

**Narrator:** Luis Garcia

**Interviewers:** Vanessa Navarro Maza

**Location:** Miami, Florida

**Project Name:** Endangered Fishing Traditions of the Greater Miami Area

**Project Description:** Broadly, the project seeks to preserve the rich history of endangered fishing traditions in the Greater Miami Area. These oral histories expand our knowledge and enrich our understanding of the region's fisheries as well as the role that fishing has had in shaping the region's economic and cultural life. Our goal was to interview key individuals connected to the fishing history of Miami, including: commercial and for-hire fishers; fish dealers/processors; fish markets; and bait and tackle shops. Geographically, we aim to cover major fishing areas that are endangered and undergoing rapid change. These include the following: Miami River, Coconut Grove (Montys), Haulover Park in North Miami. The first collection of interviews are focused on the Miami River. These interviews are conducted in English and Spanish.

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**Abstract:** Luis Garcia recounts his life and the evolution of his family's fishing business. Born on June 18, 1970, in Miami Beach, Garcia grew up near the Miami River before moving to the Roads neighborhood. He attended Louisiana State University from 1988 to 1991. Garcia's family business has deep roots in Cuba, where his father and uncles were fishermen. After the Cuban Revolution, they were forced to work for the regime, leading to their exile to Miami. In Miami, Garcia's father worked at National Fisheries before starting the Garcia Brothers wholesale business and later La Camaronera, a seafood retail establishment. The business thrived, expanding to multiple locations and establishing Garcia's Seafood Grille & Fish Market. Garcia describes the business's evolution, focusing on sustainable seafood and various species like lobster, snapper, grouper, and baitfish. He shares stories about the fishermen's expertise and unique methods. Reflecting on his relationship with his father, Garcia discusses the challenges of balancing family expectations and personal aspirations. His father's dedication to work often

caused tension, but it also instilled a strong work ethic in Garcia. After pursuing baseball and acting, Garcia returned to help run the family business following his father's illness and passing. Garcia highlights his mother's supportive yet candid role in the business and his brother's financial acumen.

Vanessa Maza: This is Vanessa Navarro Maza. Today is January 21, 2020. What is your name?

Luis Garcia: Luis Garcia. Luis Esteban Garcia.

VN: When and where were you born?

LG: I was born June 18, 1970, in Mt. Sinai Hospital, Miami Beach.

VN: And where did you grow up?

LG: I grew up blocks away from the Miami River, just on the other side of the river. I don't remember the exact address, but I can probably take you by there to show exact physical building. But I would say it's probably between Northwest Fifth Street and Seventh Avenue.

VN: Did you live there most of your life?

LG: I did until – not most of my life. I lived there until I was seven, and then my parents – I guess my father started doing a little bit better, and we moved to the area of Miami called The Roads. So I lived in The Roads from the time I was about seven years old to the time I was eighteen and went away to college.

VN: Where did you go to college?

LG: I went to LSU, Louisiana State University, and I was in college from 1988 through '91.

VN: Congratulations on your recent championship.

LG: Thank you, yes. It was a long time coming.

VN: So tell me a little bit when you started fishing.

LG: So it was more so the family business. My parents had a – well, my father had a fishing business in Cuba. That's what my family did for generations. They were a fishing family. Right around the time that the revolution took over, they weren't allowed to fish anymore for themselves; they had to turn all the fish over to the regime. So they were now out of their own business. They were now fishing for the country's fishing industry. Well, my father and his brothers didn't take too well to that. In a sense, they were forcibly exiled because my father was not cool with that system. So he came to Miami, and shortly after being here, he found a job right on the river – the place was called National Fisheries. It's ironic because it's across the street from where Garcia's is currently. National Fisheries is where my dad worked when he first got here from Cuba, and he was essentially a fishmonger. He cleaned fish and filleted fish and gutted fish and did all the fishing stuff. But, on the side, he started fishing with a friend of his. The fishing started, I would say probably about 1961. So what happens is he would fish on the weekends, and he got enough money to finally get a permit and buy his own boat. Then he started the Garcia Brothers. He had another brother that he had brought from Cuba, and they started the Garcia Brothers wholesale so that whatever they would catch, they would sell ...

Then, of course, the business started evolving, and my father, having had the business he had in Cuba, he knew what he was trying to accomplish, which was to build another fishing community. So he had friends that were fishermen, and he talked them into fishing for him, and then they built the Garcia Brothers brand of wholesale fishing. Then he realized that he was selling this great seafood to other restaurants, and there had to be a way for us to do it ourselves. So he and his brothers opened up a place on Flagler called La Camaronera.

VN: When was this?

LG: This was probably 1970, so it was probably roughly eight or nine years after the wholesale business. La Camaronera is in a strip mall on Flagler and Eighteenth Avenue, and it's been there for sixty years, fifty years, and it's still there, and it's super popular, and it still does amazing business. My uncles probably own the whole block – real estate, and they're doing very well. The place has been, at least when I was growing up, the retail side of my father figuring out that maybe we should retail this instead of wholesale. It was one of the reasons why we evolved. Luckily, because of that, we got to move out of the neighborhood we lived in, and we started doing a little bit better. My mom wanted to make sure we got into good schools. Anyways, that was the evolution of from wholesale to retail. Then, of course, my father would bring his brothers one by one from Cuba. So the business got to be bigger and bigger. Then they had three or four places call La Camaronera. Then it started getting complicated because my father was worried that my brother and I, who – he didn't want my uncles and my brother and I to have to fight over things later in life. So he opened up Garcia's as a spinoff to the original business. It was ironic because it was on the river. At the time, the river was a very impoverished area, and it was not what it looks like now, or certainly not the way Miami's evolved over the years that now when you're waterfront it's – at the time, the river was a little bit shady and scary. So he got this property on the river, and my mom was super upset about it, like, "Why would you buy that? That's a terrible neighborhood, and it's dangerous. I don't want my kids there." But he was right about it, just thirty before – it was thirty years before they thought the river was going to be cool or interesting and exciting. So I was very lucky, actually. Some of it is luck. It was necessity, I'm sorry – I take that back. My father needed to, out of necessity, because he wanted to have something for his kids, and that's the only thing he could afford was that little area on the river, which now is an unbelievable blessing because it was not the idea. It's not what we thought of. So that's how it all started. The fishing business is still there. My brother still runs it. We have roughly seven to ten boats that fish for the company. There's maybe seven to ten thousand lobster traps that are on the property. There's probably another seven to ten thousand stone crab traps. We catch all local, sustainable seafood. I think that's what – I hope that's what separates us from other restaurants. We literally catch our own seafood.

VN: Aside from everything you just mentioned, are there any other types of species that you're out there catching?

LG: Absolutely.

VN: What do you guys catch?

LG: It's interesting. We have two boats that catch baitfish. Baitfish is – it's hard for me to explain it to you, but they catch ballyhoo, and they use our docks to catch ballyhoo. Then there's other fishermen that catch snapper, grouper complex. There's guys that catch blue crab. There's guys that go out for shrimp – shrimp boats. So this is all seasonal. Again, the fishermen, at least the ones we work with, they're creatures of not habit – not habit. They're creatures of whatever is going to make them money. So if the moon is full and the shrimps are out, they're shrimpers. They have to have licenses, but they're shrimpers. If, for some reason, a storm came through here and the ocean moved around a lot, they're going to go catch lobster. If it's a supermoon – they have their idiosyncrasies with respect to the ocean. So they all have whatever they think is – if it's cold today and cold tomorrow, Friday or Saturday when the temperature changes, the lobsters are going to walk. And if the lobsters walk, we're going fishing. They have their idiosyncrasies, and you can't mess with that, even if you think it's wrong.

VN: Tell me a little bit more about those. We're very interested in this.

LG: So I'll give you a for instance. One of the ballyhoo guys the other day – I always try to talk to them about this, and I say, "Hey, why don't you go fishing today?" He goes, "Well, the water out where we catch fish is too foamy. I was like, "What do you mean by too foamy?" He's like, "Yeah, when it's too wavy, the waves crash, and it makes a foam out there, and ballyhoo don't like that." [laughter] I was like, "Well, how do you know that?" He goes, "Well, I've been doing this twenty years. I think I know what I'm doing." So there's no book. There's no book at the library here that you can go and get, and it's going to make you a better lobster fisherman or a better stone crab fisherman. It's essentially life and your habits of being out there on the ocean, and there's tendencies of things that you see. So the wind is coming from the north, and they have these – they have their system. They don't have depth finders on their boats. These guys are old school; they just know. It's amazing to me. I used to go fishing when I was younger with one of them. I don't do that anymore. It's much too – I have a lot of respect for the ocean, and these guys are not afraid of the ocean, right? But I am afraid of the ocean. Not afraid of the ocean – I'm afraid of what can happen to you in the ocean. I have respect for the ocean. They do respect the ocean, but they test boundaries the way I don't like to test boundaries. So I used to ask them to take me and my buddies fishing. He would take us out, and he would stop, and he'd say, "There's some fish here." "Based on what? Why would you say that to me?" He's like, "There's fish here. Go ahead, put the rods in the water, there's fish here." I was like, "How do you know that? How would you know that?" He wouldn't tell me. So a couple of years later – and by the way, we would catch fish. It's really hard to catch fish in Miami, but those guys didn't miss. So one time, I said – a couple of years later, I said, "Hey, listen, I know you took me fishing with my buddies and stuff, and we caught fish everywhere we stopped. How did you do that?" He said, "Well, I have my things." I said, "But tell me how. I'm not going to tell. I'm not going to share my secrets." He said, "Well, I spend the better part of the off-season picking spots out here in the ocean, and I feed them, the spots. I just come out. I don't fish. I don't fish at all. I just feed the spots. I know it seems like wasted energy, but it's not because I'm investing in myself. So I feed spots. I'll pick seven or eight, ten spots where I know there's reefs, and I know that there's – and I'll feed these spots all the time. I'll throw chum. I'll feed them, I'll feed them, I'll feed them, and then I leave. I don't catch them. I do this for four or five months." I'm like, "That's brilliant. That's genius stuff." He was like, "Yeah. It's arduous. You have to go and do it, and nobody had the discipline, but that's what you have to do

to have fish.” I say, “Do you mind sharing the coordinates of your six spots,” and he goes, “No, I’d have to kill you for that. This is how I make my living. No, I could never tell you that.” So it’s brilliant. These guys, as barbaric as they look, and as – no, because they do. I don’t mean it in a bad way, but they’re just old school – their fingers are thick, and they feel like leather. You shake their hands, and you feel like you’re shaking a – I don’t know. It’s strange to me. Then, the tackle they use and the type of equipment they use is just so barbaric and ancient, and they’re so good at it. You’re just baffled. I’m always baffled by them. Just today, I went over there, and he was working on his engine, and I said, “You don’t know anything about a power built diesel engine from 1970.” He was like, “I know everything about this engine.” “How?” “I’ve had to learn. Costs too much money.” That’s impressive for guys that probably don’t have fifth-grade educations. It’s impressive. I am awed by it. There was a time when I wasn’t. There was a time when I was kind of embarrassed to show my girlfriend where my dad worked because it’s so rough around the edges that I was like maybe I can’t show this to – but now, as an adult, I’m super proud of it. There was a time when I asked my dad if I could have a boat when I was a teenager, and I thought I was cool. He gave me an old fishing boat that smelled horrible, and he literally was super proud of the fact that he got it for me. I was like, “Dad, I can’t take anybody on this boat.” He’s like, “Why not?” I said, “Dad, because this is an old fishing boat from Cuba. It’s embarrassing.” He’s like, “Well, this is the only thing I can afford, and I think these are one of the best boats in the ocean. It’s reliable. It’s going to get you in and out. You’ll be the talk of the town.” I’d be like, “No I won’t. I’m just not going to use it.” I never took the girl out on the boat. I would take it out with two of my friends, but I never took any girlfriends out on those boats; I was too embarrassed. Now I’m super proud of it. I wish that I could preserve that boat.

VN: Where is that boat?

LG: It’s behind – it was such a great boat. It was called the *Seaworthy*. I still have a picture of it. It’s an amazing boat. I think I’m going to retire the boat because – poor thing – the last time I saw it, it was kind of on its side. It was good to me. It was really good to me.

VN: Tell me more about your dad.

LG: My dad – *whoof*. My dad was a piece of work because all he knew how to do was work, and I used to hate that.

VN: For him, was work fishing plus the whole retail side, or was there one side [inaudible]?

LG: No, he was much more fishing. We got into huge fights when I started working after college. It took me a while to come back to the family business just because I knew my father and I were not going to get along because we were so different, even though now, as an adult, I know we’re the same. But at the time, I thought we were just by leaps and bounds how different we were. So there was a time where I didn’t get along with my dad at all. I was a baseball player, and everybody else’s father was at the baseball games. But my dad was at work trying to make a living for us and trying to leave me what I have today. So for me, I was always a little bit pissed that my dad wasn’t there. I used to always think, “Man.” Which was a blessing because I didn’t have any pressure to do well. I didn’t have my parents there. They didn’t know that I was good. The only reason I was there was because my best friend wanted to play baseball

and I wanted to be with my best friend all the time, so I got into baseball with him until his father came to my mom and said, “Hey, your son is really good at baseball, and if you allow me, I’m going to keep him on this team, and he’s going to hopefully evolve, and we’ll see what happens.” This was when I was thirteen or fourteen. No one in my family played baseball before. No one in my family has played baseball since. I got lucky that I had a best friend who liked baseball. But my dad didn’t understand that. He was like an old [speaks Spanish] guy, and he was just like – they would tell him, “Your son’s pretty good,” and he was like, “Okay.” But I used to be upset about that not knowing because I wasn’t a father. I didn’t know what it took to pay bills, and I didn’t understand it. What’s amazing is – I should – you’ll edit this. But there was a guy on my team. He was one of the guys. I don’t want to say which one of my friends, but his father was always there, he was always great. And I was like, “Man, so-and-so’s dad is so cool. He’s always here. He always takes us to every game, and he’s always around to do things for us.” What I didn’t know was that he didn’t have a job, and he was a deadbeat dad who had left his mom. Of course, he was around all the time. He didn’t have any ambition or anything to do. Well, when you’re fourteen and this guy’s always there to play catch – I thought he was great. Now, as an adult and I see him, I’m like, “Oh, wow. Why didn’t I see that before? So here’s the deal. My dad, for me, was someone that I admire very much because I knew how much work he put in, but I was also really upset that he couldn’t spend the time that I wanted him to spend with us because he was always working. Now, as an adult, I try to do as much time with my kids because I don’t want to ever give them that feeling, right? Even though I’m embarrassed that I gave my dad a lot of crap, I knew he’s a good man. I’m positive now when I work for – the fishermen that used to work for him are working for us, my brother and I, and they’ll say things like, “Oh, yes. Your dad used to talk to us about you.” That kind of freaks me out. I tell them, “I don’t want you to tell me stories. I don’t want to hear it.” “What do you mean? Your dad used to talk to me about your baseball games.” I was like, “What are you saying?” “Oh, yeah, your dad knew everything.” “What are you saying to me? Stop it. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear any of it. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to go down that road.” But you don’t know this as a kid because you’re just a punk kid that just is judging people by what they – the thirteen years that they’ve been alive, whatever TV show they watch, or whatever they imagine to be a happy family. I was particularly tough on my dad, I guess because I wanted him to be there. But I understand now. Unfortunately, I can’t tell him that, but I wish I could. When I go to the cemetery, I try, and I explain that I was a punk, and I didn’t know any better. But you live, and you learn. I will try to do better at sharing time with my children because I think he would’ve had he known the repercussions – I think he would’ve – well, I don’t know if he would’ve. He had no choice. He was just trying to pay bills for his family. He was also an immigrant. He was afraid. He was afraid that they were going to take it all away from him again like they did already once. So the mentality of “No, no, no. I got to work. I got three children I got to put through college and stuff.” I’m sure that’s very typical of the old school Cuban parents. I think that generation was a generation of really tough, hardworking people that were afraid to fail, and that’s where I come from. So I have my own demons to fight. Like whenever my wife wants to get me really upset, really, really – if she really wants to get me mad to the point where I got to – she will say, “You’re turning into your dad.” That’s nuclear. That’s a nuclear bomb. But nuclear to the point where I’m like, “I’m going to go for a walk. I’m going to go for a walk because I need about an hour before I respond to anything because I’m afraid of what I’m going to say.”

VN: Well, not to piss you off, but what are the things that you see that you have that are similar to your dad?

LG: She'll say, "We have a birthday party on Saturday. The boys have a birthday party on Saturday. Your friend Christian – his twins are turning three. I think you should go." I'll say, "But Saturday's the busiest day for me, and it's a three-year-old birthday party. Are you kidding me? Are you serious? I'd rather watch paint dry than go to a three-year-old's birthday party. But listen, I understand you're asking me to do something because you think it'll be good for the boys to [speaks Spanish] with you – to be with you." "It's something that you should do." I'll say, "I can't do that on Saturday. Forget about that. It's out of the question." She's like, "You see what I mean? You're doing that thing." I'll be, "What thing?" "You're doing that thing that your father used to do." I'll be like, "Whoa. Whoa. Take it back." She like, "I'm not going to take it back. I can't take it back because it's how I feel. You're spending too much time at work."

VN: Do you think it's because –

LG: And by the way, I'm non-traditional. In other words, I spoke to you earlier today about how incredibly fortunate you are that you work from eight to five or nine to five, and there was a reason for me saying that because it's something that I fight with. Today I left work early to come to see you here and to do this because I wanted this. It's important to me. Then I have to go pick up my kids because that's important to me. But I know that I'm leaving the restaurant unattended, and I'm leaving the fishing boats unattended, and at some point, that gets in my brain and starts to affect me. Can I just take a break for one second? Can I take a break? I just need to answer this.

[TAPE PAUSED]

LG: Okay. Sorry.

VN: No worries.

LG: So, where was I with respect to my wife telling me why I'm turning into my dad? Also, my dad was a person who I thought lacked communication skills just because he was from the old school, and he wasn't very either A, emotional, or he said very little. He was a real quiet guy – real quiet, which is really admirable considering my mom's a tough lady. So to be with my mom, you got to be either very patient or just somebody who's very in control of his emotions. My dad was a very, very quiet guy. So I was very quiet for a long time. Then I met a teacher in – I was in communications in college, and so I would take classes that were outside my comfort zone, which was theater or – some of it was because there were pretty girls, but mostly because I was interested. So I got into one class, and it was a theater class. The person said to me, "Will you do" – I don't remember what it was – "an exercise." They said, "You have a lot to say, but you're not saying it." I was like, "Oh." He's said, "I believe it's a learned behavior." I was like, "What are you talking about?" He says, "You're very expressive, but you're not sharing. Is that something –?" So he started peeling off layers of things. So I feel like I'm more expressive today because I was lucky enough to be in that class on that day. Now I know that my father



probably was expressive, but it was learned behavior. It was the behavior of him, saying, “I just got to keep going. I can’t stop to share. I can’t stop to express myself.” That’s also very fortunate for me that I got to be in that classroom, and I got to help somebody help me share. Even though Brenda says to me occasionally, “Why don’t you tell me what you’re thinking?” And I’ll be like, “No, no. I’m fine. I don’t want to talk about it.” Typical, right? That’s just, I guess, guy stuff. But I think communication is important. I wish I would’ve communicated with my dad when I was upset or when I was disappointed because I gave a lot of my years up being with him when I was mad. When I went to college, I got even more upset and more hurt because I didn’t see him all the time. Then, of course, after college, I didn’t want to come home. I got a baseball – I got a chance to play professional baseball for five years, and I didn’t really share with him those five years because I was more and more upset because I was doing better and better and better, and I had no relationship. When my baseball career ended, I had an option of coming home or just not coming back to the family business or coming home to my family at all. I was living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was playing double-A baseball for the Texas Rangers team. I didn’t choose to come home. I went to Los Angeles.

VN: What made you eventually come back?

LG: So I was in Los Angeles for six years. I did a bunch of work out there as an actor – as a working actor, and that’s what I chose after college. Well, I took that class, remember? I enjoyed it so much that when I was done playing baseball, I wanted to explore that, and I didn’t want to come deal with my dad. So I moved to LA, and in LA, I started doing work, and I did really well. But you’re still broke. Even if you’re working, you’re still kind of broke. The life of an artist is feast or famine for most of them, which was fine. Except for I fell in love with a girl, and then she wanted me to propose, and I was like, “I don’t have any money, and I can’t evolve like this.” So one day, I remember my mom was calling me and telling me, “Hey, have you talked to your dad?” I said, “No, Mom, I’m not going to talk to my dad.” She was like, “You really need to talk to your dad. Your dad’s not doing well.” I was like, “What? Like what? Not well, like what?” She was like, “No, not well, like he’s not doing well.” I go, “Okay. Well, if you’re just using this as a way for me to call home, talk to dad, it’s not going to work.” We were both very stubborn. So she said to me one day, “You need to come home. Your dad’s in the hospital, and he’s not doing well. I’ve been telling you for three months, and it’s time for you to come home. You need to see him. You need to see him. I’m not saying he’s going to pass away or anything, but I would – I’m begging you to come home and look at your father and say whatever you have to say to him.” I was like, “Well, why are you telling me this?” I was so frustrated. So I did come home, and I found him in the hospital. The life-changing moment for me, which made say, “Okay, I understand,” was very close to my dad passing. I already knew that he was sick enough that he was going to pass because the doctors had told me. They just didn’t tell me when, but they did tell me he was going to pass. He was very, very sick. Then, my mom and my brother had decided that we needed to be with him twenty-four hours a day in the hospital just because he shouldn’t be alone. Then, of course, I volunteered for the night shift, from twelve o’clock at night to seven in the morning because that way I didn’t have to talk to him, right? I could see him, he could see me, but we didn’t have to share anything – like anything profound or deep. I remember I’d be sitting there next to his bed, and he would ask me to put the Marlins game on or whatever, but it was really very superficial stuff. He, by the way, was sick with the most ironic thing in the world. He had Lou Gehrig’s disease, which is a

baseball player, and he had lost his ability to move his body. He was bed-stricken to the point where his body was shutting down. He could barely speak. So that was another layer of hurt and pain. Anyway, the point of it was I was there, and I wanted to say, "I'm sorry," right? The way I did it was I would hold his hand at times at night, and I could tell that he understood me in a way that perhaps I was sharing with him how sorry I was about everything because it's not worth it. None of it was worth it. But it was too late, kind of, maybe. Anyway, the point was the next morning, I was waiting for my mom to relieve me of my overnight stay, and a gentleman walked into the room, an older gentleman, an American gentleman, somebody I'd never seen before in my life. It was probably nine o'clock in the morning, and my mom, she started sobbing. She said, "Hello." She started sobbing when she saw this guy, and then she said hello. Then she walked out of the room, and she went into the women's bathroom. So I saw the interaction there, and the gentleman said, "Hi, how are you? Are you Luis?" "Yes, I am." "Oh, I know all about you" – whatever. Then he sees my old man, and he just walks up to him and puts his hand on him, "Hey, Esteban, how are you?" So I didn't know much about the guy. I walked past him, and I went outside, and I looked for my mom. I found her right outside the ladies' bathroom. I said, "Mom, who is that guy, and why did you get like that?" She's like, "Oh, Luis, I can't even talk." I'm like, "What do you mean? Tell me. I need to know." She says, "Well, that gentleman was a friend of your father's. He worked in a bank. In 1965, he lent your father the money to start Garcia's." I said, "What do you mean?" She's like, "Yeah. Well, your dad went to get a loan at the bank, and the bank denied him the loan, but he was the gentleman that was filling out the form for your dad, and he believed in your dad so much that he lent him the money out of his pocket. The bank denied him the loan; the banker gave him the loan." We are responsible. He's essentially the first man who believed in us in this country. I said, "You're kidding me." My mom's like, "You have no idea what your dad went through just for you. I was like, "Oh, my God, I can't do this." Here I am living in Los Angeles in a shitty little apartment, barely paying my bills, super mad at my father, who happens to be an amazing guy because I don't understand or see him that way. So that moment was a life-changing moment for me because I could've gone back. I could've. But shortly thereafter, my father passes, maybe a week later, and I had to sit there and really think about what I wanted to do with my life. Did I want to keep going back and perhaps being really happy doing whatever I was doing in LA? Or could I take the responsibility of taking my father's last name and trying to make it better than what he started with? So it's a purpose-driven life for me right now to leave whatever I inherited, mostly family values, really, to give that to my kids. Not to say that I wouldn't have been able to succeed at whatever else I was doing. I'm not saying that I would've or wouldn't have succeeded, but this gave me purpose, and it drove me to say, "I'm going to leave, hopefully, this earth, having made my father and my mom proud of what I've done in their absence." That's why I chose this because I want to make – because I think the greatest thing isn't how much money you have in the bank; it's how proud you make the people who love you and the people who are in the trenches with you every day, and who admire you and who love you for who you are regardless of your weaknesses and your horrible bad attitudes at times. So I know my mom has stood by me at every – and she still does it. She calls me out on my shit all the time – and I'm sorry if I said shit – but she's also there. She's there, a rock, right? I didn't have that faith in my dad, which was a failure on my part – super failure – and I wish I didn't – I wasn't so stubborn. I would've been so much of a better baseball player. I would've been so much of a better actor if I wasn't so stubborn. I guess I'm learning. I'm still learning.

VN: So you coming into the business, it wasn't at the same time with your dad. There was never an overlap.

LG: There was an overlap. I'll tell when it was.

VN: Oh, okay.

LG: So, of course, when you're a minor league baseball player, you don't make a whole lot of money. In the off-seasons, I was training to go back to spring training and be in shape, so I would come – I would be home in Miami, and – begrudgingly. Begrudgingly I would work with my family because it allowed me to wake up in the morning, go to the gym for two hours, work lunchtime at Garcia's, go train in the afternoon, and then at night work again. So I was a four-month employee that they tolerated because if, for whatever reason, I became a superstar, then I would've taken care of everyone, right? So they were gambling on me. I'm sorry, but it's true. They're like, "Man, this guy could be our ticket." I kept telling them, "Listen, it's really hard. It's not easy. I'm really good, but I'm not great. I need some luck." Anyways, the truth of it is, baseball was really good to me. You talked about LSU. We were national champions at LSU when I was there – baseball. So yes, baseball was great, and I enjoyed it very much. But baseball, you only have a shelf life. Your career can be really great, but it also can be really short.

VN: Was there always an expectation that you would come back to the family business?

LG: Yes.

VN: Was it something that was voiced?

LG: No. It's something that – I think my brother may have voiced it to me. I have a brother. You met my brother. Maybe you have, maybe you didn't. But my brother always said, "I really could use you."

VN: Because he was there from the beginning. He went straight in.

LG: Yes. My brother was awesome. He still is. The problem is, he's tired now, and I'm the one with three-year-olds. My brother's kids are out of college. But my brother was there with my father from the very, very beginning. I was the prodigal son. I was the one that left. I was the one that was always fighting my father, and I was the one that was distant. There was a time when I didn't even talk to my brother because I chose the dark side, because I chose anything but them. Do you know what I mean? I can understand that now. I chose anything but them. They were like, "You're going where? To Los Angeles? To do what? Are you crazy?" No, I wasn't crazy. It was actually easy. The transition was really easy. I was a baseball. I was done playing baseball. I had a friend who was a stuntman. The guy said to me, "Listen, you're an athlete. I could use an athlete. If you want, come out here, and I'll get you work all the time. There's always Gatorade commercials and Nike commercials and all kinds of Dick's Sporting Goods commercials – always. We're always looking for athletes because these actors look great, but they can't throw a baseball, and you're always going to have jobs." So I was like, "Really? I'm

in. Gatorade commercials and Nike commercials, and you're going to pay me for this?" They're like, "Absolutely." So I went to LA. I went out for three weeks, thinking, "Let me see how this goes," right? So I go out there because maybe he's lying to me. So I go out there and, sure enough, the first weekend, I call him up, "Hey, Mike. It's Luis, I'm here." "Hey, you're here already? You're ready to roll?" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm ready to go. I'm here. I have a friend, I'm staying on the couch, and I'm good." He's like, "Okay, I think Thursday we have a commercial shoot for whatever." I was like, "Really? Thursday? Already?" He said, "Yeah. What do I got to do?" He's like, "You're going to come out to the audition, you don't have to worry about it. When you get there, ask for me, and we're going to put you in a room, and you're going to throw a baseball or whatever we're doing, and you'll do fine." That's exactly how it went. They needed real athletes that could mimic athletic sporting and events, and none of those guys could pull it off. It's amazing. Amazing. And so I found myself working all the time, and I was doing commercials all the time. But then, of course, the curious part of me was like, "Yeah, but I don't want to do the stunts anymore. I want that job. I want – who's that guy?" "Well, that's Benjamin Bratt, he's not going to be throwing a baseball. He's the star of the commercial." "Well, I want that job." "Yeah, but you can't get that job because that's really not – that doesn't work that way." I'm like, "Yeah, but I don't want to slide into the base anymore. I don't want to dive into the wall and catch a ball anymore. I want that job." They're like, "Well, you got to study, and you got to know." And I'm like, "I know, I took a class once in college." They're like, "Well, good. Then you need to study, and then when you study, then you can start to audition for things that are real roles." I was like, "Okay, I'll do that then. So I started studying, and like anybody who's got an inner drive, you figure it out. So I started figuring it out all by myself. Well, no, I shouldn't say that. I had a lot of friends that would point me in the right direction, and I was like, "Okay, I can do that." Like, "You need to study with this guy. You need to study with that guy. You need to study with Larry. You need to study." I was like, "Done deal," and I would get into those classes. I was devoted. I was also very selfish. I was living for myself. It wasn't like I had a family or anything.

VN: Throughout this whole time, what was your connection with your mom?

LG: My mom has been always – she's always been the person who understood me. Even when I would call home and say, "Hi, Mom, how are you?" She's like, "Hey, how are you? How are things? I'm worried about you. Are you sure you're going to be okay? Are you eating? You looked skinny the last time I saw you." Typical mom stuff. Then she's like, "Are you going to call your father?" "No." "Are you going to call your brother?" "No." Why? "Because." "Oh, my God, you're so stubborn."

VN: It was just you and your brother?

LG: Yes.

VN: You don't have any other siblings.

LG: I have a little sister.

VN: Is your sister involved in Garcia's in any way?

LG: She kind of is, and she's kind of not because my sister was also in Los Angeles. She came to Los Angeles because she worked in a talent agency, like a real talent agency. She worked here in Miami for a talent agency, and, of course, my sister wanted a bigger job and a better job, and so she took a job in Los Angeles for the big, big company. So she was representing super talented people. She could never represent me because I didn't have a resume or anything. So she's like, "I can't send you to an audition. You don't even have a headshot." I'm like, "I know, but I'm good. I can do it." She's like, "I'm not doing that. I'll introduce you to a friend of mine; maybe they can do it." But then, you know what? When I got a couple of jobs, she wanted to help me. I'm like, "Oh, now you want to help me?" But no, my sister, now, she's back here in Miami. She's got a couple of kids, and she's out of that life – I shouldn't say that. She's in the talent agency here locally again. But when she was in LA, she helped me a lot. She certainly helped me because she had a job, so I could always crash at her place if I really ran out of money, which was a huge thing. Then, I think she looked over me because my mom would tell her, "Make sure you keep an eye on your brother."

VN: So was your mom really the one who kind of showed you the ropes when you decided, "All right, that's it, I'm doing this, I'm taking it on?"

LG: Here?

VN: Yes.

LG: So it's interesting. I forgot to tell you. It's not so much that I have to pick them up as that –

VN: So speaking of moms, tell me about when you decide, "All right, I'm in, I'm doing this, I'm going to continue the family legacy." What was that process like for you? What role did your mom play in it?

LG: So my mom was – we were all scrambling, right? Because we had lost our – we had lost the center of the family. Even though he and I didn't get along for a long period of time, he was the guy who made everything happen. So my mom and everybody was scrambling to – you don't fill those shoes; you just try to do the best you can. That's what we did. This is easy for me with respect to hospitality and service for me. It's inherently easy for me. I don't know why. But the service part of me is easy. The service part is – I like people. I like being around people. Every now and then I have a bad day, but we all do. I like people, and I like being around people, so treating people as if they're in your home because essentially Garcia's is like that for me. You're coming over my house, and I'm cooking for you. I just happen to have three hundred thousand people coming every year, or whatever. So it doesn't stop. By the way, we don't cook at home. We don't, no. I spend all day cooking for people. I'm not cooking at home for anybody. Even when I have a party at my house, I have it catered. I'm just not in that world. I have people that I'm essentially dealing with every day, so the last thing I want to do when I get home is to do that again. So that part of it was easy. Then, obviously, the back of the house stuff – the ordering, the scheduling, the putting together shifts, and knowing how to handle staff, and that obviously happened over time. I didn't pick it up right away, but I picked up all the

important things right away. My mom was great because she's just the rock. By the way, my mom is super inappropriate. I'm going to get sued one day for sure, for sure, for sure. It's just a matter of time. It's just a matter of time. She is incredibly wonderful and loving and maternal to my staff. Everyone turns to her when they have a problem, and she's there, and she's super maternal. But she's equally inappropriate.

VN: How so?

LG: You want me to give you a for instance. So the other day, one of my servers showed up to work, and he looked like he had had a long night, probably smelled a little bit, probably looked raggedy. She did not hold back. She ripped him. She's like, "First of all, you smell horrible. Your face – you look like you slept on the sidewalk. Your shirt is offensive. Where did you get that shirt? It looked like it was in a bottle. And you smell. You smell horrible. Did you just get here from the bar?" And I'm like, "You can't talk like that. You can't talk to people like that, not in this day and age; you can't." Or, she saw one of our female servers was wearing a very, very skimpy outfit – very skimpy. She's like, "You can't work like that." Then, of course, she said something that's inappropriate, which I'm not going to repeat, and I said, "Mom, you can't talk like that. You can't talk like that in this generation of people. We're going to get sued. It's just not going to happen. I need you to chill out." She's like, "Nobody's going to sue me for nothing. Everybody knows that what I'm saying is the truth." And I'm like, "It doesn't matter if it's the truth. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. I'm trying to protect us because you don't know how incredibly insensitive things can seem, especially if they take it up with somebody, an attorney, or something." So she's incredibly inappropriate but incredibly awesome, too. So I have nothing but respect for her and admiration for her because she's seventy-three years old, and she wakes up every morning and beats me to work.

VN: What does she do at Garcia's?

LG: Nothing. Yell at me. No, I take that back. She is there as a symbol of strength and unity and family. But she also likes to be front and center where all the fish is on display, and she likes to stand there, and she likes everybody to see her. She's not as personable as you would think. When people get snappy with her, she gets snappy back, and that's not hospitality; that's not what we do. I've had to tell her on a couple of occasions, "Mom, you shouldn't have said that to that gentleman." She said, "That guy's a jerk." I'm like, "Yeah, but you just don't say that." She's like, "Yeah, but he's a jerk." Somebody came in the other day, and was like, "Hey, do you sell stone crab sauce?" And my mom's like, "Yeah. I mean, we don't sell it. We give it to our customers when they buy the stone crab." He's like, "Yeah, yeah. But I bought the stone crabs next door; I just need the sauce." She's like, "Go next door and get the sauce. Let them give it to you." "They don't have any." "That's not my problem." Now, is she right? Maybe. Was the delivery good? No. No, that could have been handled so differently, and maybe have gained a patron. "Hey, I'm going to give it to you this time. Next time you should come try ours," or something of the sort. So when I try to explain that to her, she says, "No, that guy's a jerk, and he's never going to buy here. He's a jerk." And I'm like, "Okay, Mom." I'm not going to change a seventy-three-year-old lady who's been the same way her whole life. I used to come home with girls for her to meet when I was seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, eighteen, whatever. As soon as the girl would leave, she'd say, "She's no good for you." "Oh, Mom, how do you

know that?” “Because I’m a mom, and I know what I’m telling you. She’s no good for you.” “Why not?” “Did you see what she was wearing?” “What’s the big deal?” “I wouldn’t let my daughter go out in public like that.” “Mom, come on.” She was right a lot. She was right a lot. She was right a lot – a lot more than I like to give credit for. Go ahead.

VN: How about your brother?

LG: My brother and I have –

VN: Was he a big help in helping you get started?

LG: My brother and I have different personalities, so my brother is super black or white. There’s non-negotiable – black or white. He’ll tell you no with no problem. I have a hard time saying no. He thinks things through as a businessman so well. He’s so much better at it than me, with respect to making money. He’s just great at it – great at making money. I’m not so good at making money.

VN: What are you good at?

LG: The human experience. I think that I’m really good at that. He’s not so good at that, but he makes money; he knows how to make money.

VN: You’re more the front end, he’s more on behind the scenes?

LG: Yes. I’m more in making you feel – I hope that I make you feel special and that we’re actually having a moment. It’s hard to do that every day with two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, five hundred people coming through there every day, and having [to] make an actual human experience – make an actual moment, that’s tough because most of the time it’s really, “Hey, how are you? I hope you had a good meal. Thank you. Thank you for coming.” You can do that anywhere. You can get experience at McDonald’s or Hillstone’s or whatever. I hope that it’s more than just that, that I actually know your name. Like I asked you, “Maza, where does that come from?” I’m really interested. I thought I asked you if you were Lebanese. But I’m trying to do that all the time. I’m trying to do that with people all the time. So he’s not like that, no. As a matter of fact, he’s very, very short on words, and that’s fine. Everybody’s different. Everybody’s different.

VN: So is this something that you’ve [inaudible] –

LG: Matter of fact, you want – I’m going to bring this up.

VN: Yes.

LG: My mom said to me the other day, “You should’ve been a priest.” I was like, “Mom, why would you say that?” She’s like, “Yes, because you give so many things away and you give – you be giving all kinds of things away. You forgive people.” I’m like, “Where did that come from?” She’s like, “Well, people take advantage of you.” I was like, “Why would you say that

to me?" She's like, "Because I know. Didn't you just give away five gift certificates to that guy?" I said, "Yeah, but it was for the United Way, whatever." She's like, "Yeah, you do that all the time," and she's right. She's right. A lot of times, I overextend myself in ways that put myself in predicaments because I say yes all the time. All the time. "Hey, we're having an event. I'd love for you to cater it." "Yes." "Hey, we're doing this donation thing, can you make a donation?" "Yes." "Hey, so there's some kids in Liberty City [and] I want to give them a free meal." "Yes." I want that. I pray that they give me one of those big lotteries, not for me, so I can just give it away. So you give it to people, make people happy. It's a bad quality sometimes. It is a bad quality sometimes. My wife tells me it's a bad quality. She tells me all the time, "Why did you give that away?" "I don't know. Because I figured that they needed it, they wanted it." Oh, the other day she bought me some golf clubs, and the ones that I had, I gave them to somebody. She's like, "Why did you give them away? I was going to sell them on the Internet." I was like, "I don't know, hon, I didn't think about it. I just gave it away." I didn't think about selling it because I don't think like that.

VN: Your brother would've sold it.

LG: Oh, my God, he would've sold it in a minute. For sure, he would've sold it in a minute. That dude is brilliant.

VN: I'm really curious because it seems like when you started working the family business, it wasn't like you were – oh, is it time to go?

LG: I'm going to make her mad anyway Don't worry about it.

VN: No, it's okay. Look. We can –

LG: Can you do another hour?

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/28/2020