

FHS Oral History Project – Volodymyr Chornyy

Description:

Volodymyr Chornyy was born in Ukraine in the former Soviet Union in 1981. Volodymyr recalled his experiences growing up in the former Soviet Union, particularly how education changed after the USSR fell in 1991. He fondly remembered the Ukrainian independent spirit of the 1990s, while also emphasizing the economic difficulties many families faced during this transition. Volodymyr studied medicine in Ukraine and shared his professional experiences working as a doctor, particularly in the country's rural regions. In 2007, Volodymyr emigrated to the United States for better educational and career opportunities. He underwent medical residency in New York, finishing his specialization in nephrology at the University of Florida in Gainesville in 2015. Since he attended medical school in Ukraine and the US, Volodymyr compared how medical practice differed between the two nations. In addition to sharing his general observations living in Central Florida, Volodymyr discussed extensively the Apopka branch of the Ukrainian American Youth Association that he co-founded in 2024, and its immense cultural significance for the younger generations who are both Ukrainians and Americans. Lastly, Volodymyr explained his connections with the Annual Ukrainian Festival Vatra Orlando (where the oral history took place), its importance, and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Volodymyr Chornyy on February 16th, 2025, at the Fourth Annual Ukrainian Festival Vatra Orlando for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, your date of birth and where you were born?

00;00;18 - 00;00;26

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: My name is Volodymyr Chornyy. I was born in Ukraine in April 20th, 1981.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So you were around ten years old when the Soviet Union dissolved? Correct?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Correct.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Do you remember anything from that time period?

00;00;37 - 00;02;26

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: I remember everything very well. I remember we were finishing our elementary school. I was then in the fifth grade, and when we came back from the summer vacation, everything was pretty much upside down in school. We have no longer followed any slogans of the Communist Party that we were forced to. We were not wearing special uniforms.

Under Soviet Union rule, we used to have a special distinguishing signs on the uniform that pictured Lenin on different stages of his life and career. So when we were young in elementary school, all of us were called [*foreign word*], and we had a whole little red star on the uniform with the picture of young Lenin. And once we moved to middle school, we become “pioneers.” And then we were wearing a red tie. So I remember very well coming from summer vacation, because independence of Ukraine was declared on 24th of August, and the school year starts on September 1st. So right later, one week later, we found out that we are no longer under Soviet rule. And we were able to wear our traditional Ukrainian clothes to come to school, *Vyshyvanka*, and we had in the hallway of the school our Ukrainian famous poet, Taras Shevchenko, instead of Lenin.

00;02;26 - 00;02;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And before progressing in time, what was life like growing up generally in the Soviet Union from your memory?

00;02;33 - 00;03;22

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: I grew up in the middle class family. My father was an engineer and my mom was, is a doctor. I cannot say that we had horrible life. We have a pretty decent life. You know, we had all necessities of life. However, at the very end of Soviet Union existence, there was significant strain on the families of middle class people because stores became pretty much empty. Everything was in scarcity and in deficit. So that was the toughest years from, I would say, 1989 to 1991 and forward.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And talk to me about how the conditions after the Soviet Union fell and Ukraine became independent throughout the 90s.

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Oh, it was a good spirit and in terms of having back our own country, having our back symbols, our anthem, our culture, traditions. However, economically, it was tough. As I said, a lot of people were forced to go and pretty much work outside of the area of specialties such as my dad, you know, he was an engineer, but he was not able—he was also teaching in university. Teaching university was not paying any salaries. You know, you were making money. They were kind of in your account, but no one was actually giving you paper money. So we had to go and make money abroad working on different jobs and trades just to support family. So economically, it was pretty tough, I would say for the first five years, I’m recalling.

00;04;29 - 00;04;36

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: I've been told that you're a doctor. What inspired you to pursue medicine? And did you start that in Ukraine?

00;04;37 - 00;05;00

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yes. I'm actually following footprint of my mom. She's a doctor in Ukraine. She's still practicing. So, I was inspired by her service to community. And that's

how I ended up in the government sponsored school in Ukraine, in the city where I was born. And I graduated medical school there, yes.

00;05;00 - 00;05;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And did you practice in Ukraine?

00;05;02 - 00;05;20

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yes. I finished my training in Ukraine, and I was a general surgeon. I practiced for one year in one of the rural hospitals, maybe 30 miles away from the city, providing care for different layers of community and varieties of care. Yes.

00;05;20 - 00;05;28

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And when did you move to the U.S.? What year was that?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: 2007.

00;05;29 - 00;05;34

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 2007. And what inspired that decision?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Opportunity for better life, for career development, for, most of all, better future for the kids. Better education, better opportunity.

00;05;47 - 00;05;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And when you came to the U.S., did you come to Central Florida first or did you go to another city?

00;05;52 - 00;06;09

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: No, I came to New York, initially. We landed in March, and there was still snow there in New York. And we lived in New York for initial 3 to 4 years. Yeah.

00;06;09 - 00;06;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What were your initial impressions about the United States, especially since you grew up in the former Soviet Union?

00;06;16 - 00;07;17

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: I wish I knew that New York is not the United States in terms of how it looks like, it's a very multicultural city. So it was a lot of immigrants. I haven't heard pure American English, pretty much nine out of ten cases. You know, New York has its own vibrancy. New York was a good place to start because a) we had relatives there, b) it was a lot of job opportunities for even non-English speaking and c) it looked different. It looked a lot different than back home. You quickly realize that you have to work. But if you do work and you have work and a job, then you're going to be fine. You don't have to worry about the place you are going to live. We're not going to have to worry about food or any other necessities because even entry jobs in the United States we'll be able to afford that.

00;07;17 - 00;07;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Did you find a Ukrainian community within New York?

00;07;22 - 00;07;45

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yes. Yeah, we were a big part of the community. We were belong to one of the Ukrainian churches in the Manhattan and East Village, and there was a little Ukrainian village there, and we were persons in that church. So, yes, you know, we had relatives who introduced us very quick to the Ukrainian community here.

00;07;45 - 00;07;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you mentioned you were there for around four years. So you came to Central Florida after?

00;07;51 - 00;08;22

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: No, actually we moved to New Jersey, which is neighboring state to New York. And we lived in less than three years there. I was working in New Jersey, and after New Jersey, I did training in New York for medicine residency. So I was back to New York, family was in New Jersey. And after that, I did my specialty training in University of Florida in Gainesville. And that's how we end up in Florida. About ten years later, from the time when we initially immigrated.

00;08;22 - 00;08;24

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So 2017?

00;08;24;23 - 00;08;34;06

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yes. Well, 20—you're good at math. I think I started in Florida in 2015.

00;08;34 - 00;08;38

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 2015. Okay. And I'm curious, what specialty?

00;08;38 - 00;08;41

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: I actually specialize in kidney disease—nephrologist.

00;08;41 - 00;08;47

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay, interesting. What were your initial thoughts about Florida when you got here?

00;08;47 - 00;09;13

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yeah, I was totally shocked. Everything was clean, beautiful, green. Very nice people. I remember we lost some directions, so I stopped to ask someone. They spent half an hour explaining me how to go. It was totally different than in New York. New York, people usually busy running and don't have time to talk. Here, it was a lot better, a lot cleaner, better weather. So we fell in love right away.

00;09;13 - 00;09;19

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And was school the main or only reason that attracted you to come to Florida?

00;09;19 - 00;09;33

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Oh, yes. I end up in Florida because of the training and medical school. But, after being here two years in training, we quickly realized that's what probably where we want to stay. And that's why we end up here. Yes.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How different is medical school here in the US versus in Ukraine?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: In Ukraine, more hands on. More interaction with the patients. Here, first few years, a lot of the theory, tests, you pretty much not seeing any patients. But then later on you have clinical rotations and you have a good exposure. Although here you spend a lot more time in training in residency. So I think residency wise, a lot more comprehensive than back home, obviously. But, you know, if you talk about subjects like anatomy, physiology, chemistry, it's the same everywhere. If you talk about pharmacology, maybe you have different subspecialties then there's a difference, yes.

00;10;16 - 00;10;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Are you still currently resided in Gainesville or no?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: No, I live in Orlando.

00;10;25 - 00;10;27

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you moved to Orlando when?

00;10;27 - 00;10;29

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: 2017.

00;10;29 - 00;10;38

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 2017. Okay. Talk to me a little bit about the Ukrainian American Youth Association.

00;10;38 - 00;13;12

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: It's my great privilege to introduce you to this association. So, the Ukrainian American Youth Association, abbreviated UAYA. It exists for 100 years, actually. It was established in 1925 in Ukraine. It has been since then growing strong and bringing a lot of joy and a lot bringing cultures to communities around the world. Maybe in Japan, I don't know if they have UAYA, but everywhere else they do. A lot of branches in Europe, a lot of branches in Australia, Canada, North America, so very powerful organization. Our motto is God in Ukraine. So we trying to instill Christian values in the kids as well as, patriotism, unity, under guidance of Ukrainian cultures and Ukrainian upbringing. This motto captures the

essence of what we stand for and what we strive to pass in to our youth. It is more than a saying. It's a call to action. It's a reminder that our duty to live with faith and in our hearts, pride in our heritage and a sense of responsibility to one another. We formed a branch of UAYA Ukrainian American Youth Organization about less than a year ago here in Apopka on the base of our Ukrainian church. We have close to 25 kids, most of them were born here, but they have Ukrainian roots. Some of them were born back home in Ukraine. And we try to just promote good citizenship. Tried to educate them to grow up strong leaders of their community and good citizens and not necessarily only as Ukrainians, but as Americans, number one, to serve this country, which pretty much give us opportunity and we stand for this country. And many of our kids are born here, they're mostly Americans—American Ukrainians than Ukrainian Americans.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how did you initially get involved with the Ukrainian American Youth Association?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: We actually got introduced back in New York. That association is very strong in New York, [it is] usually strongest in the big cities where most of the diaspora is—Chicago, Toronto in Canada, New York. So we were belong to branch in New York. And they have a nice summer camp for kids upstate New York in the Pocono Mountains. It's pretty, educational, pretty hands on, like, I would say, Boy Scout-ish type, as well as cultural component. We also have a concert, kids are singing, kids are performing, kids are having sports, playing volleyball. So that's how we've been introduced. When we left New York and New Jersey, we were missing it greatly. And we would go once a year on the summer camp, but there was nothing like this here. So the idea came to my wife and with myself and other friends we organized this branch here and we're having fun.

00;14;32 - 00;14;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You mentioned in your previous answer, that most of your kids in the youth association are born here but have Ukrainian roots. Some of them are from Ukraine. I'm curious, how do you teach them to be, to navigate that dual identity of Ukrainian but American?

00;14;52 - 00;16;26

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: It's a good question. [We] initially thought to be very simple but has proven to be strikingly difficult. So first of all, approach to life, totally different. You know, educational system is different. Not in a bad or good way. It's just different. And what stands on our side, obviously parents who are mostly born in Ukraine and they are teaching kids at home, traditions and stuff. But yes, we have some gaps to close and some hoops to jump over. But I think, slowly, I will say 90% of the kids actually understand Ukrainian language and even speak, you know, some of them, 50% speak freely and another 40, a little bit less, but they understand when you talk. So we try to encourage that too in our association meetings. Festivals like this, bringing all of us together, different events we have throughout the year, that's how they see culture. That's how they get exposed. Sometimes they bring their friends and friends seeing, and they asking me “Oh, you from Ukraine? What it is? What does it mean? Why your shirt looks this way? What kind of language you speak?” So all of this helps them to

when they start explaining their friends where they're from, they kind of have to remember they have to learn, they have to assimilate a lot. So that's how it works.

00;16;26 - 00;16;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how has the youth association changed over time since you've been involved?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: We just started. So it's hard to say here in Orlando, I mean, it's hard to say how it's going to change, but what I see that people initially was very excited, obviously, like, in the beginning, everyone excited. Let's do it. Then, when the work comes, attending the meetings, preparing for the meetings, for parents volunteering, this enthusiasm is kind of a little bit faded. But my wife, as I say, she's very creative person. She always thinks about something interesting for them. And she is always trying to create some games for them, for all their kids, some crafts, we teach them how to cook Ukrainian dishes, we teach them how to do embroidery. We teach them about culture and history. We showing movies sometimes. The more interesting you make for them [because] you pretty much competing now—and this is not only Ukrainian kids [but] kids around the world—you're competing with phones; you're competing with Facebook; you're competing with Twitter, Instagram. Those are attention draining activities that you have to compete. So you have to become more interesting than Instagram, you have to be more interesting than Twitter or TikTok in order for the kid to bring attention to you and in order for them to get involved. So we don't force anyone. We don't collect phones at the entrance, but we manage so far. Again, it takes a lot of time, a lot of creativity and a lot of dedication. And I'm grateful that I have my wife that interested in doing it and also other members of our community.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That's a great point. Just to clarify for my end, when did you guys establish the Apopka branch? What year?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: 2024. I think it was around September.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And in what ways do you anticipate changes like what do you see in the future and its plans?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Our initial idea was, first of all, teach the culture, teach the heritage, teach good citizenship, and then we hope that our branch grows, we hope that friends will bring friends. And, in the end, we want to pass this to our kids. I want to see when I am an old grandpa that my kids having their kids going also into UAYA and having weekly meetings and going to festivals and carrying that torch. That's what I want to see.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And to that point, why is that transition, that handing over to the next generation, why is that important culturally?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: It's important culturally because we all have a history, and we all have a heritage. So I think it's important to carry that heritage throughout because, we first Americans, obviously, but since we have different heritage, we cannot let it extinguish. We cannot let it fade away because, in 3 or 4 generations from now, anyone will ask, "who was your grandpa? And they're going to say, "Ukrainian," "what is that?" So we don't want that to happen, and we want to carry that through.

We believe in our culture. We believe it's very important to be multicultural, culturally-versed, and I think it only brings us strong points to the family, to the personality. Speaking more than one language scientifically prove to be a good for your brain, delaying Alzheimer's Disease and everything like that. So I think that's a lot of points that we want to gain.

00;20;35 - 00;20;42

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. How long have you been involved with this festival that we're here today in the Ukrainian Orlando Festival?

00;20;42 - 00;21;08

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Since the very beginning. I have been sponsoring, helping out. I do a lot for Ukraine. We all do anything to support any Ukrainian communities. We go to Apopka, Christmas festivals, we go to Tampa events. So, I mean, since I'm pretty much in the Orlando area, we've been involved in one or another way.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you describe to me what was what was it like during the first festival since it happened right before the war?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yeah, it happened actually at the time of the war. This festival usually goes to February 15th. That year it was delayed one week, and then February 24th, full scale invasion started. So we were all shocked because that was the weekend we were planning to have festival. I remember all program was changed overnight because there was no more funny songs, no more dancing. It was all about supporting, all about this tragedy. So, yeah, I remember very well that. And it has changed in the way that more people are attending. It's better recognize now and hopefully very soon when war in Ukraine stops, it's going to be a lot more joy around this.

00;22;12 - 00;22;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What examples from your four years being involved with the festival would make you consider this event a success?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Number of attendees. For me, success, it's when singers or dancing teams or other performers come from around the United States to attend this festival and to show their performances. So for me, that's, success, as well as introducing community to Ukrainian culture, I would like to see a lot of people from community coming to those festivals, having fun, trying food, talking to people, looking at the culture, performances. The main goal is to bring awareness of the culture and create relationships, community, and network with community and then hopefully being invited for some community events, you know, Latino culture, Native Americans, so many things that we can attend and be part of.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Has your involvement with the festival been more intimate now that you are involved with the youth association because you had a tent today, correct?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Yeah, absolutely. Yes. Well, first of all, Ukrainian project, the organization who actually created this festival, all the members are very well known to us, we are friends, we attend the same church, we are part of the same community, but yes, we definitely see ourselves going along with the festival.

00;23;55 - 00;24;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has the war, even though you're living here in Central Florida, how has the war in Ukraine impacted you?

00;24;02 - 00;25;09

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: The fact that we live here it's probably even harder because I have my mom back home, my sister and her family, all the friends. And it's always hard to read those lines in the morning, because we do read news every day. There is no secret and sometimes many more than one time a day. Because it's always too hard to read, especially if there is some tragedies, some casualties. And that, and especially if those drones and rockets are going by, you see, that's the most harmful, yeah. So it's affected emotionally and physically. We in the beginning we were volunteering and helping a lot. And the first days of war, I think the church sent maybe 6 to 12 trucks of humanitarian aid. It was a lot of work. And I was helping with the medical part. So, medications and bandages. Whatever was needed, flexi-seals, wound vacs, anything we can do.

00;25;09 - 00;25;12

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What do you hope to see in Ukraine's future?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Well, first thing, we need to stop this war. Hopefully [the] current administration will walk there talk and do this. We want to see independence. We don't want to lose our independence. We've been fighting for it for hundreds and hundreds of years. We don't want to be again under Soviet Union rule. So hopefully it's not happens. And we want to see prosperity for our country.

00;25;40 - 00;25;46

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me a little bit about your experience as a Ukrainian doctor in Central Florida.

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: I have not to say just good experience. I mean, first thing when I walked into the patient's room, I being asked, where are you from? They hear my accent right away. And then I tell them where I'm from. And then 99.9% of the time, it's a sympathy. It's a compassion. It's always sorry to hear what's going on back home, but this has been in the last three years. Before that, it was "where are you from? Oh, yeah." Usually, it just helps me. And plus, [you must] understand that I had to study twice, so my knowledge is really deep in medicine and the patients can feel that.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. How would you describe the Ukrainian community in Orlando [and] Central Florida, especially if it has changed since you arrived in 2015, 2017?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: It has. It did. It has been changed in the last three years because of "you for you programs" and a lot of new community members. We have a lot of families with kids, young, young families. So we're kind of happy about that. Obviously, they did not come here for good reasons, they were running from war, but the community grew and got stronger and we happy about that.

00;27;03 - 00;27;10

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Your youth program accepts refugees from Ukraine?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Hundred percent. We have a lot of refugees. And they are welcomed. And, I would say, 50% of them are refugees.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how do you help them adjust to life here?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Oh, we help what we can, give them tips where to go, where to find the work, how to apply for health insurance, this and that. So we try to get them involved in these kind of activities. So that's how we do it.

00;27;41 - 00;27;47

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And just more broadly, how has Orlando changed in your perspective since you've lived here?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Grew a lot. I mean, Florida, overall in Orlando. I see roads being built, buildings being built, a lot more people coming through the Florida. So I like what I see.

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

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: It's a good question. I think accommodate all this growth for me. You know, infrastructure. If you're talking about schools, you know, universities, colleges, you know, healthcare, you know, everything has to be growing as fast as population growth. That's the only challenge. But otherwise, I think it is a pretty good thing for Florida.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: In what ways do you think Orlando will change in the next 25 years?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: Oh, it's hard to predict. You know, everything United States kind of goes in waves. Immigration as well. I mean, this movement that come now to southern states from west [and] from central United States. So it's hard to say where we are going to take us, but I hope we are going to create more jobs here, bring more talent, more blue and white collar workers so Orlando can get stronger, stronger and bigger and bigger. And that's the goal. Multicultural.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. In what ways has your Ukrainian heritage influenced your perspective on life generally, but also living in the United States/Orlando specifically?

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: That's a good question as well. I appreciate it. I think it give me pretty much since I lived through Soviet Union times from independence time from to the war, and now I live through a number of administrations, so I pretty much became very a thick skinned and forward looking, so a lot of, I think it's a good experience.

00;29;50 - 00;30;00

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

00;30;00 - 00;30;30

VOLODYMYR CHORNYI: I want to know that Ukrainian culture is more than 1000 years, 2000 years old. And it's one of the initial European cultures, per se. And I want to see 50 years from now, Ukraine independent and is prosper, and I want to see that Ukrainians coming here to the United State as a tourist and visitors and not as refugees of war. That's what I want to see.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Well, thank you so much for taking some time out of your busy day to talk with me about your life. I really appreciate it.

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VOLODYMYR CHORNYY: It was my pleasure. Any time. Thank you so much.