

Michael Huerta, a Hispanic American, discusses his career as a production worker and UAW member at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI

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5 Doug Rademacher: This is the Lansing Fisher Body Historical Team. Today is May 17, 2006.
6 The time is approximately 9:30 a.m., and we are at the UAW Local 602
7 Frank Dryer Greenhouse. First, we will introduce the team.
8
9 John Fedewa: John Fedewa.
10
11 Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith.
12
13 Cheryl McCoy: Cheryl McCoy.
14
15 Doug Rademacher: And I'm Doug Rademacher. Today, we are interviewing Mike Huerta.
16 [0:24] Will you please state your name and spell it for us?
17
18 Michael Huerta: Michael Huerta. Last name is spelled H U E R T A.
19
20 Doug Rademacher: [0:32] And what is your address?
21
22 Michael Huerta: Uh, 607 Madison in Perry, Michigan.
23
24 Doug Rademacher: [0:36] Are you married?
25
26 Michael Huerta: I am. Recently married.
27
28 Doug Rademacher: [0:39] And do you have any children?
29
30 Michael Huerta: I found out last night we got one on the way.
31
32 Doug Rademacher: Congratulations.
33
34 Michael Huerta: Thank you.
35
36 Doug Rademacher: [0:46] Uh, where were you born and raised?
37
38 Michael Huerta: Saginaw, Michigan.
39
40 Doug Rademacher: [0:51] Uh, what is your education level?
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42 Michael Huerta: Uh, I went to finish high school in Saginaw in '88 and have been
43 [laughter] goin' to college on and off for 18 years now. Uh, finished a –
44 went through a labor studies program at Michigan State that I really, really
45 enjoyed. Finished that. It's a certificate program, it's not an associate's,
46 but, uh, I finished that and, um, 'bout 90 percent done with an associate's
47 at LCC right now.

1
2 Doug Rademacher: [1:20] Were you in the military?
3
4 Michael Huerta: I have not been in the military, nope.
5
6 Doug Rademacher: [1:25] Mike, what did your parents do for a living?
7
8 Michael Huerta: Uh, my father – my biological father retired from Grey Iron in Saginaw,
9 and my stepfather retired from Buick City in Flint, and my mom, uh, came
10 to the country, uh, worked in – as a migrant worker for years. And, uh,
11 while, uh, soon as my biological father went to Grey Iron, she stopped
12 doing that and raised seven children.
13
14 Doug Rademacher: Wonderful.
15
16 Michael Huerta: Mm-hm.
17
18 Doug Rademacher: [1:56] What did you do before you hired into Fisher body?
19
20 Michael Huerta: Uh, immediately before I hired in, I was a chef. I was a chef in
21 Kalamazoo, Michigan for about 10 years.
22
23 Doug Rademacher: [2:08] Why did you hire in to Fisher Body?
24
25 Michael Huerta: I actually took a pay cut to come to – come to GM, but, uh, I didn't have
26 any benefits. And, uh, I didn't like that. Uh, and it had been forever since
27 I had a chance to go to a doctor or a dentist. And I had a cracked tooth,
28 and it hurt, uh, and I needed the benefits, so I came to GM for that.
29
30 Doug Rademacher: [2:31] When did you hire in to Fisher Body?
31
32 Michael Huerta: Uh, July 28, 1997.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: [2:40] And can you tell me how did you know they were hiring at Fisher?
35
36 Michael Huerta: Probably around 1994 or 5, I think it might've been '95, uh, my brother
37 [throat clearing] told me he put my name in to General Motors. And, uh,
38 and he said, you know, "Well, they're doin' a lottery-style thing for family
39 members. They, they might call you for an interview." And, uh, to tell
40 you the truth, I'd for-, completely forgotten about it.
41
42 Uh, they called me about two years later and asked me to come in and, uh,
43 take a test or a – I can't remember exactly what the first step was, but, uh, I
44 came in thinking that I probably wouldn't be selected anyway. And two
45 months later, they came and asked me to take the physical. And I did that
46 and figured, once again, I'd heard stories [throat clearing] there're

1 sometimes lapses between the – between that and the time of hire. But,
2 uh, they called me a month later and asked me to come, come and work.
3 So, uh, it happened all pretty fast comparatively to a lot of peoples' stories.
4

5Doug Rademacher: [3:42] Well, that's great. I was just going to ask you do you have any
6 other family members that worked at Fisher. Now, you said your brother
7 worked there. Uh, wanna share his name and did you have any other
8 family members working there?
9

10Michael Huerta: My brother, Carlo, worked there for t-, uh, well, he worked at GM for a
11 total of 28 years now. But, uh, he's, he was started at Grey Iron in
12 Saginaw. And, uh, he moved, I think, to one other plant. I can't remember
13 where it was, but then he came to Fisher after that. And, uh, he's been
14 there ever since, and he's gonna go out to the new plant. Uh, no other
15 family, uh, here in Lansing that work at GM. Just the, uh, uh, my nephew
16 works in a GM facility in South Bend. He's a – in South Bend, Indiana.
17 He's a shop chairman of his local down there.
18

19Doug Rademacher: [4:26] Oh. Wonderful. How old were you when you hired in to the plant?
20

21Michael Huerta: I was 26 when I hired in.
22

23Doug Rademacher: [4:36] What shift and department did you hire into?
24

25Michael Huerta: I hired in to first shift, uh, the [C-line 4:41]. I think it was called Area 50
26 in trim back then on first shift. Uh, [Carol 4:48] Hill was my b-, first boss.
27

28Doug Rademacher: [4:51] Had you ever been in an assembly plant before that?
29

30Michael Huerta: In?
31

32Doug Rademacher: Had you ever been in an assembly plant or...
33

34Michael Huerta: I had been on a tour of, uh, Saginaw Steering Gear before. Uh, Grey Iron
35 didn't let us go in there, uh, like family members and stuff just to – they
36 wouldn't let you, let you in 'cause it was pretty dangerous, uh, back then
37 when my dad was workin' there. So we didn't get a chance to go into the
38 foundry. I don't know if I'd a wanted go into the foundry, but, uh, I went
39 on a tour of, uh, Steering Gear when I was young, when I was a little kid
40 in school.
41

42Doug Rademacher: [5:24] Okay I want to know would you share with us your first day and
43 what it was like to walk into the facility, to be approached by
44 management, union, and your first vision of the assembly line?
45

1 Michael Huerta: The first day I, uh, I worked at GM, we went to, uh, we did like a class, a
2 classroom setting. It was over at an old training facility on Saginaw Street
3 here in Lansing. Uh, w-, they basically just told us what we were gonna
4 experience and whatnot. There was a, a strike goin' on at the time that we
5 got hired, which, uh, it was only a week-long strike. I can't remember
6 what was goin' on or we were out of parts. It was a – it might've been a
7 Delphi shutdown. It was in, uh, I can't – I can't remember exactly what
8 was goin' on, but there was nothin' goin' on in the plant. No, no operations
9 were functioning.

10
11 So we came into it a complete standst-, you know, we walked through the
12 plant and nothing was moving. And it was kinda strange, dimly lit, very
13 dimly lit. To see all those cars sitting there for the first time, you know,
14 walkin' through in a, a, a vehicle assembly plant, not moving, nobody
15 around, dimly lit. Uh, it was very strange. It – night and day compared to
16 when you walk in there and the rustle and bustle and the loud noise of the
17 – of normal operations are actually goin'.

18
19 Doug Rademacher: Okay. [6:51] And s-, the people were on layoff then; they weren't really
20 on strike?

21
22 Michael Huerta: I think that...

23
24 Doug Rademacher: 'Cause you didn't cross a picket line?

25
26 Michael Huerta: No. Absolutely not. No, no. It was, it was – we were out of parts is what
27 it was. So we couldn't operate. I think it was a layoff, yeah. I don't think
28 they'd hire during that – if, if we were on strike here.

29
30 Doug Rademacher: [7:06] Well, you'd met your supposed boss but you didn't have a job yet?
31 Can you tell me the first day you walked in and were given a job? And
32 describe that first day for us.

33
34 Michael Huerta: I was nervous. My brother told me [laughing], uh, my first day, my
35 brother told me, who had worked there for a long time, and I don't know if
36 things were different or, or not, but he said, uh, during your first 90 days,
37 you do everything they tell you to do 'cause, 'cause they can fire you for
38 no reason at all. And he said, uh, he said be real careful and just, uh,
39 follow the rules and, you know, be, be on time and all that type of stuff.
40 And I was driving back and forth from Kalamazoo to be on first shift.
41 And, uh, and I was still workin' at the restaurant that I worked at
42 previously just in case things didn't work out. Uh, on weekends, I was
43 workin' at the restaurant. So I'd, I'd drive to be there at, uh, I think the line
44 started at 7:00, 6:48 or something like that in the morning, and I had to
45 drive from Kalamazoo.

46

1 Uh, I walked in. We got a very, very brief tour, and things were running
2 at that point. And it was, uh, like [throat clearing] I said, the first time I
3 walked in the plant, [throat clearing] nothing was running. And when we
4 walked in and it was running, I couldn't believe how loud it was. Uh, it, it
5 really shocked me how much noise everything makes in there. It's kinda
6 overwhelming when you first walk in. Kinda lookin' around tryin' to make
7 sure you don't get hit by anything runnin' around ya 'cause most, most
8 things, you know, aren't gonna stop for, for you. You have to – you have
9 to make sure you don't get, get in the – get in their way.

10

11 Uh, we walked up to a boss and, uh, her name was [Carol] Hill. I had no
12 idea [coughing] who she was. And, uh, she put me on a job immediately
13 coverin', uh to relieve someone who was summer help. And, uh, he ended
14 up later being a – being a foreman in there. Uh, his name was Ben. I can't
15 remember his last name, but he, he was a pretty nice guy. He was a
16 college kid at that point.

17

18 And, uh, I – he trained me and, uh, I took over and I remember the first
19 week, I ended up, uh, not – listening to my brother's paranoia, taping my
20 fingers 'cause they were all – they had blisters on'm from doin' the job that
21 I was doin' so I wouldn't have to go to medical. And I was worried about
22 getting' fired. [laughter] Uh, so I, so I, uh, I taped my hands up and, and
23 shut up and put my gloves on so no one could see it before the line started
24 and, and was all, uh, was very paranoid about, about getting' let go early.

25

26 Doug Rademacher: [9:31] And what was that first job that you did?

27

28 Michael Huerta: I was, uh, putting rocker panels on, which is a piece that goes right in the –
29 right in the, uh, very bottom of the side of the car. It was just – it's a
30 plastic molding piece. [Ground effects 9:48] lookin' piece.

31

32 Doug Rademacher: [9:51] And was that difficult to put on or what tools did you have to do –
33 to put that on? What was the process?

34

35 Michael Huerta: It was a – you took a big, uh, piece of molding and you clipped it into the,
36 uh [sneezing], [folded 10:05] piece of a – you pulled a piece of a plastic
37 off of, off of the back of the molding and then it – that revealed a
38 adhesive, and then you'd put it in the car. It would click in with plastic,
39 uh, clips. And then you'd put, uh, rubber grommets underneath it so that
40 water couldn't leak inside of it. And the rubber grommets, you had a tool,
41 uh, that was plastic, almost, uh, I don't know what you'd call it. Uh, you,
42 you'd fit the rubber grommet on the end of the plastic tool and then push
43 up with the, with the tool rather than use your thumb or your finger, but it
44 was 100 times easier to do – use your finger, uh, to snap it in. But by the
45 end of the day after doing, uh, six on each car, your hands were numb
46 from poppin' it in with your, with your thumb or your fingers.

1
2 Uh, but naturally, being a new hire and not knowin' what I was doin', I
3 decided to do it with my hands 'cause it was so much quicker and easier,
4 but by the end of the day, like I said, I had blisters all over my hands.
5
6 Doug Rademacher: [11:07] And why would you wanna be quicker? What...
7
8 Michael Huerta: I couldn't keep up.
9
10 Doug Rademacher: ...describe, describe the, uh, so what couldn't you keep up with? What was
11 happening around you?
12
13 Michael Huerta: The, the – well, when I got trained, uh, I wanted to, you know, make a
14 good impression or whatever. Uh, bright-eyed, young, new hire thinking,
15 uh, thinking that I could – I'd get fired if I didn't keep up right off the bat
16 and, you know, I wanted [inaudible 11:29]. My brother was like, "Oh, this
17 is a good job. You gotta, you gotta, you know – don't mess up. And, you
18 know, don't, don't go down to medical," stuff like that unless you really
19 get hurt.
20
21 So I, I, uh, hopped on the job. Did it really fast and was tryin' to keep up
22 with guy who had been there, I found out later, 32 years doin' the job
23 [laughter]. So he, he knew what he was doin' and he, he did it pretty well.
24 And, uh, he, he later on, you know, "Okay, you don't need to – cut that
25 out. You can't be doin' that. You're gonna end up hurtin' your hand."
26 And, you know, once, once I was there for more than a day or two, he
27 realized, uh, I'd probably be there for at least a month, so he started tellin'
28 me you're gonna really end up hurtin' your shoulder doin' it that way.
29
30 And I was, I was doin' these shortcuts to try to keep up with the line, and,
31 uh, the line moves pretty quick. When, you know, you first see it, it
32 doesn't seem to be goin' that fast, but when you're trying' to do a job every
33 50, 56 seconds I think it was, I think 53 seconds at that point, uh, they,
34 they go by pretty quick. And that next car sometimes comes way, way too
35 early. And, uh, so you end up runnin', runnin' up and down the line tryin'
36 to get caught up. And, uh, and that's, that's what I did for my – struggled
37 with it for about the first week and a half, two weeks in the – and my
38 partner ended up givin' me some good advice and, you know, "Hey, do it
39 this way. Slow down and relax. The harder you try, more often the worse
40 you're gonna end up bein'. So slow down and just relax and pace
41 yourself."
42
43 Doug Rademacher: [12:59] What did you – obviously, you spoke of your, your partner.
44 That'd be the person across from ya. What about the people in front and
45 behind you? Did they work with you? Did they help you? Were you on
46 your own? What was the feeling there?

1
2 Michael Huerta: Uh, the, the – we were in a – the car was a little bit raised, so you couldn't
3 really see the people across from you that well. My partner was the guy
4 next to me. Uh, he, uh, it was an every other car job. So by the t-, it took
5 that long to do each car. You know, it was two people on the job, so I'd do
6 one, my partner would do the next one. And we'd have to, you know, go
7 back and start over and move on to the next vehicle. The guys across the
8 line, uh, you couldn't really see. The car was at your head, like right at
9 your head, so you'd put the rocker panel on at shoulder height, so we, we
10 could see 'em between cars and stuff, but they were usually workin' on the
11 next car. So at breaks were the only time you could really, you know, talk
12 to them a whole lot or, or during breakdowns.
13
14 But, uh, the guy next to me, my TC was great. Uh, I can't remember his
15 last name, but his, his name was Bill. He was, uh, they treated me really,
16 really nice. They were, you know, apparently remembering when they
17 came in. You know, these are first shifters who had been there a long,
18 long time.
19
20 Doug Rademacher: [14:15] What is a TC?
21
22 Michael Huerta: A T-, uh...
23
24 Jerri Smith: Team coordinator?
25
26 Michael Huerta: Team coordinator. Yep. That's – I forgot the name. Team coordinator,
27 uh, he's the guy who'll do if you, uh, make a mistake on a car or something
28 goes wrong, he'll do a repair or, uh, if you need to go to medical or, uh,
29 take a break or something – go talk to your boss or something, he'll take
30 your job over and he'll relieve you to go do any of those types of things.
31 And, uh, sometimes they – they'll offer advice and help too to, to people
32 who are new on the job and train them too.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: [14:50] I wanna round out an explanation. You said your brother told you
35 you were on a good job, and you just described that your partner was next
36 to you. Um, can you explain more about that? Being, uh, on a job that
37 you did every other car, you said the cars were coming at, uh, 50-some
38 seconds [inaudible 15:08], so you musta had a nice work space. Can you
39 just describe the difference of a person that, uh, works on every car?
40
41 Michael Huerta: Uh, the – that lasted, like I said, exactly 30 days and I got bumped, which
42 it means someone with more seniority than me noticed there was an open
43 spot-on day shift and they, they put in a transfer, and I, I went to night
44 shift after that. And it was every other car. There's a lot of work space
45 when you have every other car. There's a – they give you – and, and the
46 job that I had, there was actually two, two and a half work spaces, which I

1 think are 18 feet long. Uh, and you get – that's a lot of time to, to do your
2 job, although it necessitates that much space because of the size of the
3 rocker molding and, uh, and the amount of work on it.
4
5 It was a – uh, he meant – when he said good job, he meant GM is a good
6 job. Uh, the specific job was a pretty good job, but I – he was more along
7 the lines of don't get fired from GM 'cause he knew in 30 days I'd get
8 bumped to night shift as well. Uh, which was okay with me 'cause I'd
9 been in the restaurant business for a long time, and I was on second shift
10 for, for most of my life, actually. But, uh, the, the normal confines of a s-,
11 of a job are 18 feet in 53 seconds, and you have to get your job done fast.
12
13 You'd, you do your job, you turn around, you grab your parts for the next
14 job in a space of, you know, mult-, you can't even use the full 18 feet
15 because if you do, you'll get down the line and behind. So the two, two
16 and a half lengths is, is a nice space, but if you use it all, you have to walk
17 all the way back up the line, uh, to, to start your next job. So that's what I
18 was referrin' to.
19
20 Doug Rademacher: [16:50] Okay. You, uh, just spoke of the 30-day. Then you went to the
21 night shift. Do you remember your second job? And tell us what it was
22 like to reach that special 90 day?
23
24 Michael Huerta: [coughing] My second job I [coughing] – I'm pretty sure I was a utility,
25 uh, guy, which, which is a – if somebody has a vacation day or someone's
26 sick, I go and cover their job, so you have to know all the jobs in a specific
27 area that you're assigned to, uh, on second shift for Cookie. He was a boss
28 on the night shift. Uh, [Eldridge Cook 17:26] I think his, his first name
29 was.
30
31 Uh, Cookie treated me pretty well, uh, bein' a new guy and whatnot there.
32 And, uh, learnin' all the jobs. Again, I was tryin' to hurry up and learn all
33 the jobs, so I learned, learned a bunch of'm. And, uh, and, uh – what was
34 the second part of the question?
35
36 Doug Rademacher: Oh, I was curious, did you stay on this utility until you got your 90 days,
37 and what was it like to get your 90 days in? Did you make it?
38
39 Michael Huerta: I made it. I'm, uh, with a – in the same department, oddly enough, I stayed
40 there the whole time. And, uh, I liked workin' for [Cook] quite a bit and I
41 liked that area. Uh, I ended up working on an off with the people in that
42 area till Fisher closed. I worked with a lot of'm for quite a while. Uh, it
43 was a good area. Ninety days came and, uh, and, uh, faster than you
44 realize. And oddly enough, it fell on my birthday. [laughter] So I was – I
45 didn't want to be there for my 90th day, but, uh, I came in anyway and, uh,

1 it was like – the group threw a little dinner for me, and that was, that was
2 pretty nice.
3
4 I didn't – you don't realize, uh, when you're around, you know, the plant
5 sometimes it seems like a lot of the people are gruff and hard and, you
6 know, you, you kinda got to put up a, a barrier to protect yourself a little
7 bit in there against bosses or other people and, and when soemthin' like
8 that happens, it was pretty nice. It was cool.
9
10 Doug Rademacher: [18:53] Okay. Um, what's the significance of 90 days? What happens at
11 that point?
12
13 Michael Huerta: You obtain seniority rights, I believe, is what – is technically what it's
14 called. Uh, then, uh, while you have union representation prior to that, it's
15 a little bit easier for management to say that this person can be disciplined
16 or they can be fired or, or things like that. Uh, and I think also, you can
17 put in transfers at that point too and stuff and move around a little bit.
18 Um, the, the significance of the 90 days for me was that, uh, I was a – I
19 thought that I didn't have union rights and whatnot before that. I – you do,
20 but it's, uh, it was – to me, it signified being like a full-blown union
21 member.
22
23 Doug Rademacher: [19:43] Okay. Can you tell me how much longer did you run that second
24 job in Kalamazoo? And you spoke of coming from Kalamazoo to Fisher
25 Body. What was the driving distance one way?
26
27 Michael Huerta: It took me 54 minutes from my house [laughter] to, to, to reach the
28 parking lot, uh, goin' about 75, 80, 80 miles an hour. And, uh, I don't
29 know the exact milage. I can't remember, but I remember that time for
30 some reason.
31
32 Doug Rademacher: So 100 miles round trip every day.
33
34 Michael Huerta: Mm-hm.
35
36 Doug Rademacher: [20:11] How long did you do that? And then how long did you work the
37 second job?
38
39 Michael Huerta: I worked the second job on and off, uh, my stepdad got sick late that year,
40 that – in '97, so I, I was goin' back to Saginaw, from Kalamazoo to
41 Saginaw and I was livin' with my brother during the week here. But, uh,
42 the second job I worked maybe once a month, and then the restaurant
43 ended up closin' down, and I went and worked the last day, which, which
44 was a lot of fun there. Just to s-, the owner wanted me to come back and,
45 you know, come and work the last day and all the, all the regulars were
46 gonna come in. But, uh, that lasted, uh, two and a half, three months,

1 probably three months. But, uh, once I go the 90 days, I stopped working
2 fairly regularly there, maybe, like I said, once a month. And, uh...

3

4 Doug Rademacher: That was that, huh?

5

6 Michael Huerta: Yeah.

7

8 Doug Rademacher: [21:11] Okay. Um, so did someone break you in on that job as you went –
9 or how did you learn jobs? Just go up and stand and watch people or how
10 did you learn a job?

11

12 Michael Huerta: Uh, the utility job, actually, was, uh, the other utility guys – what would
13 happen is [Cook] would, [Cook] would say go cover one of the other
14 utility guys. And, uh, I'd go and start learning their job. And, uh, eager to
15 get off the line, they'd hurry the process along, the training and, uh, they'd,
16 they'd say you gotta – when you're a utility guy, you gotta be able to pick
17 up a job fast and all this nonsense that I learned later. Uh, [laughter] but
18 they, they just wanted to get off the line and be able to go, you know, relax
19 or whatever. But, uh, I basically watched and then started doin' a part of
20 the job every car, you know, do a small section of it. And as, as you got
21 better that at, you'd pick up jobs a little bit faster along the way.

22

23 Doug Rademacher: [22:13] Do you remember the people you hired in with? Or did you come
24 in alone? You said that [inaudible 22:18] group of people walked through
25 in the, in the, uh, dimly lit building.

26

27 Michael Huerta: Yep.

28

29 Doug Rademacher: Do you remember those people?

30

31 Michael Huerta: I do. I remember some of'm. Some of'm ended up, uh, leavin'. Some
32 of'm went to different plants. Uh, I remember more – oddly enough, I
33 don't remember a whole lot of – I don't work with a whole lot of people
34 that I hired in with anymore. I don't know what happened to'm along the
35 way, but I know a lot of the people that hired in in the same year as I did.
36 I, uh, well, when you get on second shift, it tends to be a lot of the same
37 seniority or at least near the same seniority. Uh, so when I was in trim, uh,
38 trim shop, we – it was a lot of the same seniority 97s, 95s, 96s. And, uh,
39 we all kinda get forced to the same areas and the same spots because of
40 seniority.

41

42 Doug Rademacher: [23:09] Okay. Were there any new hire initiations or pranks? And if so,
43 did you get to deliver those back at any time?

44

45 Michael Huerta: I never delivered'm back, but they, they always, uh, the guys I worked
46 with [laughter], on first shift especially, were real eager to tell me about

1 my Christmas turkey [laughter] and my, my – oh, the Thanksgiving turkey
2 at the hall that I had to go pick up. They kept telling me, don't forget that
3 – naturally, having a brother who worked there for many years, he, he told
4 me all this and that. I don't know if anybody actually showed up over
5 there to get their turkey but [laughter] that was, uh, that was one of the big
6 ones. Go get your turkey at Thanksgiving. It'll be there. Yeah, you gotta
7 show up early though. You know, get there early [laughter] in the
8 morning and they'd, they'd tell ya all sorts of things to have ya sittin' out
9 there in the parking lot waitin', waitin' for the hall to open and get your
10 turkey. Uh, [coughing] I never, I never perpetuated that. But the – they,
11 uh, I'm sure they still do it. I, I haven't seen a new hire group in quite a
12 while, but I'm sure they still do it.
13

14 Doug Rademacher: Anything on the line? Uh, somethin' you remember?
15

16 Michael Huerta: Yeah. Uh, at – in the shop, they, uh, I don't know, I don't know where it
17 comes from, but I think the coordinators can order hand lotion. And, uh,
18 after the first break of being there, they filled my gloves with hand lotion
19 [laughter]. And you'd come back and you'd throw your gloves on, and it
20 goes slidin' all over your arm and, uh, and you're covered in, in hand lotion
21 for the rest of the day and all greasy. So that was, that was a big one.
22

23 Doug Rademacher: [24:44] Okay. Um, you've described some of the things, the environment,
24 uh, the trim department. Did you work in any other of the departments?
25

26 Michael Huerta: I worked with, uh, I worked in body shop for maybe two weeks, maybe
27 three weeks before I got, uh, laid off one year. Uh, I didn't – they were
28 rampin' up I seem to remember or it was – for some reason, there weren't
29 cars – there weren't consistently cars. It was a, it was a slowdown mode or
30 some-, somethin' along lines. And, uh, I didn't, I didn't work a whole lot
31 there before we got laid off again. Um, but one significant incident in
32 body shop, I was told, uh, it was an off-the-line job. We were puttin', uh,
33 pieces in a, in a robotic, in a robot that did welding for us, and you'd put
34 the piece in and you'd step back and you'd hit a button, and it, and it would
35 deliver welds, spot welds all over the piece.
36

37 Um, and I'd grab the piece after the robot was done, and I'd hang it and the
38 – it would automatically deliver it to the line after I hung the piece. And
39 my brother walked by and he's like, "Oh, hey." He worked in the body
40 shop. He was shocked to see me there. And he said, "Hey, man. Be
41 careful. This, this metal is really, really sharp." And, you know, you
42 know, "Whatever." You know, I'd touched it. "Aw, it's not sharp." And,
43 uh, I was like this isn't that bad. So I, I kept workin'. Later on in the day,
44 somebody asked me what happened to my sweatshirt. And I looked down
45 and, uh, my sweatshirt had a huge slice across the front of it, uh, from me
46 hanging these metal pieces that I thought weren't so sharp. Uh, there's a

1 big, giant hole in my sweatshirt from rubbin' it across it. I hadn't even
2 noticed. And it'd gone – it went through the t-shirt underneath as well.
3 Somehow, it didn't manage to cut me open, but just went right through my
4 clothes and I didn't even notice.

5

6Jerri Smith: Hm. [laughter]
7

8Michael Huerta: But, uh, that was, that was one of the things I remembered about the body
9 shop. And I'm like, "Get me outta here." [laughter] So, so I got out of
10 there fairly quick.

11

12Doug Rademacher: [26:53] And you'd worked in trim when you hired in. And you saw the
13 body shop. Your brother was a regular down there. Can you describe
14 what's it look like in the body shop compared to the trim shop?
15

16Michael Huerta: In the trim shop, you – it's very well lit. Uh, they have to notice, uh,
17 scratches or mutilations and stuff in final – in the, in the very final process
18 before it was shipped across town to a – to the, the final assembly, so they
19 have to notice defects, colors of carpets, colors of seatbelts, the different –
20 the various colors of trim, so it's real bright, uh, very well lit. You can
21 wear shorts. You can wear t-shirts. Uh, and for the exact reason I was
22 describing before about the sliced open sweatshirt and t-shirt, you can't
23 wear shorts and t-shirt – uh, I think you can wear t-shirts, but you can't
24 wear shorts in body shop. But it's very dark in body shop.

25

26 The first time I walked in there, I though trim shop was loud when I
27 walked in there, and it got even louder in the body shop. Uh, there's a lot
28 of welding going on. There's a lot more robots, uh, doin', doin' welds and
29 [like different, various 28:07] processes out in the body shop. A lot of
30 robotic carriers. Uh, it's a completely different world. It's very different.
31 It looks almost, almost futuristic in there. Cars floatin' around in the air
32 on, uh, on carriers. Uh, it, it's, uh, sparks flyin' everywhere from the
33 welding goin' on. Even when no one's around'm, you don't – you can't see
34 people. The robots are doin' the welds sometimes, and there's, there's just
35 sparks flying. If you're not familiar with the area, you can get lost and
36 kinda freaked out pretty easily, which I got lost in there for about an hour
37 one time, the first time I worked down there.

38

39Doug Rademacher: [28:49] Do you view your coworkers as brothers and sisters? And at what
40 point did that happen?
41

42Michael Huerta: That's a great question. At what – and it happened at a specific point too.
43 The, uh, [beeping] when I went in – when I got hired at GM, I, I always
44 thought that, uh, I, s-, you know, saw my dad workin' in the foundry and I
45 saw my, uh, stepdad workin' at Buick City. And I thought, uh, the, the
46 years they put in there were hard on'm. My, my stepdad was, uh, nearly

1 deaf when he came out. My dad worked in the foundry for 35 years, and
2 that's hard time. It's, it's awful in the foundry. [coughing] Uh, but when I
3 came in, I'm like I'm gonna get my degree and I'm gonna get outta here.
4 I'm gonna go to school and finish, you know, I don't wanna, I don't wanna,
5 uh, have a physical toll on me like it did them. And, uh, they told me the
6 same thing. Do that, you know, get your degree, and get out if you can.
7 It's a good job, but if you don't think it's for you, get your, get
8 your schooling done and move on.
9
10 Uh, so that's, that was my intention when I hired in. And, uh, I hired in in
11 July of '97. In December, my, uh, my stepfather passed away. I went into
12 work that day, uh, it was either that or sit around the house, you know,
13 beatin', beatin' my head against the wall. I was – I went into work that
14 day, told my boss and, uh, everybody just immediately, you know, you
15 know, you all right? My TC came in to relieve me, basically all day, you
16 know. You wanna come – when, when you feel like you can work, come
17 back. He worked all day on the line. Uh, when I came back after the –
18 after my bereavement, uh, they had a card with money and stuff for my
19 mom. Immediately after that, I was – right, right at that point, I thought,
20 okay. I get it. Uh, uh, prior to that, I don't, I don't think I'd really – you
21 know, you see the donations and, you know, occasionally they'll have the
22 United Way signs and, and things like that, but that was when I really
23 understood.
24
25 Doug Rademacher: [31:02] Have you developed friendships that extend outside of the plant
26 from, from your workers?
27
28 Michael Huerta: Absolutely. Yeah. Uh, I developed many, uh, I met my wife in the plant.
29 We got married in, uh, this past January. Uh, I was, uh, thrown in a,
30 thrown in a job. I'd noticed her. I didn't really know who she was but, uh,
31 I was thrown at a job for a day and, uh, I worked across the line from her.
32 Uh, eight hours flew by like – in about 10 minutes. Uh, about a week
33 later, I asked her for her phone number, so I could ask her maybe to dinner
34 sometime, and she asked if I was serious. And I said, "What do you mean
35 are you serious?" And, uh, she, she was – she said later she was just
36 surprised that I wanted her phone number. And, uh, we ended up, uh,
37 goin' out and like I said, uh, last night, we got some good news.
38
39 Doug Rademacher: Very good news. So you found romance and love in the assembly line.
40
41 Michael Huerta: And her, her dad works at the – worked, worked at, worked at the plant
42 too. I recently got to sign his retirement papers for him. But, uh, he
43 worked in body shop, or in paint shop. He told her, "Don't you ever date
44 anybody from, from the plant," [laughter] which, which is hilarious. And
45 she always swore that she wouldn't either. Uh...
46

1 Doug Rademacher: [32:34] And has that opinion changed of him since he's met you?
2
3 Michael Huerta: Absolutely. When I, uh, five years after we started dating, [coughing] I
4 went to his house to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage. And his first
5 response was, "It's about damn time." [laughter] [coughing]
6
7 Doug Rademacher: [32:44] Um, explain a day. What did you do for your lunch breaks?
8
9 Michael Huerta: After I met my wife, [Dia 32:50], I went and, uh, went and sat with her,
10 talked to her every break I could, uh, during the courting process. And,
11 and she worked there for probably two and a half years after we started
12 datin'. Then she finished her degree and she moved on but, uh, when,
13 when she was there, I'd go, go eat lunch with her almost every day. But,
14 uh, before I met her, we – I just, uh, I read a lot. Sat down at the – they
15 have picnic tables in – at the – in break areas in the plant. And, uh,
16 sometimes we'd have dinners together, groups or teams would have
17 dinners and, and, you know, somebody's birthday, somebody's, uh, you
18 know, retirin'. Uh, there's a holiday comin' up.
19
20 Any excuse to, to show off your cooking, uh, flex your cooking muscle,
21 everybody, everybody liked to do that. And, and, uh, that's – as someone
22 who cooked for a living, I like to taste other people's food, so that was – I
23 enjoyed that too. Uh, I never – I tried to tell as few people as possible that
24 I was a cook 'cause they', uh, automatically volunteer you to, to do
25 everything. But, uh, we spent a lot of time doin' that. You'd talk to, you
26 know, there's a lotta rumors that fly around the plant and, and breaks and
27 lunches are good for those types of things.
28
29 Doug Rademacher: [34:10] Okay. So you did participate in the departmental dinners? You,
30 you were sharing, uh, these, uh, holiday ones; are these every year? In this
31 – what was that like?
32
33 Michael Huerta: Virtually, every year. I, I don't remember a Christmas or Thanksgiving
34 going by without having one. And, uh, jeez, I don't even – I don't – we'd
35 do'm for Easters and birthdays and, uh, any, any type of congratulatory
36 event that people wanted to break bread with each other. That was a, a
37 comradery thing very much. Uh, almost making it more familial in the, in
38 the plant, and I, and I enjoyed that a lot. And it really did, you know,
39 you're, you're here in this mechanized, you know, vast area with all these
40 machines, robots, guns, uh, but come break time, everybody returned back
41 to neighborly, you know. Let's, let's sit down and eat, eat lunch, or relax
42 with each other.
43
44 Doug Rademacher: [35:09] You spoke about, uh, breaks and lunches being a chance to check
45 up on rumors. What kind of rumors would happen? What do you mean?
46

1 Michael Huerta: Oh, unbelievable. The – I, I was always of the belief that never believe
2 them because they can't possibly be true. [The elevators are breakin' 5:25]
3 down in paint, were goin' home early. Uh, there's, uh, there's gonna be a
4 layoff or there's the – they're gonna – there's gonna be – everything from
5 we're goin' home early to, uh, so and so got fired or – it, it – the rumors
6 were fast and furious, and you usually ignored them until something in
7 writing came out or, or until you actually saw, uh, certain things, uh,
8 happen.
9

10 Doug Rademacher: Was there a particular day of the week where the rumors really flew, you
11 know?
12

13 Michael Huerta: Before Christmas, uh, the week or two before Christmas, there was always
14 talk of layoffs or there's gonna be extra times off. And there were, there
15 were a couple periods, uh, in the last few years where there were week
16 layoffs here and there. And, uh, those, those spurred rumors big time.
17

18 Doug Rademacher: [36:21] There's also, uh, while you're working, it's, uh, you said the
19 factory, the noises, did people have radios?
20

21 Michael Huerta: Absolutely. That was, that was a saving – that, that probably [laughter]
22 saved, saved my life. I loved, I love listenin' to music. I'm a music freak.
23 Uh, and I've – the last year or so, I worked with a really good group and
24 we all had a very, uh, eclectic music taste, so we'd all listen to each other's
25 music without any bickering. And sometimes there was bickering
26 amongst people who didn't like each other's music if you had a partner that
27 didn't like your various CDs or whatever. But, uh, we'd bring in CDs and
28 we'd play the radio and everybody was very patient with each other. We'd
29 listen to each other's music and sometimes got turned on to new music
30 and, uh, enjoyed each other's taste, musical tastes as well.
31

32 Doug Rademacher: [37:18] You said you were a chef, um, can you tell about in-plant
33 vending? Did people bring products in? Um, can you share any stories
34 about that?
35

36 Michael Huerta: One of my favorite things about being on first shift was Nacho. He was a
37 skilled trades guy in, uh, in trim who'd bring in his wife's burritos,
38 breakfast burritos in the morning. And, uh, bein' away from mom for a
39 while, I missed the – missed her salsa and her, uh, her burritos and chorizo
40 in the morning. And, uh, when I first came onto first shift, I saw people
41 walkin' around with these foiled – something in foil, wrapped in foil. And
42 I asked my partner, "Hey, hey, what is that?" And he told me that Nacho
43 sells burritos right around the corner for in the morning for breakfast. And
44 so I started getting' there early so I could get Nacho's burritos 'cause they
45 ran out. And, uh, that was, that was absolutely one of the, one of the – my
46 favorite things about first shift. I'd – I'm not a first shifter at all. I'm not a

1 morning person but, uh, that drove me to even arrive early from
2 Kalamazoo to get there for Nacho's breakfast burritos and his, and his
3 wife's salsa. And, uh, there's, there's other stuff at night, but nothin' can
4 compare to that.
5

6 Doug Rademacher: [38:33] Um, did you have a skilled trades person – did you ever befriend
7 one? Did you ever have a tradesman do somethin' special for you? And
8 what, what did you think of skilled trades compared to the line assembly?
9

10 Michael Huerta: I didn't really know a whole lot of skilled trades guys. Uh, I, I really, you
11 know, I didn't know – I knew they covered large areas. Uh, I didn't really,
12 you know, I worked on jobs that had tools that were constantly messin' up
13 so they'd have to come out a lot. Uh, sometimes the, the torque wouldn't
14 be right on, on the, uh, bolts I was puttin' in, so they'd have to come and
15 fix the tools or adjust the tools, uh, but I was moved around quite a bit, uh,
16 all over trim, so it would be different skilled trades guys that I'd always
17 see. And I, and I didn't really get to know any of 'em too well. But, uh, they
18 all seemed pretty nice to me. You hear a lot of people talk bad about 'em,
19 but I don't get that. I don't – I didn't see any, anybody maltreat me or, you
20 know, anything like that.
21

22 Doug Rademacher: [39:41] You said you had a goal of – you were plannin' on getting your
23 education and getting out. And you said your wife achieved her degree
24 and, and left. Is that still your same goal? Or what are you – what's your
25 feelings today?
26

27 Michael Huerta: Uh, I had a completely different view of the union when I came into the
28 shop. When I came into the shop, I didn't – I had, you know, no idea what
29 the union was all about, and I started – [Marta Bobio 40:05] one time, uh,
30 came up to me with a piece of paper. I didn't even know who she was. I
31 had never met her. Uh, she had asked my brother if he wanted to
32 participate in a Latino Labor Conference that they put on in Ann Arbor.
33 And, uh, he said, "Take it to my brother. He'd probably be interested in
34 that type of thing." And, uh, I'd never met [Marta]. She walks up to me
35 and she says, "Sign this." And I said, "My name's Mike. How are you?"
36 [laughter] And she said, "Good. My name's [Marta]. I'm a friend of your
37 brother's. Sign this, uh, paper. I'm gonna see if, I'm gonna see if we can
38 send you to a, a labor conference." And I said, "What do I have to do?
39 What is this?" I, you know, I didn't know what it was. I had no idea. I
40 was just there kinda floatin' my time and, you know, goin' to school and
41 ignoring everything about me, really, you know, or around me, excuse me.
42

43 Uh, so I signed it and I, and I got to go to this conference. And, uh, it
44 really fired me up. I took a, a basic, uh, union class, union awareness
45 class. And, uh, it lit a fire under me big time. I, I came back, reported to
46 the membership, thanked them. I was excited to, uh, and immediately

1 following that, I started to become an active, goin' to the meetings, goin' –
2 I didn't know a whole lot of people in Lansing at that point. I, I didn't
3 know anyone but my brother really. And, uh, and his wife and my nieces.
4 So I sat there and I read the – my brother gave me copies of the contracts.
5 He gave me, you know, he was an alternate committee man at that point.
6 He gave me a – some, some, some of the paperwork of committeemen and
7 stuff, and I started readin' it.
8
9 And, uh, I don't know why, but I found it interesting. And, uh, so I started
10 getting really involved in the union and, and as far as I'm concerned, I'd,
11 I'd love to stay here 30 years and plus and possibly, I, I don't know exactly
12 what position I want, but I'm, I'm all about bein' – serving my
13 membership. Now I love, I love – I don't, I don't know what it was about
14 that first conference. I met Ray [inaudible 42:15] and we sat up till six in
15 the morning talkin'. Uh, Ray's passed now, but, uh, we – I didn't even
16 know he was a member of 602 at the time. [laughter] We sat up talkin' till
17 six in the morning the next day. I found out he was a member of 602 and I
18 was shocked, and I saw him at the next meeting, you know. It was great.
19 But, uh, ever since then, I've just, uh, stayed involved and I, and I don't
20 plan to stop.
21
22 Doug Rademacher: [42:47] Okay. Mike, you worked in the body shop and the trim
23 department. What made a good or a bad supervisor for you?
24
25 Michael Huerta: Oof. [laughter] Uh, I had a lot of supervisors. I got bounced around for
26 quite a while. Uh, there was a period of time where the job bank was
27 being utilized to help training, supposedly, but, uh, they, they moved us
28 around a lot. And, uh, I, I – that's when I started to get really
29 knowledgeable about the contract and discover that I was being misused,
30 uh, quite a bit.
31
32 Uh, but the bosses, I guess, were willing to use us however they could and
33 whatever made their lives easier, which was, you know, we're gonna take,
34 uh, I'm gonna put you on this job and I'm gonna take my people and free
35 them up so they can have a day off or go home and, and things like that. I
36 thought that was garbage. Uh, I didn't care for that and, and because of
37 that, I got into arguments and got into incidences with several supervisors.
38
39 Uh, [Cook], again, knew me from back when I hired in, so he was one of
40 the few that wouldn't really misuse me a whole lot, but, uh, I didn't – other
41 than [Cook], I didn't know a whole lot of second shift supervisors before I
42 started to get moved around like that. So I never really got a chance to
43 establish a relationship with anybody, uh, other than [Cook] until, uh, the
44 second time that I worked for – third time that I worked for [Carol] Hill.
45 Uh, and [Carol] Hill, uh, had been in the plant for a long time, uh, 30 years
46 at that point, 28 years at that point.

1
2 And, uh, she was a, she was an old-school supervisor and I didn't, uh, and
3 I was becoming incredibly active in my union and she didn't care for that.
4 And I didn't care for her style [laughter] and we clashed a lot, but there
5 was a respect factor between us two where she knew that I knew what I
6 was talking about, but she was gonna try to have her way anyway. And I
7 said do what you want, but, you know, you're gonna have to pay people
8 for it or, you know, we're gonna file grievances against you and you'll
9 lose. And she understood the consequences of doing things her way and,
10 and she knew that I would take her to [inaudible 45:09] for it.
11
12 But the – I mean, there's a, there's a certain amount of, uh, things that they
13 have to do to keep things flowin' in the plant, but they – there's a way to
14 do it. There's a contract laid out for'm. Uh, there was – there's also been a
15 lot of contract supervisors that don't understand a con-, the contracts and
16 they're not trained, trained with the contracts. [Cook] was probably my
17 favorite supervisor and he – when he broke the rules, he knew he was
18 doin' it and he was fully willing to, to make up for that later.
19
20 Doug Rademacher: [45:39] Well, today is, uh, May 17 in '06. The plant closed May 5, '05.
21 I'm gonna have you run a few thoughts and some feelings. What was one
22 of your best memories of Fisher Body?
23
24 Michael Huerta: Uh, meetin' my wife. I think, uh, that day, that day that I worked across
25 from her when I, when I – I, I knew her vaguely. We, you know, said hi
26 to each other and stuff like that. And, and I didn't, I didn't know what her
27 full name was. I didn't know her last name. Uh, I don't think she even
28 knew my, you know, my f-, my name. But, uh, meeting her and spendin'
29 that day across the line from her was probably the best day there.
30
31 Doug Rademacher: [46:28] What was your funniest moment? Do you remember anything that
32 happened that impacted you or many people around you or something?
33
34 Michael Huerta: I like to have fun when I work. I mean, the guys, the guy-, when I get to
35 know a team and, and we enjoy each other's, you know, sense of – strange
36 sense of humor. I like to have a lot of fun [in the shop 46:52]. Even
37 though we're workin' and, you know, we got a, we got a job to do, you
38 can, you can still have fun with each other and joke around if you get a
39 good partner. That's a, that's a, you know, you work, you s-, gotta stare at
40 each other for eight, eight hours every day [laughter], sometimes nine. So
41 you, you gotta have fun.
42
43 We, uh, the last team I was with, we joked around constantly, constantly.
44 Uh, that probably six, seven months together was, was – there's no specific
45 inc-, incident I could point to, but those, those – we, uh, I developed
46 friendships with those guys and even after the shop closed down and we,

1 we went, uh, we went out earlier. We were all lower seniority. We, we
2 hang out probably two, three times a month at every meetup. We're all, all
3 of us are from even different cities, but we all meet up in Lansing and get
4 together and hang out for, for a few hours at least once a month.
5
6 Doug Rademacher: [47:45] What's your saddest memory of workin' in the plant?
7
8 Michael Huerta: The day I came in when my dad died.
9
10 Doug Rademacher: [47:56] Being, uh, Hispanic, did you feel any discrimination? Did you
11 face that in there and can you share an incident?
12
13 Michael Huerta: Not towards me. Uh, not towards me. Uh, but I specifically remember
14 people singling me out, but there – yeah. There's, uh, it doesn't matter
15 where you are, you know, the – there's incidents. Uh, I, I saw, I saw some,
16 uh, some things I didn't like and, uh, I'm not the kind of guy to sit on the
17 sidelines and just let stuff fly by. Uh, so, you know, I, I very much
18 vocalized that I didn't care for people, uh, saying the type a, type a racial
19 slurs or, you know, it happens a lot. No matter where you are, but, uh,
20 people shouldn't have to work in that type of spot. People shouldn't have
21 to deal with that, uh, for eight and a half, nine hours a day, every day.
22 People shouldn't have to think about it before they go into work for a
23 couple hours every day, how I gotta go deal with so and so who's gonna
24 call me this and that. Who's gonna, you know, who hates me because y-
25 not even knowing me. That's a, that's an awful situation for anyone to
26 have to work in.
27
28 And I, and I, I saw it. I didn't have it done to me. Uh, maybe people
29 know, you know, he's not gonna – I can't say this crap around him. But
30 they would say it about other people and other, uh, cultures. Not
31 necessarily Mexicans or Hispanics, but, uh, people sometimes can be
32 harsh to each other. And, uh, I don't like it. And I, I don't, I don't like to
33 tolerate a whole lot of that goin' on at all.
34
35 Doug Rademacher: [49:38] Did you see that in gender also?
36
37 Michael Huerta: Oh, absolutely. You know what? It was more so to, to – women are
38 [subjectified 49:45] in that place more so than, I think, racial. Uh, there's
39 a lot, there's a lot of racism everywhere, but, uh, in a, in a, in a auto
40 production plant, I think, sometimes, uh, ladies take a much, much bigger
41 hit. Uh, what are you doin' in here? Don't – I mean, I heard all sorts of
42 nonsense in there. Uh, sometimes, you know, God, I feel like I'm in the
43 30s. [laughter] Uh, some, some of the nonsense people, people spout out.
44 But, you know, you gotta, you – I, I don't like to tolerate that either. And,
45 uh, you know, to, to see, you know, how, how goin' through the rich
46 history of women in, in the auto industries is insane that that still goes on.

1 During World War II, you know, the country would've been a mess
2 without the women's workforce, uh, in our auto industry. So I'm – it, it,
3 it's not only silly, it's ignorant for that still to be goin' on.
4

5 Doug Rademacher: [50:45] You said you'd tape up your fingers early on in the interview, um,
6 [coughing] cut your shirt. Did you ever get injured badly or see anyone
7 else injured badly?
8

9 Michael Huerta: Uh, I saw, I saw a guy – I can't remember what happened to him, but he,
10 he just completely fe-, he was – there was a thing called an [ErgoChair
11 51:06] that went in and out of every car. And, uh, they would tighten
12 down brake pedals. And he sat down in this chair, and it would, it would
13 kinda float you around and you could fly – go in and out of every car with
14 it and you'd, you'd carry this torque gun, and you'd torque the brake pedal
15 down. And, uh, I, I think he pulled several muscles in his back at once.
16 And I never [laughter] heard anybody yell like that, but he, he, he started
17 yellin'. And he was in the car at the time. And, uh, the line shuts down if
18 it - if the chair goes beyond a certain point. And, uh, he ended up bein' all
19 right, but at the time, it seemed pretty severe.
20

21 Luckily, I had – I've heard a lot of stories about some really nasty
22 incidences in the shop. And, uh, I've, I've never had to see any of them.
23 Uh, though I've had some minor injuries, uh, tendinitis developed over,
24 you know, repetitive, uh, stress stuff. But, uh, luckily, nothin' too severe
25 yet. Uh, I'm gonna knock on wood [knocking] even though I'm not
26 [laughter], uh, not supposed to. [laughter] Uh, not yet. No, I haven't, I
27 haven't. I'm lucky, lucky that way.
28

29 Doug Rademacher: [52:16] The knocking on wood, that's pertaining to the discs that we're
30 recording on, not any other reason?
31

32 Michael Huerta: [Right, correct 52:21]. [laughter]
33

34 Doug Rademacher: [52:23] Lansing was known as the Capital of Quality. Why do you think
35 that was called that?
36

37 Michael Huerta: Workforce. Absolutely, the workforce. No, you know, the – sometimes
38 in a building that was originally occupied by the Durant Brothers, we had
39 substandard, uh, equipment, uh, substandard conditions to w-, I remember
40 being rained on in the plant. Uh, I remember standing in puddles of water.
41 Uh, just inexcusable sometimes lack of, lack of, uh, safety in, in certain
42 instances that were addressed, you know, uh, by, by our safety people.
43 But sometimes, man, that place, that building [laughter] was, was
44 interesting. The, the pipes were funny. I mean, every-, everything from
45 the bathrooms actin' weird to the, to the, to the trim shop floodin' out when
46 it rained. Was, uh, was interesting and then we put out that kind a quality.

1 That' says something about the people that go into that shop every day,
2 you know.
3
4 We, we, we weren't askin' for much, but we – you'd give us a chance and
5 you're gonna get the best, you're gonna get the best thing on the planet.
6 And, you know, we're often two in – number two or number three with
7 the, the worst possible scenario, working conditions, we'd produce. That's
8 why we got a new plant.
9
10 Doug Rademacher: [53:42] You said you went to a conference, came back energized. Did you
11 attend union meetings and how often?
12
13 Michael Huerta: Uh, I – In March, I'm a college basketball junkie, so I don't go to the union
14 meeting in March. Uh [coughing], [inaudible 53:58] goin' so I, so I don't
15 go to that one. But, uh, I try to make every union meetin'. I didn't go to
16 my last union meeting because I was at a wedding reception for, for me
17 and my wife, but, uh...
18
19 Doug Rademacher: Oh, your own wedding reception? I guess that's a good excuse.
20
21 Michael Huerta: I [laughter], I, I didn't ask to be excused, but, uh, uh, people will
22 understand. Uh, I try to go to every meeting. Uh, not necessarily because
23 I have to. Uh, I'm not elected to any position. I'm, not yet, appointed to
24 any position. Uh, I don't have to go to my union meetings. Uh, I want to.
25 I like the people who show up at the union meetings. I like, I like the
26 leadership we currently have. I, I went to the union meetings under the
27 leadership we previously had who I had a lot of problems with, but it
28 didn't matter. It's my union meeting. It's my union. I'm responsible.
29 Same way I'm so in – I, I get very involved in local politics and state
30 politics and national politics. This is my country. I have an obligation. I,
31 I feel I have an obligation to help run it.
32
33 And I feel there's maybe a hundred of us that run, that run things at the
34 hall because we bother to show up. And, you know, uh, good or bad,
35 that's, that's how things are. I wish that we couldn't fit everyone in our
36 hall every union meeting. I wish people cared that much about their
37 future, but, you know, here we are, and we, we're gonna, we're gonna do,
38 you know, what we think is in the best interest of the memberships. And I
39 got no, I got no problem showin' up and helpin'.
40
41 Doug Rademacher: Uh, you said, uh, you've already described that your union involvement
42 has changed over the years.
43
44 Michael Huerta: Mm-hm.
45

1 Doug Rademacher: [55:37] Um, and where your drive is. Do you participate in union
2 sponsored activities?
3

4 Michael Huerta: Oh yeah. Yep. Uh, I am on the legis-, legislation – Citizenship and
5 Legislation Committee. Uh, right now, I'm really, really involved with
6 that. Uh, I'm on the Community Service Committee. I have, in the past,
7 been on the Strike Committee, the Election Committee, the Education
8 Committee, and I think that's it. [laughter] I can't remember'm all. But the
9 – I've been, I've been involved with quite a bit. Uh, I ran for, uh, alternate
10 committeeman twice. I have ran for trustee and union [label 56:26] chair.
11 I ran f-, uh, and that's it. I think that's all I ran for. And I, and I haven't
12 won once. [laughter]
13

14 Doug Rademacher: That's, that's part of getting there.
15

16 Michael Huerta: Yep.
17

18 Doug Rademacher: [56:39] Getting' your name, uh, familiar and, uh, stay at it. Um, [you
19 obviously 57:46] and probably do, but have you voted in union and
20 political elections?
21

22 Michael Huerta: Absolutely. I was, uh, I vote in ev-, all the union elections, uh, political
23 elections as well. And, uh, I started getting' really involved in politics as I
24 kept, uh, as I furthered my education, as I kept, uh, the Michigan State
25 Labor Program, uh, [Danny Hoffman 57:09]. Again, he's gone now, but,
26 uh, [Danny Hoffman] really also got me fired up about politics. Uh, I, I
27 can point to specific spots where I got fired up about certain issues and,
28 and, uh, the Latino Conference fired me up t-, towards my union and
29 [Danny Hoffman], uh, fired me up towards politics, I think. Uh, I had
30 always had some interest before then, but, uh, I think, I think that's, that's
31 what really fired me towards politics. And I got pretty involved in the last
32 probably two or three national elections. Helped a lot with the Kerry
33 campaign in '04. Uh, and I'm currently gonna – in the midst of helping a
34 lot with [inaudible 57:54] campaign in Michigan here. And, uh, and doin'
35 a lot with the, with the Legislative Committee. So...
36

37 Doug Rademacher: [58:02] You do something else with the Legislative Committee. What,
38 what, uh, responsibility do you take on for that?
39

40 Michael Huerta: I, uh, I started doin' a newsletter. We, uh, I – sometimes there's, uh,
41 legislation that'll, that'll go into, uh, it'll go into effect that once the, once
42 legislation is brought to the Senate floor or House floor, it'll be through
43 within a week before we even know what happens often. And, uh, I don't
44 know if that's on purpose. I, I personally think it is but [laughter]
45 sometimes we need, uh, quick, uh, ways to get to our members and tell
46 them hey, this is goin' on. This is antiworker, this is, you know, this is

1 nonsense. We need to call our representatives or our congress people and
2 – or write'm a letter.
3
4 I started doin' an email newsletter, uh, update type thing. Probably once
5 every three, three weeks. Maybe three and a half, uh, when I'm busy. Uh,
6 but it, it's, it's goin' over pretty well. I've done, I think, nine or ten issues
7 so far. Uh, there's 160 or 70 people on it. Started off as, I think, 11. So,
8 uh, four countries, six states, which is pretty weird. [laughter].
9
10 Doug Rademacher: [59:20] Well, you're a young man and you're, uh, into the new technology
11 and it's nice to have you on board there. Um, we're gonna go to benefits.
12 What's your most appreciated bargain benefit?
13
14 Michael Huerta: Whoa. [coughing] That's a tough question. We got a lotta, we got a lotta
15 killer benefits. We're, uh, that's what brought me to GM. Uh...
16
17 Doug Rademacher: [59:40] Got that, got that tooth fixed?
18
19 Michael Huerta: I got that tooth fixed. [laughter] We, we – I think we have to wait eight
20 months for dental, and I was [coughing] – the day of, the day I had dental
21 insurance, I went and got it fixed. And, and my dentist was laughin' at me.
22 But, uh, I, I have to say, you know, the health benefits, um, I'm, I don't
23 have kids yet, but, uh, as soon as, as soon as, uh, I do, that's probably
24 health – the health insurance is gonna be the biggest one. But to this
25 point, it's been the tuition reimbursement, I think. I've used that a lot. Uh,
26 and I, and I don't plan on stoppin' usin' it. I'm, you know, I said previously
27 that, you know, I thought that once I finished my degree I'd just, uh, move
28 on, but I don't, I don't, I don't think so. I think I plan on maybe getting' –
29 finishing my associates, movin' on to the bachelor's and maybe runnin' for
30 local spots to – we need more union representation in our local political
31 areas. School boards, city councils, uh, stuff like that. And, uh, that, that's
32 something that I, I'm – political science is my major. So that's something
33 that I, I see myself doin' in the future.
34
35 Doug Rademacher: [60:50] This is kind of goin' back a little bit, but, uh, what is White Shirt
36 Day and what does it mean to you?
37
38 Michael Huerta: Uh, it's a day, uh, what does it mean to me? Uh, to me, like, I don't – I th-,
39 I think of these things different. I'm a history freak too, so, uh, I look at, I
40 – like on Veterans Day, I'll sit down, you know, and we'll, uh, read a, read
41 a – grab an old history book or a Howard Zinn book and, uh, sit down and,
42 and read, you know, some, some history on, on, uh, on the particular day,
43 if it's Memorial Day, Veterans Day, whatever, you know, whatever, uh,
44 read poppies and Flanders Field and, and sit down and think about that for
45 a while.
46

1 Uh, White Shirt Day, I think, you know, as I think about this is the day,
2 this is the day we celebrate being on [equal 61:41] footing. This is the day
3 we were suppose-, we're supposed to wear, in my opinion, button-down,
4 white shirts to signify that we're on equal footing with management. The,
5 uh, all those people from, uh, Eugene, Debs, uh, all – in, in the late 1800s
6 on to this point have fought for. We got, we got it at that point. Uh, the
7 Reuther brothers, uh, all the, all of those people along the way who gave
8 their lives and stuff to'm. This isn't, this isn't just a, you know, sit at the
9 table and, and bargain with management. There's been people who've lost
10 their lives over this stuff. So I, I like to think about all that stuff. Reflect
11 on, reflect on it, you know.

12
13 The – a lot of people don't even know about it, so, uh, when, when I was
14 in the plant, I'd print off stuff on my computer and bring it in and leave it
15 laying around and luckily, like that – like I said, that last group, we were
16 pretty tight. We'd eat beans and toast and, uh, and, uh, kinda think about
17 what, you know, I'd read, uh, I – last time I was in, I read a little section,
18 little quote from, uh, Victor Reuther, Victor? Yeah, Victor Reuther, and,
19 uh, and, uh, we ate, we ate then at break and, uh, I, I passed down a little
20 bit of the history to those guys who were actually lower seniority than me,
21 believe it or not.

22
23 Doug Rademacher: [63:07] Uh, do you participate in community activities outside of the
24 plant?

25
26 Michael Huerta: Yeah. Yep. Uh, during community service when I was in the job bank,
27 the [recent 63:16] time, we got to go out on community service. I hopped
28 over to, uh, I got crazy goin' and sitting in the jobs bank, so it snowed real
29 bad. We had, uh, [Lyle Birchman 63:27] call Meals on Wheels and ask if
30 they had any problems getting' to the, uh, older people's houses. Uh, and –
31 because of the amount of snow we got, and they said yeah. And so, three
32 of us, three or four of us volunteered to go, uh, shovel sidewalks for the
33 older, for the elderly people who couldn't get out of there house and were
34 homebound and stuff and, and were having meals delivered to them. So,
35 uh, we went and did that and then I noticed, well, they have a kitchen.
36 [laughter] So I asked if they needed any help in the kitchen, and they did,
37 so we stuck around there and, uh, I still go back today even though I don't
38 have any obligation to go.

39
40 We, we'd put in, uh, long, long weeks there. We'd give a little, we even
41 help with fund raising on weekends. On occasion, they had a walk, uh,
42 uh, the director was at my wedding reception, of Meals on Wheels. So
43 she's, uh, we've become very good friends. Some of those, some of those
44 people, uh, uh, take – I walked in there the other day last week, and they
45 have our pictures still on the wall, uh, from when we were volunteering
46 there a year and a half ago. Uh, we, we made some good friendships

1 there. It was very cool working with those people and watching what they
2 do with absolutely nothing. They have no, no funding. Uh, again, here
3 comes the political freak in me. The current administration has cut back
4 on their, on their funding, so they have, they have – they work with
5 nothing. They work with donations, uh, local, local people givin', uh, uh,
6 grants or even the building they operate out of is, uh, donated, leased to
7 them for, for next to nothing. Uh, and, and I'm on the Community Service
8 Committee too, so I, I do other, other things as well, but Meals on Wheels
9 is, uh, the one I'm, I mainly, mainly – I do Toys for Tots and stuff too, but
10 Meals on Wheels mostly.
11
12 Doug Rademacher: [65:23] Mike, you, uh, you're – they call [low 65:27] seniority. You got
13 quite a few years in actually, but, um, you worked in the Fisher plant. It's,
14 uh, it's being torn down. What does that – tell me that feeling. What's that
15 mean to you?
16
17 Michael Huerta: The f-, I walked, or I drove into the union hall parking lot [coughing]
18 [inaudible 65:44]. It must've been a month ago. I don't remember, but I –
19 that was the first time I saw them actually with the cranes and that big –
20 there's a big clipper thing that, that shreds metal. Uh, and I s-, opened my
21 car door. Stood there for probably 35 minutes just – I couldn't believe it.
22 You know, I – you know it's goin' away. You, you know, since I hired in,
23 I – you know, there's been rumors and, you know, people talkin', "Oh,
24 yeah. They're gonna close this place," and this, that, and the other thing.
25 But, uh, and, and, you know, over the – it slowly became reality, you
26 know, hear we're closin' the plant, you know. But seein' it bein' torn down
27 was, was, uh, was weird, you know.
28
29 Like I said, to think about the, the Durant Brothers operated off of that
30 site. [popping] It has been so many different things over the years. It's
31 just wild to hear even, you know, some of the retirees comin' to the union
32 hall and talk about, uh, yes-, yesterday I got stopped in the parking lot
33 from a guy who worked there for 42 years. He's like, "They – why'd they
34 stop tearin' it down?" "I dunno." But, uh, I hadn't noticed, but it was, it
35 was bizarre to see it. A piece of, uh, I, I haven't lived in Lansing that long,
36 but probably a piece of Lansing goin' away. And they're gonna, they're
37 gonna have to dig it out and take it away and, uh, I dunno if that's, you
38 know, necessarily bad or good, but, uh, the – having a Fisher Body gone,
39 another Fisher Body gone is a, is, is a big deal. It's, it's gonna be strange
40 to drive past that point when nothing's there, you know. Dri-, uh, the big
41 green monster, I always called it, but, uh, it's gonna be strange to drive
42 past it and not see that.
43
44 Doug Rademacher: Some day with your children. You'll – you won't be able to drive by and
45 say, "I met your mom in there."
46

1 Michael Huerta: Yeah.
2
3 Doug Rademacher: [67:33] Well, we have a new General Motors in, uh, has invested a, a lot a
4 money in, in this new plant. Uh, the people that're gonna listen to these
5 interviews have never seen assembly plants. Talk about real briefly what
6 do you think of this, this new plant and what do you tell, uh, college kids
7 about auto industry?
8
9 Michael Huerta: That's a two-part question.
10
11 Doug Rademacher: Oh, yeah.
12
13 Michael Huerta: Uh, the, the first part, uh, I've only been to the plant once, the new plant,
14 excuse me. I've only been in once, and it was this past Friday. Uh, kind
15 of a class reunion atmosphere when you walk in. You see everybody who
16 you haven't seen in a while. Uh, the older gang, you know, everybody's,
17 uh, getting' ready to go back to work. Uh, but a friend took me on a, on a
18 little tour of the, the general assembly part of it. Uh, it's amazing. It's, it's
19 completely different. Uh, somebody a, a while back said it's gonna be the
20 most, uh, uh, technical-, not technol-, not technology, uh, technolog-,
21 technological advanced [laughter] plant in the, plant in the world. And it
22 seems like that. It's crazy. You walk through, the platforms rise to, to
23 your, to you so you can work on things rather than you bending and
24 twisting to get inside the cars or work on cars.
25
26 Uh, it, it really was amazing. It looked completely different it was, uh,
27 [inaudible 69:01] [clicking]. So, [while, while 69:04] – seein' the, uh, the
28 advancement that have come along rather than, rather than workin' in a
29 hundred-year-old, hundred and somethin' year old building is, uh, is pretty
30 amazing. Yeah, it's great that they made an in-, investment in, uh, in us.
31 Uh, I think they're gonna, they're gonna – it's gonna pay dividends for
32 them in the long run. Uh, you know, the, the – you hear about – a lot
33 about the company doin' poorly and whatnot but, uh, our, our futures are
34 tied, so we have to help them and they have to help us. And, and, uh, I
35 think, uh, having us work, working is, is an advancement for them. It'll
36 help them, uh, no matter what, we're building. So it's, uh, good that –
37 good to see that. Uh, I haven't seen the rest of the [thing 69:48]. It is
38 enormous. I couldn't believe, uh, how big the, the facilities were. I only
39 got to see the one little general assembly, uh, area. And not even all of
40 that but it's huge. You, you pull in the parking lot and you're like, "My
41 God. This thing continues forever."
42
43 So – it w-, it was, it's, uh, brand spankin' new, shiny. They're still not
44 done. You have to wear hardhats and orange vests 'cause there's still
45 construction but, uh, it is amazing to see what's goin' on out there, and it's
46 exiting. It's exciting that we're gettin', we're gettin' rewarded for, for

1 workin' in that old building [laughter] forever. Uh, so that'll, that'll be
2 exciting when that finally gets rollin' too. I'm excited to go out there.
3
4 Now as far as the what do tell, uh, college kids about, about the auto
5 industry, I took two economics classes recently, and, uh, the economics
6 teacher and I would have a little bit of banter goin' on, exchange goin' on
7 about, uh, he'd talk about how the economy's doin' great and how
8 everything's fine. And I'd say, "Well, that's a statistical outlook. What do
9 you see in reality?" And everybody would turn their head towards me
10 like, "Who's this nutjob arguin' with the teacher?" [laughter]
11
12 And, uh, the teacher and I would, after class, go sit down and have coffee
13 for a couple hours talkin' about those realities and, uh, it, it's a different
14 class, as he put it. He said, "I can't, you know, I can teach you what's in,
15 what's gonna be in your book, but what you're askin' are different things.
16 You're talkin' about sociopolitical and, uh, and a different thing." And I
17 said, "But you shouldn't be," uh, I, I, I, quite frankly, told'm he shouldn't
18 be pushing nonsense because that's, that's what you're tellin' people.
19 Everything's rosy and the outlook's great. No, it's not. You're, you're
20 talkin' about a quarterly interest in, in, in, you know, the next three
21 months. What're the next three months gonna be like. That's what you're
22 doin', and that's a, that's a horrible outlook. You're an economist. You
23 should be thinking, uh, further down the road than that. You – cyclical,
24 uh, these things tend to happen, but this is beyond cyclical.
25
26 So, uh, that was interesting and again, political science classes are always
27 heated. They love to hear about those union workers, uh, so, you know.
28 It's good to have – that we had some representation out in those college
29 classes.
30
31 Doug Rademacher: [72:15] Well, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to
32 share before we end this interview?
33
34 Michael Huerta: I think you covered everything, Doug. [laughter]
35
36 Doug Rademacher: I did my best for ya.
37
38 Michael Huerta: Yeah.
39
40 Doug Rademacher: Hopefully, uh, uh, like I said, if there's anything you ever wanna add, we
41 can always do another, but it's been a pleasure interviewing you. I
42 appreciate your interview.
43
44 Cheryl McCoy: Thank you, Mike.
45
46 Michael Huerta: You bet.

1

2Jerri Smith: Thank you.

3

4John Fedewa: Thank you very much, Mike.

5

6Michael Huerta: Thank you.

7

8

9/tl