(Dr. Roy Flores) Hello. My name is Roy Flores. Welcome to Conversations with the Chancellor. My guest today is Ernesto Portillo, Jr., and he has long family roots in Tucson, Arizona. We'll, of course, explore that and then talk a little bit about him and his interests. Welcome.

(Portillo) Chancellor Flores, it's good to be here with you. Thank you.

(Dr. Flores) Now you're a fourth-, fifth-, sixth-generation Tucsonan, or how does that work?

(Portillo) Well, it depends on how you, [chucking] when you start counting. I'm either second or third, or even there was an interruption. I have a great, great grandfather, was it two greats or three greats, who came to Tucson from Argentina, through Sonora, in the 1850s, there about.

(Dr. Flores) Okay that's...

(Portillo) And then he returned to Sonora. So there's an interruption there. But my mother was born here, and my father's from Chihuahua, Mexico.

(Dr. Flores) Okay.

(Portillo) And my maternal grandparents came to the United States in the 1920s and settled in Tucson soon after.

(Dr. Flores) Well, 1920s is almost 100 years ago.

(Portillo) It is.

(Dr. Flores) Eighteen fifties is what, 170 years ago.

(Portillo) It's pre-U.S. acquisition.

(Dr. Flores) That's true, that's absolutely true. So what keeps you occupied these days?

(Portillo) Well, I'm a columnist with the Arizona Daily Star. I'm also editor of La Estrella de Tucson, the Spanish-language weekly publication of the Arizona Daily Star. That in itself keeps me very, very busy. But also involved in the community...

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) And my church and other activities.

(Dr. Flores) Now, I enjoy, quite honestly, I've always enjoyed reading your columns.
(Portillo) Thank you.

(Dr. Flores) How do you pick the subject matter? Does it pick you or?

(Portillo) It picks me often, it picks me often. I like to say that I just listen. I listen to people’s conversations. I look around me-- what is new, what is different. But often, people will call me and suggest a story idea to me. To be quite honest, sometimes they may be good story ideas, but they don't hit me at the moment.

(Dr. Flores) Sure, sure.

(Portillo) A column recently for example, a woman called me, asked me to write a story about her uncle who had passed away. And I reluctantly told her I don't really like to write about people who have passed away, because then more people will call me and ask me to write about their loved ones. And I only write once a week.

(Dr. Flores) Sure, of course, right.

(Portillo) But I slept on it. And when I woke the next day, I thought why not write a story, because it’s the end of the year, and we spend time in journalism writing about what happened in the year.

(Dr. Flores) Yeah, right.

(Portillo) Who passed away. And here is an example of a born and raised Tucsonan, say, who passed away anonymously. And so why not? And there are many people like him who do not get the end of the year recognition.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) So I wrote a story about him, Mike Rodriguez. But again, people come to me...

(Dr. Flores) Yeah, I read that.

(Portillo) I’m talking to people, or just in my everyday life I just, again, grab onto something and think this might make a good story.

(Dr. Flores) What things about Tucson don’t people know? You know, folks can, if you listen to the Chamber of Commerce they can recite statistics on economic activity, and you know who the celebrities are, who the star athletes are, what potholes haven't been fixed. But what it is about Tucson that the average person doesn't know that you find quite compelling?

(Portillo) History.

(Dr. Flores) Okay.

(Portillo) Tucson's history. Many people, I'm going to be generous here, I suspect many people know that it was founded by Spanish explorers.
(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) Other than that, I don't think people know much more about Tucson. That it is one of the, it is one of the longest established, inhabited areas in the present United States even preceding Spanish Colonial times.

(Dr. Flores) By much, yes.

(Portillo) Indigenous people occupied this area. And if you look around Tucson, of course, it's a very harsh area, desert area.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) And you think how could people live here? But people have been living here for thousands of years. So, but again, history; people don't know about the development of Tucson, how people came, when they came, why they came, and when they came, what did they do here? How did they develop? How did the neighborhoods develop? How did businesses develop and so forth? So, that's what fascinates me, the history of Tucson.

(Dr. Flores) Well, I'm sure it's compelling, and my undergraduate major was in history and social science, so I would find that very interesting. Is it because the people who are, who move here— and it's fair to say that a large proportion of the population has shorter roots. Either they or their parents moved...

(Portillo) Well, sure. I mean, understandably someone who comes from outside of Tucson and didn't, of course didn't grow up here...

(Dr. Flores) Right.

(Portillo) ...doesn't have much of a historical view of Tucson. But I would also say that people who are born here also don't have a historical view of Tucson. And part of it is it's not taught in schools; it's presented very little in the media. Currently, we at The Arizona Daily Star and other media outlets are celebrating the state's centennial.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) So we are focusing a little bit more on local and statewide history. In The Arizona Daily Star, everyday there's a reprint of a story that appeared in 1912. And they're fascinating stories about Tucson primarily, southern Arizona. But other than that, we really don't get much history taught to us. And so, in a way, I feel it's incumbent upon me as a journalist, because much of my work I purposely devote to exploring Tucson's history through individuals primarily to get a better sense of who we are, where we came from.

(Dr. Flores) Have we missed an opportunity as a city or and as a county in not developing this, what could be a historical treasure?

(Portillo) Oh, don't get me started! [chuckling]Yes, it's been a sad history of how Tucson has ignored its history and just rushed to pave over it and build something new. And this is nothing recent. I mean, you
look at Tucson's history, and you look at the development of Tucson for example. There-- it's story after story of certain interests, let's call them “Tucson boosters”, who want Tucson to be this wonderful resplendent community. And, but in their view, the old Tucson has to be done away with, and a new Tucson has to be built. And so there has, again, there has been this history of doing away with the old.

And currently as we are in discussion and bewilderment over Rio Nuevo, we have lost that opportunity. In 1999, the voters approved this Rio Nuevo plan and district. And the centerpiece of that plan was to build on the west side of the Santa Cruz River along Congress, a complex. I don't want to say complex, but a campus of buildings and gardens that were, that would be dedicated to Tucson's past. And that hasn't been done, although there's still an effort to keep that idea and dream alive.

(Dr. Flores) Yeah, I know a little bit about regional economic development. In fact, my doctorate's in economics, and I concentrated on that and monetary theory, kind of different ends of the economic spectrum. But the, an observation that I make on occasion that I think rings true is that people will visit and live in an area that has some charm. And if you look at the places that attract people...

(Portillo) Right.

(Dr. Flores) ...it's not going to new shopping center. They go there because there's something unique about that particular location.

(Portillo) They go there, but they don't live there.

(Dr. Flores) Precisely.

(Portillo) Right. Whereas if you had these historical centers that you're referring to-- I lived in San Diego, and there's Old Town, and that is an economic engine for [inaudible].

(Dr. Flores) Precisely, you have to have people live there.

(Portillo) Albuquerque has its Old Town.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) Tucson could have had that with the downtown barrios. The barrios, part of it is still there, of course, today.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) And it is, and it's an expensive place to live. Property values there are very high because of its unique characteristics, of its antiquity, of its charm. And in hindsight, Tucson could have done something much like other communities. But yes, history is an economic engine. People want to visit and learn about the past. Williamsburg, Virginia...

(Dr. Flores) It's a great example, yeah.

(Portillo) The North End of Boston. There is so much that other communities have done with their history, and Tucson, unfortunately, has done very little.
(Dr. Flores) Well, again, I don't envy people who are the policy makers trying to make policy to refashion and refocus the efforts of a particular city or a particular region, but, uh, it’s not about political decisions or special interest. You really have to have a vision that's compelling and a vision that will be exciting to people. Not only those who live there, but also people who would want to see what's going on and take advantage of that. We don't have resplendent ocean views and all that kind of stuff, but we have a very...

(Portillo) We have some great desert views.

(Dr. Flores) Very...

(Portillo) And the views of the mountains.

(Dr. Flores) Absolutely! We have the equivalent, and we just haven't gotten the word, the word out that the folks. But anyway, moving on from that particular topic. So the gap you see is that we don't appreciate, we...

(Portillo) We as a community, I...

(Dr. Flores) ...don't really appreciate our history, how it's anchored and how that's, how that's fashioned who we are today.

(Portillo) No, we're in a hurry to move on.

(Dr. Flores) Right.

(Portillo) And I'm not suggesting that we should just re-, how should I say it, reconstruct what we had and go back to these good old days.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) No, but there, a number of buildings have been taken down, and there's very little of what Tucson used to look like, and there are very little efforts to restore some of that. Downtown the old Walgreens building which the U of A has taken over. They, we worked and uncovered the, an earlier façade, and it looks lovely. But it's just one building.

(Dr. Flores) Sure. You mentioned the U of A, and of course we're, I'm an educator, and we're here at Pima Community College. What's changed about education, and what do you see that's missing in your observation?

(Portillo) Relative to Tucson?

(Dr. Flores) Or just generally, Arizona or Tucson or the nation.

(Portillo) Well, one immediate response is the cost, you know, the cost has become very high for many families, and that has become a huge barrier. I think also education has changed, and it has become more politicized.
(Dr. Flores) Yes. [chuckles]

(Portillo) I believe. It is...

(Dr. Flores) Amen to that.

(Portillo) From, from, you know, K-12 through the university college levels, it's more political. And I'm not saying whose, I won't even go the-- whose fault is it. It just has become political-- it's difficult to be, to work in that environment.

(Dr. Flores) It is, and I think that it, it's a shame that it has. But I also find that more of society's becoming political, that people have, have chosen sides, and there's no talking.

(Portillo) There is more polarization, I agree.

(Dr. Flores) Yeah, it's a, and that seems to be almost, almost everywhere.

(Portillo) But on the other hand, education's also become more, well, I said earlier that there is that barrier of cost. It has also become more accessible in many, in more ways than before. Technology for example...

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) ...has opened up educational avenues to people who may not be able to, would not have been able to have access to it. There are more campuses. That in itself is a great thing. Growing up in Tucson, I remember when Pima College came to be on the west side, on Anklam. And I lived on the west side, still do, and it was a great thing. Tucson's getting a community college! And many people didn't know what a community college was. You know, it was either high school or...

(Dr. Flores) And that's still the case.

(Portillo) Well, that may be true.

(Dr. Flores) You know, community colleges are evolving obviously. What I find is that there's less participation by individuals and family in the education process. It, this, my personal experience is quite common, the same as millions of others. My parents themselves were not educated, but they were interested in how I was doing in school and making sure that I did my part, and they were very supportive of their local, local high school. And I find that's a little, there's more of a barrier, or they don't feel as connected to the education process as they did a generation or two ago.

(Portillo) I agree. When my daughters were in public schools here, I was very involved, but I was, I felt I was one of a handful of parents...

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) ...who were involved, and the majority of parents were not. And part of that has to do, yes they're busy, they're working maybe two jobs.
(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) But also there is disinterest among, unfortunately, among many parents I believe. And students, their children are left alone. And while the schools do as best they can with what they have, it's not enough, because it is a partnership, the community and the educational institutions, the parents and the teacher and the principal. Once that's broken, again in my opinion, many things become broken in our society.

(Dr. Flores) Yeah that's, that particular piece has many aspects to it. It, with respect to your profession, changing topics again, the journalism, can we make the case to have Pima students major in journalism? Why bother? I mean, newspapers are laying people off. It's an industry, if we think of it as an industry...

(Portillo) Right.

(Dr. Flores) If an industry is shrinking, do you counsel your son or daughter to go into something that's going out of business?

(Portillo) No, you counsel your son or daughter to change with the evolution of that industry. When horse and buggy were going out and cars were coming in, we didn't, parents then didn't tell your children...

(Dr. Flores) Walk, walk to the-- right.

(Portillo) You know, don't, to walk and forget about that new fangled thing that's coming out that's not going to work.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) Likewise, there is still a need for writers. There is still a need for producers; we like to call them “content producers”.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) There's a still a need to get information out to the public. That is what's changing. Yes, newspapers are changing; electronic media is undergoing rapid change. And so there are still opportunities there. How that evolves and how that shakes out remains to be seen. There will not be these large metropolitan daily newspapers. They're too costly to operate. So the operations will be smaller and slimmer.

(Dr. Flores) More boutique you think?

(Portillo) Well maybe, maybe more boutique, more focused on a customer, a market share, a market if you will, a unique customer. But again, there's still information that needs to get out there. So no, don't counsel your children not to get into journalism, just to be wise and to learn the various ways of delivering information through spoken word, through television, through radio.

(Dr. Flores) Videos?
(Portillo) Videos, of course videos. And, and everything that is changing with the internet.

(Dr. Flores) You know one of the things I was thinking about during my hiatus, the-- for the audience, I was out for about six weeks because I had, I had bypass surgery. But anyway, in my musings while I had, when I had time, I was thinking that perhaps in our own programs, in our occupational programs we teach people as best we can state of the art techniques in whatever trade or profession that is. But we're not good at teaching them the economics of it and the evolution or possible paths that particular industry might take.

In yours, it's heavily technologically driven, and it always has been technologically sophisticated in different eras, but now, now even more so with digital technology. And the same is true in every other industry. Will it be the case, and I'm just speculating, I'm sure this one won't be, but to give that example, where you're going to provide your services on a, have a different relationship with an employer so that you're one of, you're a provider of a particular service, whether you're an auto mechanic or air frame mechanic. How much of that industry is going to change as far as a relationship between the employer and employee?

(Portillo) That's an interesting question. I hadn't really, I haven't pondered that.

(Dr. Flores) And we, we don't explore that. We don't explore that, and I think, I think we should as part of a training. And say, you need to tune into these other possibilities, because we have seen in white collar occupations where that relationship has changed dramatically.

(Portillo) True.

(Dr. Flores) They, there's cases after case, and you might have even written about it, and surely your paper has, where employer goes to the employee and says, “I'm going to lay you off.”

(Portillo) Right.

(Dr. Flores) But I want you to contract with the firm.

(Portillo) Right.

(Dr. Flores) So the relationship changes, and the income might even go up.

(Portillo) Could or, or...

(Dr. Flores) As long as I don't have to pay the fringe benefits. And if...

(Portillo) Right.

(Dr. Flores) It may be more cost effective for the employer.

(Portillo) And then I can find other employers so to speak...

(Dr. Flores) Precisely.
(Portillo) We call it “freelancing”. [laughs]

(Dr. Flores) Oh, you call it freelancing in your industry; so you're familiar with that. I'm thinking that that might be the case also in some of the occupational areas; there might be more and more of that. And we haven't explored that.

(Portillo) Yeah. Nursing for example, a lot of contract nurses out there that go from place to place, business to business, hospital to hospital.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) And so you're probably onto something. And I suspect journalism will follow suit in some ways.

(Dr. Flores) You, in journalism, you have people who are superstars and folks that consequently they're well known and so on, and then you have your work-a-day person that's...

(Portillo) That would be me.

[both chucking]

(Dr. Flores) Making an honorable living. The gap in terms of income is enormous is it not?

(Portillo) I, that's what I read in the newspaper. [both laughing] That's what they tell me.

(Dr. Flores) Yes, right. So, what is a realistic expectation? Do people spend a lot of time thinking they're going to be the next Walter Cronkite or the next superstar that's going to get these ten million bucks a year or whatever they make?

(Portillo) Oh I, I've been in journalism for 30 years. I, in my conversations with my co-workers in three newspapers in three states, I've never had a conversation like that-- who's going to be the next superstar?

(Dr. Flores) Bernstein.

(Portillo) Woodward and Bernstein. We're journalists, we work...

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) We enjoy the work that we do.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) We, yes we think about maybe going to a bigger newspaper.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.
Earning more money. But that, those conversations are gone now. Today, realistically, conversation is, “I hope we have a job.” [both laughing] Because sadly newspapers, again as we discussed...

Sure they’re evolving.

Are evolving and shrinking. And we're stable at The Daily Star, and we've gone through some hard times as other organizations have gone through.

Sure. Well, and continue to go through.

But I like to think that a good journalist with those skills of writing and communicating will find a job almost anywhere.

Well, take, excuse me, talk, talk with our, to our students right now and tell them what are the most important things they need to concentrate on in school in order to be successful in your profession or any other profession?

Write and write and write and read and read and read. It sounds simplistic, but I think if you get the fundamentals of writing down, writing clearly and directly and reading an array of subject matter so that you're knowledgeable in many areas, get that down, and it takes you, it takes you places. Maybe not necessarily journalism, but it takes you, it takes you into other areas of politics...

Sure.

...of business, of community work, working abroad. And, but again, it's just learn to write, and write well.

Well, it reminds me of advice I got from someone whose opinion I really admire. He said the best determinate of who the best brain surgeon is is not the grades or the college where they graduated from, it's time on task. So the more you do something, whether it's play basketball or baseball or anything else, you have to just do it and do it, and that, that leads to improvement.

Right.

So your suggestion of just write.

Just write.

How about the editing? I don't mind writing, but I'm not sure about editing.

Neither am I. [laughs]

Any hints about, do you have to set aside some time after you write and then go back to the editing?

Oh, oh sure you do. You have to rework what the, what you've written in the first draft. And, and if you have time, rewrite it again a second time or third time.
(Dr. Flores) Sure. Now, do you impose on your many friends to take a look at it?

(Portillo) No, not in the work that I do at the paper.

(Dr. Flores) Right.

(Portillo) I look at it, and then there's an editor, and then there's the second editor.

(Dr. Flores) Okay, so you already have an editor; that mechanism's is already built in.

(Portillo) Yes. But if I did, if I do personal writing, sure, I would have some friends, friends look at it.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) And that happens often.

(Dr. Flores) Well I have, I have the luxury of asking staff to completely rewrite or to edit and do that kind of thing. But I find that the editing part for me if I have to do something like that is only possible if I set it aside for a while. I can't just write and then rewrite. I simply can't do that.

Well, we have about a minute, a minute left, and what is it about, about the area that you want all of us to focus on in the next year? Is there any one thing that you think is important enough for us to spend some time looking at? I'm sure reading your articles...

(Portillo) Community involvement.

(Dr. Flores) Okay.

(Portillo) Getting involved with your neighborhood, getting involved in an organization whether it be a church, a school, a nonprofit.

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) In these, in these, in this age of austerity as government services are curtailed, we need, as individuals and as a community, we need to pick it up and just and do more, whether it's working with homeless...

(Dr. Flores) Sure.

(Portillo) Whether it's just going out and cleaning the streets, sweeping it up, or pulling some weeds out from the median.

(Dr. Flores) Or reading to a child or...

(Portillo) Or reading to a child, but, or going to the school and working. Just more community involvement.
(Dr. Flores) Excellent. Well, thank you so much for stopping by.

(Portillo) Well, thanks for having me over.

(Dr. Flores) I've enjoyed the chat and...

(Portillo) Likewise.

(Dr. Flores) Look forward to reading more of your articles.

(Portillo) Thank you.

(Dr. Flores) Thanks.

[music]