

FHS Oral History Project – Claudia Menezes

Description:

Claudia Menezes was born in Belém, Pará, Brazil, in 1966. She briefly recounted her experiences growing up in Belém, particularly the inspiration she drew from her mother. Claudia initially majored in history, and explained why she selected that field of study and how it informed her approach to tourism, the career she ended up graduating from and working in. She recalled the business she and her sister opened while in college in Brazil. In 1996, Claudia emigrated to Orlando, Florida, “unintentionally.” After deciding to stay in Orlando, Claudia opened a small tourist business that eventually merged with a bus transportation company owned by her husband, Fernando, in 2001. Claudia described the changing entrepreneurial landscape over the past twenty-five years, given her deep knowledge and experiences as a Brazilian small businesswoman. She also discussed Orlando’s cultural diversity, sharing several varied examples from receiving racially charged phone calls while operating her business to feeling embraced by the overall community. Given her personal experience as an immigrant and professional background working in the tourism industry, Claudia contended that multiculturalism remains Orlando’s greatest strength, not the theme parks. Lastly, she highlighted the current state of her business, GoPegasus, and what she envisions for Orlando’s future.

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Claudia Menezes on February 9th, 2025, at Audubon Church for the Florida Historical Society oral history Project. Before we begin, can you please state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born?

00;00;18 - 00;00;26

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Claudia Menezes. I was born April 11th, 1966, in Belém, Pará, Brazil.

00;00;26 - 00;00;36

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Excellent. Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences growing up in Brazil during the 70s, 80s?

00;00;36 - 00;01;38

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Yeah. Seventies, I was quite a kid, four years old. Belém is in the north of the country, so it's a little bit of different because all the references most everybody has from Brazil is Rio and São Paulo. So I'm from the north. Belém is almost on the equator line, and it's the delta of the Amazon River. Lots of rivers, lots of green, kind of middle of the rainforest. So I had a pretty healthy and good childhood running in the streets with a lot of what we would say, kayaking, but at that time there was no kayaking, there was very small little boats that we had when I was a kid. Lots of river and lots of creeks. Very healthy and very close to nature was my childhood.

00;01;38 - 00;02;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you were born two years after the 1964 coup that established the Fifth Brazilian Republic or the military dictatorship. Obviously, I know you were too young to

sort of remember that transition, but do you recall any stories from your parents or grandparents about that transition?

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CLAUDIA MENEZES: No, that was not part of my childhood. This was impacting when I was fourteen, fifteen years old, when you were in the school. It was a time that the Amazon was under kind of watch, and there was a lot of people fighting over the lands and also about the Brazilian nuts that we call, *castanha do Pará* in Portuguese. So a lot of fights between the local people and people there were taking the land off. So there was a lot of this movements there, and the church was pretty much involved. I stayed in a Catholic church in that time, and I was pretty close to the more progressive side of the church. But to that point, if it was to say the political then actually the national thing with the military, that was not much of a big participation or influence on that.

00;03;21 - 00;03;26

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What inspired you to study business administration and management during college?

00;03;26 - 00;04;01

CLAUDIA MENEZES: I always worked in the tourist industry. My mother was the inspiration. She was very curious. If Belém was the small capital, a small city, my mother came from an even smaller city that you only access by river. And she was very curious. Love to read and everything. So she influenced us a lot. So in the tour industry, to be honest with you, when I was going to college, my major was history.

00;04;01 - 00;04;03

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Oh, wow.

00;04;03 - 00;07;03

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Because I was so fascinated with everything and of the whole political thing. And everything on my environment and my father looked at in me and he asked me, “Are you ready to have a very tight life and not having money at all?” That resonates to me. And I said, “Well, but that’s what I like.” And he supported me. So I entered my first year in a history major. And then I started working with my mother. And knowing more about the touring industry and being a tour guide, I was like sixteen and seventeen years old. So I was everything, tour guide—at that point, I already spoke English because was part of the education we had. So it was always in contact with all of that. And my mom, she went back to college. She was forty-five years old. And then that time, like my father said—I was ten at the time—“You can go to college, but my daughter was not going to be with nannies. You have to take care of it.” And you know what happened? I went to college with her. So I was ten years old already listening to things and in the middle of adults. And I remember one time in the classroom, it was a philosophy class, and the campus was by a river. And then everybody was sit down in that philosophy class, and the teacher talking about exactly the water that goes in the river is not always the same water. And that was in my head, and I was looking to the water. Yeah. It is not the same water. And I was looking for the little leaves there were passing by. It was fascinating me like the little things. The little fish is not the same. And I was trying to see if

the leaf was going to come back was the leaf. So all this started resonating me later on. And I really liked the tour and that other side because I was in contact with different people from all around. And by the end I changed the major to administration because that was more towards what I was working and I was open[ing] with my sister a tour company. So it has more to do with than history. Although I still love pretty much and I like to read and I like to, but I think I agree with my father. I want something a little bit more exciting and something that was more profitable.

00;07;03 - 00;07;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. Before we talk about that tour guide business that you launched with your sister, I'm just curious, since you shared that, what was it like studying history at that time in Brazil?

00;07;23 - 00;10;12

CLAUDIA MENEZES: I think studying history, or majoring history is something like people will look to you and say, "you kind of cu-cu" or "you kind of like a party people. You are the one that likes looking to the sky." Which is not really that, but I think at that point the environment of the people that studied history, our major in history, the professors and everything, it was more towards that cu-cu stigma that people don't do anything just party or just have a good time, which is not true. Like whoever studies, it's a lot of work, a lot of work. And that point, there was a journalist I went to work with, a journalist in Brazil, who was very proactive and work as an archivist for him. His office was the size of this room, like very small. But he almost couldn't even move, like in piles and piles and piles of paper and trying to organize, putting it in order, and it was so big of archives and so much history and I was going there, and it was for free, and I couldn't leave because it was so much to read like, who the hell thinks that we are doing nothing here, putting all this together and preserving all this spaces together. But it was a lot of work involved and very few resource. And there was not a computer at that time. Everything was typewriter. So, I still have a couple of copies of his pieces. For me it was one of the things that fascinated me. And to be honest with you, using that history thing, with the tour thing, it was not much of a change, a difference. I use the knowledge [of] the past to your days and sharing it with other people because the tourist industries are all about that. The tourist industries is all depending on the history of the place or whatever is going on. So it's not that far away from what I studied. I just made it more practical, let's say.

00;10;12 - 00;10;47

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah, absolutely. I'm glad you made that connection of how your studies in history informed sort of your approach to the tourist industry because you're right. Even nowadays when people go to foreign countries to travel, a lot of the things that they do is very much rooted in history. So, yeah, I'm glad you made that connection. I'm curious, since you were studying history and you were clearly politically aware, you were in college when the Republic changed again, correct?

00;10;47 - 00;12;01

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Sort of. I was not pretty much participating on the college activities because at that point I was already working. I opened my own tour company with my sister and that is a lot of work. And that is a lot of things going on in the campus and college and

everything. And to be honest with you, I was trying to be as far as possible, not just because of like the whole political thing, but I didn't have the time. There was a lot of strikes which was hard for me because when the strikes came, it was three, four months without school, and then it got delayed. And then I started working in other stuff. So it took me a while to graduate. And by the end I graduated by experience, not by actually getting all the credits from studying because there were so many interruptions and because when they started also the tour college, you had the option of showing all your experience and graduating for it.

00;12;01 - 00;12;10

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Let's talk about that business that you launched with your sister after graduating. Just tell me about that experience.

00;12;10;08 - 00;12;11;24

CLAUDIA MENEZES: It was not after. It was during.

00;12;11 - 00;12;13

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: During. Okay.

00;12;13 - 00;16;04

CLAUDIA MENEZES: It was a whole bunch of opportunities. It is a funny and good story because we have all this thing with my mother, and I was involved with that. There was a friend of ours, which I don't know if I would call a friend, but it was a friend of my parents. And, at that point, to have a tour company in Brazil, you have to have a patent letter. So you can just not open a tour company because there was so many per X amount of inhabitants or something like that. So we have to have this letter. And one of the things to open a tour company is you could, if you were like a representative of an airline or something, you could open it. So this friend of the family, he was the representative for Air France, which [made] some things pretty interesting, when you live in a small city like Belém, but we're so close to the French Guyana. And so we had direct flights from there to Paris. So we have the flights from Belém to Guyana and then from Paris. So we have the whole, Air France thing there. So I went to work with him. At that time, we use tickets by hands, so we have in the company and Air France, one person that will calculate the rates. We need a big book that you have to see the number of miles and if it fits and you calculate that, and it will send that to the main office [which] was received in another city, your calculation was approved, and then it came back to you by telex and so there was another person that has a beautiful handwriting, which was not my case, that will actually write on the tickets all the calculation and everything to you. And to today I know how to calculate a rate by hand if I need what computers do today. So with that I was working, and he saw the opportunity to change that and get the patent to have the tour company. So he changed that, and he sold like 40%, that I bought together with my sister and actually my brother too and my other sister. So when we changed that and we started working with a tour company, he went to Guyana, closed a piece of business and then he said that "The business is mine. You stay with the problems." So we just inherited an almost closed company with a lot of problems. But me and my sister we turned it around. We started doing other kind of service, doing tours in Brazil, leaving the city, going with a bus [to] other states and everything, and we survived. And the company is still there. Later on, before I came here, I sold my part to her [Claudia's sister] and it's still there to today. So she still has the company. So it was a lot of things, like at that point,

we hired bus, we traveled with the people, we were closing agreements with hotels outside. And at that point there was no cell phones, no GPS, we would go in the bus with a guide and a map. And we did all of that and the company started growing and it was, it is a pretty good business there.

00;16;04 - 00;16;11

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And why did you ultimately leave Brazil for the United States? And when was this?

00;16;12 - 00;23;07

CLAUDIA MENEZES: I left Brazil [and] moved here in 1996. It was very unintentional. At that point, I was married. I had my kids, and my ex-husband had a little boy. So we came on vacations and we came to Orlando, and we were looking things around and I was always curious. And every time I traveled, I always went outside of the regular tours, and I wanted to go around the neighborhood, see how everything was happening. And then I saw the way that Americans sold the houses, like when you get to that subdivision, and I decided to enter subdivision, "let's see the house." And then we went and saw the house and how easy it was to buy the house. And then that point, \$1 was \$0.85, so it was 15% less. So it was a big good deal. And then I said, "I had some money that I was going to buy a house in Brazil." And I said, "You know, I'm going to buy a house here." And then I decided, and I bought the house here. It was so easy. It was so simple, totally different what was in Brazil, probably Latin America, not a whole bunch of papers. Just in one day. And I was with that, and I went from approval, even got a mortgage because we're doing a big downpayment. So then we bought a house, and then I decide to bring the two kids to start for about six months. And I wanted to start as well. So I was like, "You know, I'm going to start English. I'm going to find something that would be even related to history or human sciences because I want to do something like that, [do] some research that I liked. And I came here for six months with the kids. They went to school. We got everything good. And then I went to the lawyer to see about the visas and everything and this process. And one of the ways that I could get to stay a little bit more if I wanted to was to get a one visa, as I had a business in Brazil, I could open a business here.

By coincidence, a very good friend of my, he was Brazilian worked in the tour [industry] also. He lived in California. And then there was when they have like, the earthquake in California, that was a big deal around that time. He lost about everything. And then he said there was a company that is hiring me to go and work in Orlando and open an office in Orlando. And I said, great, if you need to stay in my house, I have the house. It is going to be empty. You can stay there until you settle. When he came here, actually, it was not like a legit company. And he had moved here with his family and came with the problem in California. He was kind of lost and everything said, "Well, what are we going to do now?" And then we look at each other, and why we don't open our tour company here. And I said, "I don't have money, but I do have the work. I can get some money for us to start. You know, everybody, let's put it together." And that's what happened. We opened a tour operator here, me and him, and then start working and start doing well, and the kids are starting to do very well in school. I was not very happy of being here because my life in Brazil was kind of comfort, with a lot of comforts. I have nannies that take care. I have, like, you know, how it is in Latin America. And I was spending about \$600 on phone calls with my sister, and I said, "No, that's it. One year, that's it. I'm leaving."

But the kids were doing pretty well, and they were enjoying the freedom and everything. So about a year [passed] I said, "I'm not going to come back. That was the time was renewing my visa. I even left the country before it renewed. I'm not going to wait for the renew because I'm not going to come back." And then my visa was renewed, of course, everything went in place, and I came back. So from there, I decided to stay. I divorced from my husband. I stayed here just with my daughter, and I remarried with a Brazilian that had a company, with my actual husband, Fernando. He had the transportation company that at that point he used to do the work to my tour company. So I would hire his transportation. So then we start talking. He wanted to sell part of the company. At that point, I also went to work in real estate, selling businesses, which gave me a whole bunch of education. And I understand more the business side here in the US, [and] start working with the Small Business Administration, which is using a lot of other resources. So we end up being together in 2001 and I went to a work with him. One of friends saying, "You should hire Claudia. She's sold her company. She's not working in the tour industry, but I know she misses it." And then, Fernando said, "I don't have the money to pay her." But then we sat and that's okay, we kind of did the partnership that ended up in a marriage. So now we're going to be, next year, 25 years married. And we start building here and have one bus, actually [bought] the second bus. So when I joined him, we went and bought the second bus. I brought my expertise on the tour side, so hotels, tickets, putting tours together, contracts with the parks. And he had all the knowledge of the transportation. So it was a pretty good merge on the business side and also a pretty good merge in the love side.

00;23;07 - 00;23;26

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. How different besides what you just mentioned—how you merged with another company, a transportation company—how different is entrepreneurship in Brazil versus the United States from your experience?

00;23;27 - 00;30;48

CLAUDIA MENEZES: That was one of the motors that kept me here. I can tell you about Orlando. Orlando was and it is a very friendly city. It is much easier because people are willing to help you much more than actually create problems. Unfortunately, in Brazil, and this is something that is sad about it. It's a lot of bureaucracy and sometimes people create difficulties to sell you facilities. So what we thought, what I felt here, was exactly the opposite. People kind of embrace you. And I had a very good experience. As soon as I got together with Fernando and we bought our second bus, this was 2001, came September 11th. So we just bought our second bus, we just invested and then boom, everything was closed. The airport was closed. And we are basically a company [that] our market was all international, so all our clients were from Brazil, where from Mexico, where from Colombia. So what are we going to do? It was zero business and all cancellations. And then SBDC [Small Business Development Centers] came, and I said this should not be just my problem. This is everybody's problem. So we need to find a solution. So let's start looking and digging. And I came to SBDC and SBA [Small Business Administration] and they did pretty much a lot of help at that point, not just only like in the loans like the disaster loan, but also in guidance and resources, which I always tell everybody that comes here and want to start a business, look for the resources that are available. People forget to use it or just rely on "somebody told me this or somebody told me that." No, go after—I think that's my background over in the history side. I like to read everything that comes to my hand. So this is important. Stop listening and try to see more by yourself. Not because

somebody said or because you heard or because of this or that. And so I found a very useful means not just only on the government side, but also all the associations involved being members of your niche markets, like, VisitOrlando, VisitFlorida. I used to participate a lot in the school with the kids. Like, they did an international fair, and we represented Brazil, that was a success. And with that you go knowing people and you going making also your environment.

So it's very important that you participate with an open mind. I think that is immigration—there is two sides. I think we are living in a moment that people believe more what they hear than what they see, because they keep saying immigration is a problem is this and that. What about the kids that are friends with your kid in college? Most of them are immigrants. Are you seen bad in them or seeing good friends? Don't hear. Look for yourself. Go after the information. So it's the same on the business. Just don't hear people saying it is difficult or it's a problem. Go by yourself and look at it. You're going to be surprised if you really touch and experience things and how much people are willing to help you participate and how much you also have to give back. So it's just like, dammit, throw your cell phone and go talk, look to people. I think that's like this moment. And at that time, it was not that. It was much easier to navigate. You were more welcome. To be honest with you, until a couple of years ago, I never had a bad experience as an immigrant. Like, totally in the opposite, I always was feeling in a good spot because I conquered something. We did something good. So it was always respectful. Couple of years ago, then it started, people calling our office—and we have about 50 employees between drivers and staff. There are all around the world. I have Colombians, I have Chinese people, I have Brazilian people, I have El Salvador, I have American people. I have all backgrounds because we deal have a lot of international clients with a lot of different backgrounds too. So it's easy. We have even, we say one of our taglines, like “we understand, and we speak your language” So people calling to the office like I have an accent, a big one, and most of the international ones [employees], they have an accent. And people call into the office and say, “I don't want to talk to you. I want to talk to you an American people, and I say like, “hey, I'm an American.” But this was a couple of years ago was the first time this happened. It was the first time that I really felt I am an immigrant. Before that, although I was and I am an immigrant, I never felt that way. I always felt part of it. And suddenly, it was a shock when we got—and it was not one time, it was a couple of times we had this phone call saying, “I don't want to speak with anybody with an accent. I want to speak with an American person.” So damn. What's going on? What is happening? What are we living here? I am giving this an example, but I think it is a very isolated thing. So we should not be repeating this isolated things, but much more repeating and resonate the good portion of it. And tour is all about that. Tour is all about that integration. It is exactly about the history. It is the culture. It is the arts. It is the best of the best they want to see, they want to discover. If you travel, you want to discover. Sometimes you have [*inaudible*] just on your side. And as much as you have an open mind, as much is going to get knowledge as much as you're going to enjoy it.

00;30;48 - 00;31;03

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. How has GoPegasus, which is the company that you joined in 2001 or you merged with? How has that evolved in the past 24 years?

00;31;03 - 00;35;34

CLAUDIA MENEZES: First of all, the company, when Fernando started, it was one man, one van, and we were a very small company. When I joined at that point, Fernando had five vans for volume of people and one bus. And then when I joined, it was in April, one of the first things that we did was go together, sign the lease [to buy] our second bus. So then came September 11th, and we had to stop and from that point on, using all the resources, we started growing and when people ask, “what is the key of a success?” It's not just hard work, but honesty, like being transparent with your clients, your vendor, the suppliers, your team that work with you, being clear of that and use the company as a good resource. That's one of the other things I always tell with our group: the company is good, if it is good for everybody. I spend my whole day there. I want to feel good. And I'm not going to feel good if you're not feeling good. So we based it on that. And 2002 was our best year ever. At that point when we acquired five more busses and the business was growing also because, we said with all these things happening, we cannot step back, we have to step forward and then when people are like staying at home, we start visiting everybody, going after all the piece of business. And then we came up with a very interesting idea. There was no busses running in the city because everything was closed. So we decided to put our two busses to run everywhere, empty. The busses are big billboards. And people start seeing the busses in cities and then we start getting phone calls. Oh, are you guys open for business? Yes, we're open for business. So we start like, gearing to the domestic market, to the local markets, because the only bus the people were seeing in the roads were our busses. So, in one side we are moving the name and also giving a work to our drivers instead of just giving them money or something. And it was funny because the drivers would say, “No we're going to Disney. What I'm going to do in Disney? and when you arrive in the parking lot, you call me.” And I arrive in the parking lot to say, “There is nobody here. I'm going to go to Universal and they will go to Universal. They arrived there. What the hell I'm doing? Oh, no. Go back to Disney.” So on I-4 you only could see GoPegasus and also it give the impression to people that we have a whole bunch of busses. Because there are back and forth, back and forth. But actually, it was just two. And people start calling. And it was like an idea from nothing and with no expectation that in that [would] move us very big in 2002 and even Channel Six went to see what was going on. And then we started to grow always with this thing in mind, sharing not only with our team, but as much as we could give back to the community to participate in everything that we could possibly do. And today we have 30 busses. Before pandemic, when everything shut down and closed we were about 100 employees, offices here and in Miami and representation even in China and also Brazil, of course, in Colombia, Mexico. [The] pandemic was a big, big, elephant in the room. And everything was a very difficult time for the transportation because cruise ships, everything stopped. And then we came back a second, almost third year after pandemic. We are running the business back. We closed a couple of offices that I don't know if we're going to reopen like Miami or something, but we are pretty well established here. We were able also to continue the pattern because of all the good service and things that we did in the past.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You mentioned the parks. Was that always intentional to leverage that market for your company?

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CLAUDIA MENEZES: Yeah because we are not just transportation. So when I joined, we opened a contract. So we started selling tickets, booking rooms, doing the whole thing because, for the domestic market, the transportation goes towards, let's say the church wants a field trip or the government with the Department of Defense or the convention center. You just move more people or parts. When it comes to the international market that comes to a big difference that we have. So we want to come with the group, let's say a *quinceañeras* group that will flood the parks with the T-shirts. We do a lot of that, but we help them with the whole process of booking the hotel, working on the event and that comes the expertise, the language, understanding, like what they want, what a *quinceañera* is and put it all together. So we end up doing a lot of business and we are contracted for all the parks. It's all the main attractions here and everything. So and for like what you can think or not think when you talk about groups and transportation and all the groups were in any point, you're going to move for like a parking lot and the parks and what are they going to see? The busses.

00;37;10 - 00;37;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. How has your clientele changed? If it has.

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CLAUDIA MENEZES: Not change but expanded.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Expanded. Yeah. How has it expanded?

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CLAUDIA MENEZES: We started basically mainly Brazil and then to the Latin America clients like, Central America, Panama, the main markets, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina. We do a lot of Argentina. And then come September 11th, that was the wake up call that we cannot depend on just the international market. So then we expanded to the domestic market—conventions, churches, government and all of that good stuff. And then we extended to Asia with India, China, with the help of the community here. So that's an expansion because today is good here, tomorrow is good there. So you can actually fluctuate of the ups and downs of the market.

00;38;29 - 00;38;39

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Transition a little bit. In 2014, and please correct me if I'm wrong, you launched a blog titled, "PANROTAS"?

00;38;40 - 00;40;34

CLAUDIA MENEZES: PANROTAS is a magazine in Brazil. It's one of the biggest [magazines] for the tourism industry. I was always very close with them, and I ended up writing direct from Orlando. I was sending monthly [and] twice a month about all the new things to do in the city. But I try with my blog to be a little bit away of all what the bloggers say about the parks and everything, and try to pull up like the different things not so on the marketing things, let's say. So talking about more of the hidden things, a lot of food, because I love food. So if you if you take a look on some of the blogs, there was a lot of restaurants there. Actually like, getting back like, publishing a monthly back again with the pandemic, I did I stop. And again,

that goes back to my history background of writing and knowing. It's funny because the blog that I wrote about the Black Friday, what is Black Friday? So I went and dig everything about Black Friday. Black Friday—what is the meaning? It's not the shopping. So things like that that I think is out of curiosity, maybe [it is] not so popular then if I put like okay, you can buy here, cheaper thing here or cheaper thing there. But do you know why Black Friday is Black Friday?

00;40;34 - 00;40;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Share.

00;40;37 - 00;41;28

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Well there is two meanings. So first of all, the stores were in the red, like losing money. They finally got in the black. So that's one of the meanings for Black Friday. So it's the time that turn from losing money to getting money. And there is another about the riots and everything. So that had a more, how can I say a more, not so cool meaning. But basically it was more on the economic side. So it's because you turned black and you are out of the red, so that's the main thing that kept the name Black Friday.

00;41;28 - 00;41;34

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And have you gotten any reactions from or comments from your readers?

00;41;34 - 00;42;24

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Yeah, there are super positive. I never got any bad ones because I really try to be like, oh, you're going to write about this or that. How do you choose about what a restaurant to write? I choose what I write, what I like. I will not write something that I don't go here. If I don't go here, I'm not going to write. But if I go, I will write. So I try to be positive. I think we have to highlight the positive things. It's not that we have to close our eyes for what is wrong, but I think we should try to know. But you should not be your main thing. Otherwise you're going to be too negative.

00;42;24 - 00;42;35

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. Did you always have that in mind, like, "Oh, in the future I want to write a blog?" What prompted you to write?

00;42;35 - 00;44;19

CLAUDIA MENEZES: I always like the research and writing and that's again inspiration of my mother. My mother loved to read, and she was a very good writer. She loved the Amazon and the area [where] she lived. She would write about anything not just food, but every particular thing about the Amazon region. So I always thought about doing that, and I really enjoy writing. And it was a fun experience. I think it was a great opportunity to put it in, and also like to understand, people don't sometimes imagine even if you write a page with 300 words, it takes me sometimes fifteen days to put all together the research, to make sense and everything. For me again, it fits my curiosity. I really enjoy [it]. That's my goal on retirement is to write more. I have a list of blogs ready to go and that I need to develop. But when we came back from the pandemic, also, we had to, in the office, me and Fernando, we had to do things that other people used to do until we put our team back and everything. So it was a lot of work

that we have also to do. But I'm fascinated of writing [and] reading. It's my go to and actually, what is the best thing for you to travel and write about your good experience?

00;44;20 - 00;44;30

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Exactly. Tell me about your experiences, just broadly speaking, as a Brazilian businesswoman in Orlando.

00;44;31 - 00;48;09

CLAUDIA MENEZES: I've been very fortunate in this market. How can I tell you? Like I said in the beginning, because of being curious and always looking for opportunities, I was very fortunate to join people who would support. Like I said, I'm very grateful for the SBDC, Visit Orlando, the government, [and] the mayor's office. But these things happen is not just because they come and look at me and come here. No. You have to go after, and I always went after it. And of course you have a problem here and there, but I'm stubborn. I never quit. So if I see this an opportunity, I travel with this people I knew, it's like when you open a market, I travel like ten times to Mexico until I got the first client, but, you have to insist. And so being a women owned business being an immigrant, it's like I said, it was always in a positive note. I didn't have backlash to that until that experience we had a couple of years and this time around. But it was always fortunately, it was always something that is [*inaudible*] in a positive way. So I had always a good point to add to a conversation, being a woman, being a Brazilian, being a small business owner. So I think this is why this is my message to everybody—don't think everything was easy. Don't think that I didn't have many nights without sleeping, like banks or clients or downsides, upsides. But you have to look to the positive side of things and get your energies to that. Problems are always part of it. And you have to think this is part of your job. Solve the situations. It's just part of your job. It's not a problem. It's part of your job. So that's what you have to focus on. Focus on your objectives and everything that comes in between as part of your job, good or bad. So I'll be honest, being super honest with you, this community was always, always a welcoming community. And this is something that today, it's a little bit of my platform, with everybody and with every organization that I can take part of is we need to keep this sense of community and embracing things that I felt twenty five years ago. It's not the same, I'll tell you, but we have to keep insisting and keep insisting, in the schools and in the business community and in everywhere that we need each other. It doesn't matter—woman, man, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian. This is what makes Orlando a great city.

00;48;09 - 00;48;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And to that point that there's a strong Brazilian presence in Orlando today, I'm curious has always been that way since you arrived in the late 90s?

00;48;22 - 00;50;28

CLAUDIA MENEZES: No. It was not as big as it is today. There were waves. I remember there was a time that a lot of retired people would come here from Brazil because the exchange rate was favorable. So when I bought the house and everything. So the money you make in Brazil here was good. And then these people left. Then came more like the working people, that [had] desired to do anything for a better life. Now there is a lot of investors and people establishing or buying houses here. A lot comes with a sad thing that they're fleeing Brazil because of the political, not much of the political situation, but by the end, because it is safer

[here]. You cannot have a safe life in Brazil. Even my husband, Fernando, he was kind of kidnapped thirty years ago in an assault in Brazil. So leaving your place because of that, I don't think it's something that you expect. But it is today, it is a big community. You find all sorts of service. I used to joke when we went out to a Brazilian restaurant. I used to know everybody around or almost everybody. Today, I don't know most of everything. It is nice to see [the] amount of investor builders and also in the other services supermarkets who have anything from Brazil. Before I would pay to bring food. Today, no. You have most of everything in the supermarkets. You have good catering and sweets and the famous *brigadeiro* is you can easily find the *pão de queijo* [Brazilian cheese bread]. Just not much from the food of my area, but the rest of Brazil, yes. Do you know that açaí come from the north of Brazil?

00;50;28 - 00;50;29

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: No, I did not. No.

00;50;29 - 00;51;17

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Yes. It is a native plant from the area [where] I lived. I grew up eating açaí with my mother, but it's totally different the way we eat there. It is not with granola and all this junk that is terrible. But we used to drink açaí with manioc flour and with salted maybe shrimp or pork belly. It's so good. But this thing with granola, it's not the real açaí thing. Same thing with the Brazil nut. They call Brazil nut, but it is actually *castanha do Pará*. And it's all native from the state of Pará.

00;51;17 - 00;51;34

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Interesting. Somewhat relatedly, you, of course, have lived in Orlando, and have been intimately involved in its business activities. In that context, how has Orlando changed in the past 25 years?

00;51;34 - 00;56;02

CLAUDIA MENEZES: A lot. When we arrived here, the Florida Mall was so far. My work was around the International Drive and my house was in Doctor Phillips in Apopka, which was a two way road, Apopka Vineland. And then the airport was so far and, my gosh, everything was so small and there was two or three restaurants, and everything was fast food. And so people would say that I hate to eat here. Even the parks, like, I was here when they opened Animal Kingdom, Islands of Adventure, all this big growth. And it is pretty neat to see all the changes. So it was very, I would say limited in the sense more to the parks and very limited in the sense of knowledge of the other things. We have to say that a little bit of this was pushed by the tour community, start coming people from all backgrounds and everything to sustain all these attractions. And so this is I think that we saw and then just saw the number of restaurants of local food. It's amazing how many Asian restaurants we have and good Asian restaurants that we have. Brazilians are open[ing] more and more restaurants, Colombian restaurants, Mexican restaurants. So all this diversity coming, heavier and heavier, like we saw that change. So instead of like today, you can come to Orlando and not going to any of the parks. And we seeing that in our groups coming overseas. There is a lot coming to stay in Orlando. Like as you would go to New York. You go to New York, and what do you do? Not always you go to a Broadway or attraction. You just go and you go to a restaurant, you walk around or things like that. And we see a lot of our clients coming here without getting house or staying in a hotel for

a period of time, and they start enjoying all these different things, the sports, which is another good activity. I'll not going to talk about soccer yet, but it's getting there. But. Okay, let's talk about the NBA. People will come and watch it. And now we have all this cultural events, Doctor Phillips, and coming and seeing a good show, things like that. And just enjoying the city, enjoying the outskirts—going to the beach, going to the NASA. It's so many things and Orlando is a city that is heartfelt you feel good here. I keep seeing the groups and I always near the clients and doing conventions. I'm a field person. I like to see it. And it's easy. Like, people will treat you nicely. It's different when you go to another destination with Miami or even New York. People are cold. Orlando is too warm. I think it's all due to this diversity. It's like a Brazilians always eager to get more Brazilians, Colombians always eager to get more Columbus. People are proud of their heritage and that's something that we need to preserve. And sometimes I'm afraid we could lose it. We can't lose that. It's not the parks that make us different. It's not the big attractions that make us different. It's the people. Because even if you are in the parks or if you are in a restaurant or any place, people will treat you nicely and are always willing to make you feel good.

00;56;02 - 00;56;08

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. From your perspective, what challenges does Orlando face today?

00;56;08 - 00;58;09

CLAUDIA MENEZES: One of the biggest one is actually just from what I said. I think the biggest challenge is Orlando not lose its identity. As not just becoming something that is numbers or money. We need to preserve this sense of well-being that I used to feel. And I keep talking to people. People think Orlando is an easy city, it is easy to move around...sometimes...I don't get too much traffic now. But it is easy. It is easy to get information. It's easy to be welcome. I'm talking a lot about of course the tour side of it. And we need not to lose this, this attachment this willingness of service. And we can tell that this is a good heritage that we have from Disney, and all the trainings that they do on and all of that. So we need to expand that and not lose it. And sometimes I feel scared that we see that these things are going away. But this cosmopolitan feeling of like exactly the diversity that makes this willingness to serve because...who is from Orlando? You are a rare species. So everybody came here and established, and others felt good of being established here. And I feel that people is always this willingness to make the others that coming to feel the same. So that diversity that makes this willingness and that's we cannot lose. And that's for me, the biggest challenge that Orlando has is to grow without losing the small touch.

00;58;09 - 00;58;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Well said. And on the flip side, in what ways do you think Orlando will change in, let's say, the next 25 years? What are some of your predictions?

00;58;21 - 00;01;00;16

CLAUDIA MENEZES: That's a tough question. I don't know if I have thought much about that. We can see a lot of big investments coming, more parks, more this and more that, a lot of infrastructure. I know that people will tell, "this is all fault of the tourist industry." No, this is the good part of the tourism industry. But we have to adapt to what the tourism industry is

bringing to us. And somebody one day, one time said like, "if wasn't about all the attractions, investment parks and all of that, Orlando would be like Lakeland." Not saying anything bad about Lakeland, but that's the truth. So we have just to manage and be on top of that good infrastructure is in place to support that growth. So that growth is not bad. The tourists not bad. What we have to be aware if our infrastructure is going the same pace. For one side, I think, yes. But in the other side it comes back again. It's not just roads or buildings. We need to take care of our population. We need to well-educate our population in that sense. We need to start with the kids for them to understand the importance, because tourism is diversity, tourism is the congregation of cultures, of everything. So this is the best message Orlando has to tell the world. And that's what we need to preserve. We need to grow and preserve that message.

01;00;16 - 01;00;27

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: In what ways has your Brazilian heritage influence your perspective on life generally and living in Orlando specifically?

01;00;27 - 01;02;22

CLAUDIA MENEZES: You probably know other Brazilians. And, you know, Brazilians love to talk. They love to feed you. They always like to embrace you. Brazil is a very welcoming place in that sense. Brazilians like, by I don't know, education and everything, they embrace people. And I think that helps to me to put in that position of taking care as much as possible and seeing the importance of having an open mind and an open heart and share with the people the best [of] what you have and try to accommodate and understand. I'll give you a practical example. Sometimes, and I'm not saying anything bad about anybody, but if you don't say the right words for, let's say, an English speaking person, they will not understand. Like [this] situation, let me tell you. Double-o-zero. The spy. What is the double zero? It's 007. Right. Double 007. But one time I went to a movie and my daughter was watching that movie. Like I translate 007 and nobody couldn't tell me where it is. There's no movie 007, no, because then I discovered it was double o seven. So I'm saying the same thing. And I think in that sense, Brazilians would stop everything to try to help you more in terms of understanding and make you understood. This happened just when I arrived here, and I still laugh till today that it's not 007. It's double o seven.

01;02;22 - 01;02;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: If someone is listening to this recording 50 or 100 years from now, what would you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

01;02;33 - 01;03;26

CLAUDIA MENEZES: This was a life changing for me coming to Orlando and living in Orlando, working in Orlando. And I really hope that, 100 years from now, you could feel the same feeling I had when I was here. The same good feeling, the same well-being, and I still hope that in 100 years, Orlando is even more multicultural, that you can walk around and see so many differences that you don't even want to travel anywhere in the world, you'd just want to stay here because you're going to have the best food for all around the world, you can talk and see things from all around the world, and it continues to be this welcome place that it is today.

01;03;26 - 01;03;31

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Thank you so much, Claudia. I really appreciate you taking some time out of your day to share your life story. Thank you.

01;03;31 - 01;03;33

CLAUDIA MENEZES: Thank you.