

## **FHS Oral History Project – George Rodón**

### **Description:**

George Rodón was born in Santiago, Cuba, in 1947. George recounted his upbringing in Santiago, particularly the joyous mood once Fidel Castro took control of the island from the longstanding right-wing dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. George explained how the elation quickly soured, prompting his family to flee Cuba on November 13, 1960, almost two years into the Castro regime. After a few months in Miami, George and his family moved to Ohio, where his father landed a medical residency to start practicing in the US. George attended the University of Maryland from 1966 to 1970 and majored in psychology and criminology. In 1971, George returned to Florida to work for the Division of Youth Services. In 1994, then-Mayor of Orange County Linda Chapin appointed George as chief of staff, recalling his broader experiences serving in that position. Given his extensive professional resume serving in prominent public roles and his personal experience living in Central Florida over the past fifty years, George shared his broader observations regarding continuities and changes in the region and state, which he has acquired since 1971.

### **Transcription:**

00;00;00 - 00;00;14

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing George Rodón on May 13th, 2025, at Fashion Square, Orlando, Florida, for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, date of birth and where you were born?

00;00;14 - 00;00;26

**GEORGE RODÓN:** My name is George Rodón. I was born in Santiago, Cuba, on September 20th, 1947.

00;00;27 - 00;00;30

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Can you tell me about your childhood growing up in Santiago, Cuba?

00;00;30 - 00;01;53

**GEORGE RODÓN:** It was very idyllic. We were several generations Cubans in Cuba. My family, from my mother's side, goes back to the 1700s in Santiago. My father's family is a little newer. They came over during the Spanish-American War. My great grandfather was a colonel in the Spanish army. When the Spaniards lost the war, he returned to Spain, and my great grandmother stayed in Cuba. My grandfather was a small child then. And we were born in Oriente, which is the eastern province of Cuba. We are several generations there. The family on my mother's side was prominent because my great uncle was the mayor of Santiago, the youngest mayor ever, at age 27. And coincidentally, his name was Desi Arnaz, like the famous comedian who married Lucille Ball. And so my official name is really George Arnaz Rodón.

00;01;53 - 00;01;58

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Excellent. And what do your parents do for a living?

00;01;58 - 00;02;33

**GEORGE RODÓN:** My father was a medical doctor, and he practiced in Cuba. He was a surgeon. And then when we came to this country in 1960, he had to undergo all the residencies

and things that doctors have to do—foreign doctors—to be able to practice here. He did that and completed his residency and practice in Merritt Island. And that was where he retired from.

00;02;33 - 00;02;35

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Excellent. Were you an only child?

00;02;35 - 00;02;48

**GEORGE RODÓN:** No. I have two sisters, one older, by about eighteen months and one younger by about sixteen years. So it is the three of us.

00;02;49 - 00;02;55

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Were there any particular challenges that your family faced growing up?

00;02;55 - 00;04;24

**GEORGE RODÓN:** In Cuba, not really. We had it pretty good. We were, I guess you can say, well-to-do. But those were in the 50s. And things that we take for granted today were not available then, like air conditioner or a television that ran 24/7. We had a black and white television that ran for like three hours a night. And the town we lived in, Santiago, was hot. Very hot. And you had to make adjustments for that. You try not to go out in the high noon because it was so hot, but we did not seem to mind it because we never knew air conditioner then, so we did not miss it. So we had it pretty good until we came to this country, at the time we were poor, but being poor is not a problem. I have always said that being poor with hope is not a problem, but being poor without hope must be a very tragic thing. But if you are poor, and you know that you have potential for redemption, you are okay, you just take it one day at a time. You have one pair of shoes and perhaps two pair of pants and three shirts, and you make do, and you never miss it. You adjust.

00;04;24 - 00;04;38

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And you were about ten, eleven, twelve years old around that range when [Fidel] Castro took over in 1959. Can you just recall the atmosphere at that time?

00;04;38 - 00;05;47

**GEORGE RODÓN:** There were very exciting times because we had just undergone a right wing dictatorship by [Fulgencio] Batista. And Fidel was going to be the savior. Our family supported Fidel, and we were in an area of Cuba where the revolution was active and very active. There were bombings every night. Shootings. People were missing and then turned up dead later. I remember as a small child having to deal with that and maybe not be able to ride my bicycle because there were bodies on the streets that my parents did not want me to see. But Fidel was supposed to be our savior, and we were so happy when he won the revolution. Cuba was going to be free. He was going to be the savior. And we were going to live out our days in Cuba, happy, go lucky, as the beacon of democracy in Latin America. But it was not meant to be.

00;05;47 - 00;05;52

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** So you mentioned earlier how your father left in 1960. You all left with him?

00;05;52 - 00;06;43

**GEORGE RODÓN:** No. My father was a doctor. He was not allowed to leave Cuba because doctors were kept back because they needed doctors. So he faked a contest with the Venezuelan government. He was a ham radio operator, and he won a contest, which was all fake, that enabled him to leave Cuba on a ten day pass to go to Caracas and pick up a trophy. Well, when he went to Caracas, he never came back. And after the ten days of the permit, they went to the house to find him. When he was not there, they took over the house and they took everything we owned. And it became government property, and we never been back. That was in November of 1960.

00;06;43 - 00;06;45

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And when did you leave the island?

00;06;45 - 00;06;52

**GEORGE RODÓN:** We left it, I remember the day it was a Sunday, November 13th, 1960.

00;06;52 - 00;06;55

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And did you come to Florida?

00;06;55 - 00;07;18

**GEORGE RODÓN:** We came to Miami. We stayed at the home of my great uncle, Desi Arnaz for a little while. And then after that, my father joined us early in '61, and then he began his efforts to do a residency and become a doctor in the US.

00;07;18 - 00;07;37

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you mentioned how, sort of in the lead up to and at the moment of the revolution, there was great hope and promises. And then almost a year later, you fled. So besides your father's incident, what happened?

00;07;37 - 00;09;06

**GEORGE RODÓN:** My parents, who were, of course, mature then, they would say that in the old days, if you lived under a right wing dictatorship, you could just be quiet and make it and survive. But under a communist dictatorship, you had to be a communist actively so, if not, you were unable to get a job. You were unable to make a living. So either you were a communist or you were not. And if you were not, you could not make it. So that was why they left. And they also had a great fear that my sister and I would be indoctrinated because they were having these schools at a certain age, [which] kids were plucked from their parents' home, taken to a *campo* which meant the country, and you would be indoctrinated into believing that communism was the right way to go, and then the kids would come back trans—kind of becoming communist. And the parents had a great fear of that because it would turn families against families. So that was when they said we got to go because we cannot stay here because of the kids.

00;09;06 - 00;09;13

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Right. And talk to me about your adjustment in Miami as a teenager.

00;09;13 - 00;09;15

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, we were only in Miami a few months.

00;09;15; - 00;09;16

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Okay.

00;09;16 - 00;10;09

**GEORGE RODÓN:** I did not speak English at all, and it was very difficult, but there were a lot of new arrivals from Cuba, and we kind of hung out together, and we are able to survive. Now, the difficult time was when we went to Ohio. My father got a residency in Ohio, and we moved to small town in Ohio, outside of Cleveland, where they had never seen a Cuban before. And I did not speak a word of English. And it was very, very difficult. I remember sitting in class and I did not have a clue what the teacher was talking about. And when you have to learn, you have to learn. And in about a year or maybe less, I picked up the English language.

00;10;09 - 00;10;12

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** You attended the University of Maryland, correct?

00;10;12 - 00;10;12

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Correct. Yes.

00;10;12 - 00;10;17

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What years? And what was your major?

00;10;17 - 00;11;18

**GEORGE RODÓN:** My major was psychology with a minor in criminology, and I was there from '66 to '70. Ironically, my grandfather on my father's side, who was a pharmacist, had attended the University of Maryland back in the early 1900s. And we always used to make fun of him because he did not pronounce Baltimore as Baltimore. He said it was "Balimore." And that was because if you live in Maryland, Baltimore is "Balimore." And he went to the University of Maryland and was a pharmacist. In those days, pharmacists were called doctors. They did more, I think, than they do now, which is actually compound pharmacies, they call them now. But I went to Maryland, and he had passed by then, but it would have been interesting to say, "*Abuelo* [Grandfather], I went to Maryland like you did."

00;11;18 - 00;11;23

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. Why do you select psychology and criminology?

00;11;23 - 00;11;55

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, because my father was a doctor, and he got me a job at a mental hospital outside of Baltimore or "Balimore." Anyway, I worked there summers and I worked with mental patients at a time when they were not treated correctly. They were more or less imprisoned in psychiatric wards and provided heavy medication to control them. And I [thought] that there would be a better way.

00;11;55 - 00;12;02

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And then after graduating from the University of Maryland, you returned to Florida, correct?

00;12;02 - 00;12;56

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Yes. When my father got all his credentials, he was able to take the Florida state boards and become a doctor in Florida. I do not know what the deal is now, but in those days, you had to pass the test in every state. Some states had reciprocity, so perhaps if you took the boards in Florida, you could be accepted in Georgia, I do not know, but he became a doctor here in Central Florida. And one winter day I came down and it was a beautiful, beautiful day. And in Baltimore, it was snowing, cold, wet, muddy, dirty. And I said, "Why am I in up north?" So in 1971, I moved to Florida.

00;12;56 - 00;13;02

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And to work in the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, correct?

00;13;02 - 00;13;58

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Correctly. At the time, it was called the Division of Youth Services, so I was able to work with juvenile delinquents, and it was just a very rewarding and frustrating position. But I think I helped a lot of kids make it through the difficult teenage years, and I can look back on many successes of kids who straightened themselves out, and I was just able to be there for them. And then there was a young man—well an old man now—who has been in death row for like forty years who was one of my probationers. He did a horrible crime. And he now sits in in death row here in Florida. And to this day, I wish I could have done more for him to save the tragedy that he caused.

00;13;59 - 00;14;04

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I should have clarified, was this position in Orlando, where in Florida?

00;14;04 - 00;14;55

**GEORGE RODÓN:** This was mostly in Brevard County. Then, in order to get promoted, you had to move around. So I was promoted. My first big promotion was to Daytona Beach, so I moved to Daytona Beach. After that, the next big promotion was in Jacksonville. And after Jacksonville, a new governor took over and I was in a senior position, so you serve at the pleasure of the governors. So you are a governor's appointee. And when the new governor came in, he cleaned house, and I was not reappointed to the position. And that was when I left the state. And, after a while, I began to work for Orange County here in Orlando.

00;14;55 - 00;14;57

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And talk to me about that position.

00;14;57 - 00;16;22

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, they had a position in Orange County as a chief probation supervisor working for the Department of Corrections here in Orlando. And I applied to the position, and I was honored and fortunate to get the job. So I began my career again. Then, as it happened before, I kept getting promoted. And then Orange County adopted a mayoral form of government. And Linda Chapin was the first mayor of Orange County, and she was about to start her second term, and her chief of staff was not coming back. So, out of the blue, I was appointed as her chief of staff. And that began a new track in my career because I went from being an administrator, at one point supervising like 4000 people to a small political office, where I reported directly to the mayor, and we had a small staff, but my job was to make sure that everything went right for the mayor in her office and that she had the support she needed to be the chief executive in Central Florida.

00;16;22 - 00;16;23

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what year was this?

00;16;23 - 00;16;29

**GEORGE RODÓN:** This was in 1994. Yeah.

00;16;29 - 00;16;3

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And can you share any specific moments or experiences serving as chief of staff?

00;16;36 - 00;18;15

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Yes. And I tell this often because I was very fortunate that I worked for her as her chief of staff, then for the next mayor, who was Mel Martínez, and after that, for Rich Crotty. I served three mayors for a total of about, oh my gosh, almost ten years. And I was very fortunate that every mayor that I worked for was a decent and honest person. And I was never asked to do anything that would have been unethical, illegal, or...so I was never put in a position where I would have had to say, no thanks, because they never asked me to do anything that was underhanded. So I was very lucky. And my job was as a public servant. And I used to tell the staff that the call that comes in to the office is not an interruption of the work, or an interruption of your life, it is the reason you are here. So I demanded that staff returned all the calls by the close of business that day and get answers for the citizens who are calling and asking for help, which could be fixing in a pothole or fixing a traffic light. So I was lucky. I enjoyed doing what I did.

00;18;15 - 00;18;22

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I am curious, what was it like working with Mel Martínez as a fellow Cuban himself? What was that like?

00;18;22 - 00;19;03

**GEORGE RODÓN:** We were very aware that we did not want people to say, "Oh we got a Cuban gang here or a Cuban mafia." So we were very professional. While privately, I always call him by his first name because we are friends, in public, it was always mayor. And we kept it very professional. And we never allowed our heritage and friendship to come between our work. We were professional at work and to some degree, a little distant, which was necessary.

00;19;03 - 00;19;08

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What did you learn about Orange County and Central Florida serving in this career?

00;19;09 - 00;21;11

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, what I learned is that democracy is the way to rule, but it is not very efficient. In Orange County, we have thirteen cities, thirteen, mind you. And we have twelve mayors plus the county mayor, the only city in Orange County that does not have a mayor is Disney World, and that is because I guess Mickey is the mayor. But I do not think that was very efficient. I am looking here at the highway in front of us, and this is Colonial Drive, [and] if you take Colonial Drive from when it starts in East Orange County, you go through Orlando, you may go through Winter Garden, you may go through other municipalities. And it just does not make any sense to me that you have to have different governments in different places, because every government requires a mayor, every government requires a public safety director at public utilities. And it is just a duplication that is not a very efficient, cost effective way. It should be, Jacksonville, for instance, Duval County and Jacksonville is one. The chief of police in Jacksonville is also the sheriff for Duval County. Here we have, the sheriff and we have a chief of police. In fact, we have twelve other chiefs of police in every municipality. And imagine that is twelve different chiefs being paid.

00;21;11 - 00;21;11

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah.

00;21;11 - 00;21;13

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Yeah.

00;21;13 - 00;21;29

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** You spent most of your life here in Orlando serving in public positions that have allowed you to gain a deep insight about the city's political, economic and cultural milieu. How has Orlando changed since you have been here?

00;21;29 - 00;22;41

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, when I first arrived in Orlando in 1970, if you heard someone speaking Spanish anywhere, you literally made a beeline and you went to that person and say, "*Oyeme! Quién eres? De dónde eres?* [Hey you!] Who are you? Where are you from?" because there were very few Hispanics. Imagine that today. Oh my gosh, if you hear somebody speak Spanish, it is not out of the ordinary. It is just common. It has become a destination for a lot of Hispanics. And that has changed. And it is what it is. And I just hope that we are accepted by our contributions to the community, for instance, most of my doctors are Hispanics. I do not know what would happen if there were not here. I am sure that there would be some Anglo that would take over. But I hope we make a contribution that gives us the right to call this home and to make it a better place.

00;22;41 - 00;22;46

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Right. What challenges does Orlando face today?

00;22;46 - 00;24;12

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, growth. At a time when I was chief of staff—think about this—every year we would grow in population the equivalent to a new Winter Park, every year. Every single year, a new Winter Park, roughly 30,000 new people moved to Orange County. You would drive down a highway where just last year it was nothing but woods and now you see apartments after apartments after apartments. The traffic is horrendous. Growth brings people, brings challenges. You have to provide education. I think what makes America great is public education. I hope we do not get to a place where, for instance, in Cuba, kids of well-to-do families never went to public schools. They went to generally religious schools, Catholic schools mostly. I hope we do not come to that because I think a good education is something that people deserve. People have earned. And it is a right. And that is a challenge to answer your question.

00;24;12 - 00;24;17

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** From your perspective, how will Orlando change in the next fifty years, since you have been here for fifty years?

00;24;18 - 00;25;29

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, I think there is a limit to the growth and there is competition. I read the paper, and I hear of people trying to protect the environment, the wetlands, which is a rich resource for our water system. There will come a time when, I am sorry, but you cannot put any more people in. I guess we can go tall and build tall buildings and put more people in. But I still like the country. I like the parks. Under Mayor Chapin, she invested heavily in parks. And once in a while, I take my grandkids, or we take our grandkids to parks. And I look back and I say, “Well, I remember when they started this park,” and people said, “We do not need a park.” Well, now we do. And you see on weekends, soccer fields after soccer fields, and kids just enjoying themselves and families enjoying the park.

00;25;29 - 00;25;36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** How has your Cuban heritage influenced your perspective on life generally, but living in Florida [and Orlando] specifically?

00;25;36 - 00;27;23

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, I am very proud to be Cuban, born in Cuba, but I am equally proud to be a US citizen. And I will never forget in August of 1972, it was at the federal courthouse, the old federal courthouse in downtown Orlando, when I raised my right hand, and I saw allegiance to the flag of the United States. And as I uttered the words, I cried. I was really, and to this day, I think of that moment as a very important moment. That day I became an American and, I am proud to be an American. I am also proud to have been born in Cuba. I cannot change that. If you think about it, you have no say at all where you are born. You are born where you are born. And I was born in Cuba. And I am proud of that. But we made some mistakes in Cuba that I wish we could go back and fix, so that if that had been the case, I would have not had to immigrate to the United States. We would still be in Cuba visiting the great USA as we did as tourists. But it is what it is. And my kids are, my family is American. They are honored and



proud to be of Cuban heritage. They never hide that. But we are Americans, and this is what makes this country great.

00;27;23 - 00;27;45

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And to that point reflecting on your life, are you satisfied with how you lived life on the hyphen, to borrow that phrase from the very famous Cuban writer [Gustavo Pérez Firmat] on his experiences being a Cuban and an American in the United States?

00;27;45 - 00;29;16

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, I think it has made me who I am. I would not be the same if I had been born here. I have some insights that if I had been born in the States, I would not have. And, I remember once, I was asked to give a speech on a Veteran's Day, and it was unexpected. Actually, I was working for a mayor that got his schedule messed up, and he could not make it, so he asked me to go and speak for him. And I did not realize how to speak until I got there. And then I said, oh my gosh, I got a speech to give. Well, the speech was that, in the US, I had to learn when I moved here that people in uniforms, particularly in the armed services, were not here to subjugate people. But were here to protect. And history tells us that the United States has been to many wars, and we fight, we lose men and women, and we come home. And other countries the military is used to govern and to subjugate people. And that was an insight that I have, where now when I see someone in uniform, I am not afraid of them. I respect them. And oftentimes, if appropriate, I thank him or her for their service.

00;29;16 - 00;29;32

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And do you think that serving in public positions was something that you were very conscious of being involved in the political process here given your background?

00;29;32 - 00;30;16

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Yes, I think so. And what I try to do is be very mindful of public service. And I used to say to the staff, "You are a servant of the public. They pay your salary, so you better act like it." We were not there to become wealthy and rich. But we were there to serve the public. And in many dictatorial governments, they go in poor and they leave very rich, and that is no accident. And here in the United States, public servants ought to be that, just servants of the public.

00;30;16 - 00;30;25

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Lastly, if someone is listening to this recording fifty or hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

00;30;25 - 00;32;15

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Well, that Florida originally was Hispanic. In fact, I have to do the math, but I think today Florida has been more under the Spanish rule than under Anglo rule, if you add the years. So, if you go to Florida, if you visit Florida, you have so many places where the names are in Spanish, like St. Augustine, and places where the history of the United States was born. And Florida is a Hispanic name, and Ponce de Leon was looking for the Fountain of Youth. So we owe a lot to the Hispanics that colonized this and must have been horrible. When

there were more mosquitoes on people. And now, we are getting to a point where there may be more crocodiles than people, but it is totally different. But we cannot forget the history of Florida. And I do not know if you know this, but Tallahassee, the legend is that the population of Florida then was in Pensacola and in St. Augustine and they decided where is the capital? And supposedly they sent a horse from St. Augustine and one from Pensacola, and they met in Tallahassee and that is why the capital is up there where it is crazy. But, I do not know, because in those days, I do not think they had cell phones to coordinate the trip but, anyway.

00;32;15 - 00;32;20

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** George, thank you so much for taking some time out of your day to share your life story. I really appreciate it.

00;32;20 - 00;32;21

**GEORGE RODÓN:** Thank you Sebastian.