barby, F-E-R-N-A-N-D-O,* (phone rings) —

MALE VOICE: It's okay.

PLA-BARBY: *Pla, P-L-A* (phone rings)

MALE VOICE: Scott, can we stop for a second?

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

INTERPRETER: *Vamos a esperar un momentito porque está sonando el teléfono y lo tenemos que poner — en silencio.*

PLA-BARBY: *Sí, sí, sí. Déjame ver.*

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

INTERPRETER: Sounded like it was from (inaudible).

SNIDER: Yeah, no —

PLA-BARBY: The phone from Atlanta, Georgia. (Laughter.) I don't — I don't know anyone in Atlanta, Georgia.

SNIDER: Your insurance. Your insurance is (inaudible).

PLA-BARBY: (Laughs.)

INTERPRETER: *¿Usted lo tiene — lo tiene en silencio?*

PLA-BARBY: *No, pero lo puedo poner. Lo puedo poner.*

INTERPRETER: *Por favor.*

PLA-BARBY: *Sí, segura.*

INTERPRETER: *Ponerlo en silencio de manera, si Georga nos vuelve a llamar.*

PLA-BARBY: *Ese está tratando de vender algo.* (Laughs.)

MALE VOICE: 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: *Comience con su nombre nuevamente y (inaudible).*

PLA-BARBY: Mi nombre es Fernando Pla-Barby. 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: *Queremos comenzar con que usted nos cuente un poquito de su vida y sus experiencias antes de su involucramiento — eh — con la planta BONUS.*

PLA-BARBY: Pues, yo estudié ingeniería mecánica en el Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez, en aquel entonces, Colegio, de la Universidad de Puerto Rico. Me quedé después de graduarme un año más y me gradué de ingeniería eléctrica. Y un día, en un viaje a San Juan, paro en Aguadilla, en un puesto de gasolina y me encuentro [00:03:00] a un compañero mío de la infancia que trabajaba como que era entonces la Autoridad de las Fuentes Fluviales de Puerto Rico y me informa que están buscando estudiantes para el programa de maestría nuclear para las plantas nucleares de Puerto Rico. Yo que iba para San Juan, fui a la oficina de la Autoridad de Fuente Fluviales, solicité participar del programa, me aceptaron y ahí entré al programa de maestría de nuevo en el Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez.

Y cuando terminaron todos los cursos, dos semestres y un verano, fui a parar a la planta BONUS en 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 men— 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: *Y ahora, ¿puede describirnos un poquito de cuál fue su involucramiento con BONUS durante los años que usted trabajó allí?*

PLA-BARBY: *Bueno, al comenzar,* [00:05:00] *fui a un entrenamiento para operar la planta. Y eso tomó — no recuerdo cuántos, varios meses. Y después, fui a las prácticas y fui asignado — un tiempo fui asignado a la sección de operación, a una sección de operación de la planta. Pues iba a trabajar — trabajaba en turno, aprendiendo a operar la planta.*

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: *Desde su punto de vista, ¿cuál es el impacto de la planta BONUS en la comunidad aledaña?*

PLA-BARBY: *¿El impacto en aquel entonces?*

INTERPRETER: Mm-hmm.

PLA-BARBY: *Bueno, trajo mucha gente a trabajar al área de Rincón. Por lo tanto, fue una ayuda a la economía del pueblo. Siempre, cuando uno habla de cosas nucleares en el pueblo, hay un miedo. Afortunadamente, que yo esté enterado, no ocurrió ningún accidente que afectara al pueblo. Así es que, el impacto de curiosidad, pero sí,* [00:07:00] *ayudó a la economía del pueblo porque había mucha gente trabajando allí.*

INTERPRETER: So — uh — the plant 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: *Siendo BONUS la primera planta nuclear en Latinoamérica, [00:08:00] ¿cuánto fue el significado de eso para la gente de Rincón, para el pueblo aquí? Que eso sucediera en esta, en esta área.*

PLA-BARBY: *Bueno, esto representa un orgullo para el pueblo tener la única planta nuclear. Yo no creo que fue tan importante que fuese en Latinoamérica, pero por lo menos en Puerto Rico era la única. Este — siempre estaba la duda del miedo a lo nuclear, pero en general, yo creo que el impacto en la comunidad fue que trajo más gente a la comunidad.*

INTERPRETER: So —

PLA-BARBY: *La compañía que diseñó* [00:09:00] *estaba trabajando aquí. Así que, mucho del personal eran extranjeros. Extranjeros para Rincón, estoy hablando, ¿okey? De habla inglés, así que trajo un flujo de, en general, norteamericanos.*

INTERPRETER: So, it's definitely a point of pride. But not necessarily because it's the first one in Latin America or 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. Uh — so we have a lot of population that came in from the United States because of that project. [00:10:00]

SNIDER: Great.

PLA-BARBY: There was, and I think still is, a big hippy colony (laughter) in Rincón.

MALE VOICE: A hippy colony? (Laughter.)

INTERPRETER: *¿Lo puede decir en español?*

PLA-BARBY: *Sí. Había muchísimos hippies americanos que venía a vivir en la playa aquí. Y esa gente venía con dinero, que lo depositaban en bancos en Rincón, así que ayudó también a los bancos. Porque eran — nosotros decíamos que los padres no lo quieren en Estados Unidos y los mandan aquí a vivir en la playa conchaos.* (Laughs.) *Eso era el chisme. Eso era el chisme. Pero había muchos, muchos. Eran norteamericanos, muchachos, iban a surfear.*

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.

PLA-BARBY: There's a very good surfing facility here in Rincón.

SNIDER: Yes, yes, yes.

PLA-BARBY: *Bueno, perdona, llegué en inglés. Es que me tienes que entender en español.* (Laughs.)

INTERPRETER: You have to understand him in Spanish. (Laughter.) Being here, you're supposed to.

SNIDER: Sorry. I — when I was in college, I took, 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: *Lo que aprendió en la universidad fue alemán en vez de español, porque su familia venía de Alemania.* [00:12:00] *Así que, por eso no sabe español.*

PLA-BARBY: My grandfather came from Germany.

SNIDER: Oh.

PLA-BARBY: It might be 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?

PLA-BARBY: I can't —

INTERPRETER: *¿Cómo usted ve esa relación entre PREPA y el departamento de energía federal y cómo esa relación fue cambiando de lo que usted experimentó, lo que usted recuerda?*

PLA-BARBY: *No, no puedo comentar de eso porque no lo sé.*

INTERPRETER: He doesn't have any information —

PLA-BARBY: I don't have any knowledge of that.

SNIDER: (inaudible).

PLA-BARBY: 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: *¿Cómo es el área del Rincón?* [00:13:00] *¿Cómo usted la describiría en términos de la gente, de la comunidad, del ambiente? ¿Cómo es esto aquí?*

PLA-BARBY: *Yo describiría a Rincón como un pueblo pequeño que vive del turismo interno. Y donde han venido a vivir también muchos norteamericanos que han ayudado a la economía. Se mantiene, como dije, por turismo; tiene buenos restaurantes, tiene buenas playas, tiene facilidades, tiene hoteles y eso lo mantiene bien. Está muy bien organizado. Así es que — y el nombre* [00:14:00] *del pueblo es el mejor nombre de un pueblo porque verdaderamente estamos en el rincón de Puerto Rico.* (Laughs.) *Aquí uno no llega porque pasa por el pueblo, sino que tiene que tener el propósito de venir, ¿okey? Uno puede pasar por Aguadilla, puede pasar por Mayagüez, pero a Rincón, se pasa porque uno llega aquí. Así es que, es un pueblo muy acogedor* — eh — *yo vengo muy a menudo a disfrutar generalmente de los restaurantes.*

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 develop the area. 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 —

PLA-BARBY: (Laughs.)

INTERPRETER: — in the land 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 mean 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 — uh — working with PREPA with your background and education, did you ever find yourself — uh — 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: *¿En alguna vez estuvo en la posición, ya sea cuando trabajaba para PREPA o cuando trabajaba para el — como educador, donde a usted le hiciera preguntas de los residentes en cuanto a la seguridad, de la planta, la radiación? Esas preocupaciones que usted mencionó antes que existían.*

PLA-BARBY: *No. No me pusieron en esa posición.*

INTERPRETER: No (inaudible).

PLA-BARBY: *No tuve — relación con la comunidad, no tuve. No tuve — oficialmente.*

INTERPRETER: *¿Me lo puede repetir?*

PLA-BARBY: *No tuve relación oficial con la comunidad. Así que, no me pusieron en esa posición que tener que explicar la seguridad de la planta al pueblo. No tuve esa posición.*

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: *¿Usted nació y se crio en Rincón?*

PLA-BARBY: No.

INTERPRETER: *¿Dónde usted nació y se crio?*

PLA-BARBY: *Yo nací en San Juan y me crie hasta los 16 años en una central de azúcar en Toa Baja. Mi papá era ingeniero de central de azúcar. Cuando llegó el momento de irme a la universidad, vine a Mayagüez y me quedé. Allí adopté a Mayagüez y he vivido en Mayagüez con algunas excepciones* [00:18:00] *como servicio militar y estudios avanzados, el doctorado. Por eso fui a Estados Unidos.*

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: *¿Hay algún momento o recuerdo que sobresale en su memoria en términos del tiempo que estuvo colaborando en la planta BONUS o trabajando con PREPA que usted les pueda contar?* [00:20:00]

PLA-BARBY: *Bueno, yo no estuve mucho tiempo en la planta BONUS — uh — porque me llamó el Ejército. Tuve que ir a servir. Aparte de estar en la sección de operación en BONUS, un tiempo estuve en análisis, análisis teórico — eh — y tuve que ir a viajes en una avioneta a San Juan* (laughs) *desde aquí. Pero, los recuerdos son buenos y no tengo nada en especial que surgiera. Fue una experiencia muy buena y cuando terminé el servicio militar, la planta había cerrado. Así que, se me terminó el empleo.*

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.

PLA-BARBY: (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.

PLA-BARBY: *Sí, yo estuve tres años en el Ejército, el último en 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] were you involved with PREPA?

INTERPRETER: ¿Cuánto tiempo trabajó para —?

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

INTERPRETER: *¿Cuál fue su posición cuando trabajó en PREPA y por cuántos años trabajó con — con PREPA?*

PLA-BARBY: *Déjeme explicarle. Cuando yo solicité entrar al programa y me pagaron los estudios, pues yo era empleado de PREPA. Pero, ¿cómo se llama esa posición? No lo sé. O sea, era un grupo de 10 personas. Éramos 10, ¿okey? Pero yo recibí un sueldo mensual de PREPA que — perdón, cada 15 días. La Autoridad de* [00:23:00] *las Fuente Fluviales es como se llamaba. Energía Fuente Fluviales. Y estuve en la planta BONUS como hasta noviembre — del 1966. Así que, yo creo que yo empecé en agosto con la Autoridad del 64 y terminé como en noviembre del 66. El primer año, el verano lo pasé en la universidad y el resto aquí. Primero en entrenamiento y después en operación de la planta. Yo pude, tuve la experiencia de subir potencia en el reactor. Tuve la experiencia de sincronizar el generador al sistema de — todas las experiencias que tuve que recuerdo, todas agradables.* [00:24:00] *Pero eso fue cuando yo me gradué del colegio, además de los bachilleratos en la ingeniería, había tomado ROTC y me gradué de teniente del Ejército. Y tenía que servir.*

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, 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]

PLA-BARBY: 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, *cuando usted trabajaba haciendo las operaciones, ¿tenía un título? ¿Tenía como una posición, le habían dado un nombre a su posición?*

PLA-BARBY: *Algo que decían entrenamiento, al final — pero no recuerdo la primera palabra.* [00:26:00] *Este, algo en entrenamiento. Porque era para poder tomar el examen de operación del reactor, pero yo nunca lo llegué a tomar porque me llevó el Ejército.*

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: *¿Qué usted piensa que debe pasar con BONUS en el futuro? ¿Como usted se imagina su futuro? Ahora mismo hay una — hay un museo* [00:27:00] *ahí, en el espacio, en la ubicación de BONUS. ¿Cómo usted — qué usted cree que debe pasar con esa facilidad? ¿Usted cree que debe estar abierto al público? ¿Cómo usted lo ve?*

PLA-BARBY: *Bueno, según lo que yo entiendo, la facilidad no puede estar completamente abierta al público porque la limpieza que se hizo ahí no era para eso. Claro, se puede volver a limpiar. Sí hay un museo; yo he estado un par de veces. Este, pero — eso es un terreno que el municipio de Rincón se quiere quedar con él para hacerlo atractivo. Y entiendo que PREPA lo tiene como garantizador de bonos, como bono de ellos.* (Laughs.) *Así es que, no sé — yo no sé qué pueden hacer* [00:28:00] *con eso. Este, sí, a mí me gustaría que la gente pudiese entrar con facilidad porque sí se puede entrar ahora, pero no es tan fácil entrar ahí. Un grupo puede solicitarlo, pedir permiso, le dan un paseo. Pero una familia no puede venir un domingo y entrar. Este, sí me gustaría que estuviera abierta al público y que viniera y que hubiese una — una charla interna, ¿verdad? Que explicara al público qué fue eso. Y lo que deben explicar bastante bien es por qué cerró. Porque de eso hay muchas teorías. Y me parece que todas ellas equivocadas.* (Laughs.) *Muchos chismes en el pueblo. Yo creo que se debía abrir al público,* [00:29:00] *pero entiendo que no está lista para eso.*

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 interested 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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