

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Lorraine Ornelas**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**December 4, 2008**

Smith: How did your paths cross?

Ornelas: I was working at the Marriott Desert Springs. I was a chef there and they came in a couple of times to have a dinner. Prior to that I knew a mutual friend, Rosalee, who happened to be the cook, or the chef at the Betty Ford Center. You know how chefs all know each other in the Valley and kind of help each other out – that’s kind of how it was. She gave Mrs. Ford my name and number when they were looking for a chef or cook, and they had had my food at Tuscan’s, which I worked at, at that time at the Marriott. That’s how she knew who I was and it was a funny story because Mrs. Ford called me and my roommate said, “It’s Betty Ford for you on the phone,” and I said, “Shut up, you know, quit messing around.” And he goes, “No, it’s really Betty Ford.” And I said, “Why would she be calling me?” and that’s how – she wanted to know if I’d be interested in a job, or interviewing for a job for them as a personal chef. That’s how it all started.

Smith: And that would have been about when?

Ornelas: This was maybe twelve years ago? Maybe longer.

Smith: Yeah. I’m thinking...

Ornelas: Twelve or thirteen years ago, I didn’t really do the math, but it was a while back.

Smith: I’m wondering because I remember...

Ornelas: Maybe longer.

Smith: And you were with them for how long?

Ornelas: Almost seven years, and I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine when I went to work for them.

Smith: We must have met because I remember before I took the job at the library, and this would have been the end of '95 – I came out here and had lunch with him at the house. What was that like – the interview with her?

Ornelas: Well, when she asked if I would be interested in the interview I said, sure. And I didn't think anything of it – not that I didn't know who Betty and Gerald Ford were, but I mostly knew about her because I went to the Betty Ford Center – but she did not know it at the time. So, of course, you know who Betty Ford is – anyone in the desert knows who Betty Ford is. So I didn't think much of it and maybe my arrogance, or being young, I was twenty-something years old, I was like, "Okay, sure, I'll go on an interview."

And then as I told people about it and when I went to work and told them that I was going to interview for this job, everybody got *so* excited about it. People at work, other chefs were jealous of it, and it started to – I started to realize what a big deal this was. And then I started to get nervous, so I had some friends of mine kind of coach me. I'd never really went on an interview this important before. I went out and bought a whole new suit, because I knew Mrs. Ford is into fashion, so I wanted to look presentable. I bought a briefcase and I remember walking into the office and just the feel of it, I knew this was going to be something different.

Smith: How so – something different?

Ornelas: Well, I had only worked in restaurants since I was like seventeen years old. The hustle and bustle, it's the night life. I'd recently went to the Betty Ford Center, so I was only nine months sober when I got the interview.

Smith: And you'd not met her while you were there?

Ornelas: When you go to the Center, you see her because she does a lecture. I remember everyone going up to her and thanking her and I didn't. Let's say, getting sober for me wasn't what I wanted to do. An intervention is how I got there. So I didn't do it by choice, I did it by force. The Marriott where I worked did an intervention on me and that saved my job, to go to the Betty Ford Center. So, against my will, if you can imagine, I went there. So I wasn't very happy to be there and I really didn't care who Mrs. Ford was at that time,

and this is why this is such an amazing story, I think that I have, because what in turn happened, was amazing - the fact that I ended up working for them and being part of their family. At that time in my life I was pretty much lost and broken, I had a broken spirit. When I walked into this interview I felt that I had hope. When she walked into the interview room, she just has this graceful stride to her and she introduced herself, we sat down, and she was very kind, and formal at the same time.

Smith: Business-like?

Ornelas: Yeah, business-like, but charming and I found myself at ease with her. And then she talked to me most of the time. Then she said, "You'll be meeting my husband after the interview." So, that's what we did. We got up, walked into this office where I shook Mr. Ford's hand for the first time. I liked him from the minute I met him. Something about him - just his whole demeanor to me. He shook my hand, he's polite, asked me a couple of questions and then that was it and went out. I said goodbye and I didn't hear from her for like two weeks. I thought, oh I didn't get the job, so I just went on. Then two weeks later she called and said, "Would you like to work for us?" And I said, "Sure." I didn't hesitate. And that's how it all started.

Smith: A couple of things: in this initial interview, presumably she talked about their tastes, their preferences, in food? What sorts of things...

Ornelas: Yeah, I just remember she saying they had a big family and she kind of gave me the lowdown on the traveling - that they did go to Beaver Creek, Colorado - their kids, they named them all. I didn't remember at the interview hardly any of this because as we went along, I was like, I don't remember her saying this, but I think I was kind of - there was a lot to absorb, I guess.

Smith: Yeah.

Ornelas: The kind of food they like - the first thing I remember is her telling me that they didn't like Mexican food, spicy food, and that they like simple meals, and they liked to eat healthy. And that's my specialty, so it worked.

Smith: And he was – and of course, she, too, but he was very self-disciplined, wasn't he? They both really took care of themselves.

Ornelas: That's one of the biggest things I learned from him. I was thinking when I was on my way over here, about that and the discipline. I learned a lot about discipline from Mr. Ford. I think he had a lot of discipline and I think that's why I felt secure. There was a sense of security for me because he had such discipline and he was a great example to me – somebody who was so undisciplined. The only discipline I ever had was to go to [the Betty Ford] Center and get sober, and I didn't have a clue. I fell into this job by word-of-mouth from someone who knew someone, who gave her a number and she contacted me.

There are no coincidences – I believe that very much. From the first time I came into the family, they told me the things they liked and didn't like – it was kind of a short list, but nothing major. They seemed very friendly and easy going. Ann Cullen was Mrs. Ford's secretary at the time, who kind of gave me the bigger picture of how they liked the service and when they ate, the times and the schedules and things like that.

Smith: Was he a workaholic?

Ornelas: He enjoyed working – I believe he was, yes.

Smith: Borderline.

Ornelas: But I understand that. When you have a passion for something – like I cook, bake and do stuff 24/7.

Smith: Now is that something you've always loved?

Ornelas: I think I've had a natural talent since I was young. It was just something that comes natural to me. And to this day, I have a restaurant, I am hands-on in there. They can't keep me out. And then if I'm not there, I'm somewhere baking because I love to bake. They loved my desserts.

Smith: Really? Did he have a sweet tooth?

Ornelas: Yeah.

Smith: What desserts in particular?

Ornelas: Anything, but I think cookies and pies – just the good stuff – the down home, homemade things, were probably the favorite. He loved ice cream. I was trying to think of his favorite food – he loved sea bass. She liked desserts, too, but Mrs. Ford watched her figure more than he did. But he had great discipline. If he would gain a pound, he would cut back and he would tell me, only serve me half, or he would only eat – I don't know too many people who could have a big, juicy piece of pie with ice cream and stop themselves at half. Mrs. Ford could do that also.

Smith: Plus, of course, he swam a couple of times a day.

Ornelas: Yes, he was very active.

Smith: You were in the house – what was your daily schedule like?

Ornelas: Well, I'll just tell you when I first started working for them, it was very different – the whole pace – everything from the restaurant world I was used to. Also, my own thing with being sober – just getting sober and being...I told Mrs. Ford, I think after she offered the job, I had to let her know that I was newly sober, and she had no hesitation to hire me. It's not easy getting sober and it's not easy having someone newly sober in your life, so I wasn't sure if they were going to be...but in retrospect, when I think about it, the Betty Ford Center is the reason why – it exists because of her.

Smith: He had cut out his drinking, too, when she did.

Ornelas: Yes, that's when he would tell me stories. He would tell me stories and I would be in awe of his discipline, or his ability to just say something and do it. He said they used to have Jack Daniels Silver – I don't know what that is – every night and he used to smoke a pipe, and they would have cocktails. When she got sober he said he just stopped. I said, "Just like that?" and he said, "Just like that, I stopped." Because their cocktail I used to serve them – they would have a cocktail and then I would serve them an appetizer, and at 7:30 they ate their dinner. The cocktail was just club soda with a lime, and he would come in the kitchen every day, every evening and I would have it ready

there for him and he would pour it and then he would take it out to the living room, where I would take them their meals.

But those are the times when he and I had our time alone together. Or if Mrs. Ford was out on a trip or something, which was rare, but she would be out doing something with the Betty Ford Center or something. I just remember he used to call me Pal a lot. He would walk in and say, "How you doing, Pal, this evening?" and then we would have a small conversation – talk about something and then he'd go off and then I would bring them their meal. Breakfast – they would do their own breakfast, I would just leave grapefruits and everything ready for them and they would do it themselves. They were very self-sufficient and on the nights that I wasn't cooking, I would leave them things and they would fix dinner for each other. I always thought that was very unique, because I know other people who would always go out or have people come in. Mrs. Ford wanted to do it. I would leave them something.

Smith: They were incredibly close, weren't they?

Ornelas: Yes, they were partners. Whenever I would ask them something, if I had a request or something, he would say, "I'll talk to Mrs. Ford about it," and she would always say, "I'll talk to Mr. Ford about it." And then, I believe that they would. They would have a discussion and then they would tell me the outcome.

That's another thing they showed me. I really have to say this when I first came to them and worked for them, I thought it was just going to be another job. They invited me into their family. They told me, "You're going to be part of this family. You're going to work for us, but you're going to be part of this family." And I thought to myself, well that's a nice gesture to say, but I will be your employee. The first time we ever went to Vail, Colorado – I don't like to fly, and I'd never flown in a Lear jet before – and that's the way they used to travel. It's small and confined and Lear jets go kind of fast, I mean, they go straight up. And Mrs. Ford would be so kind and nice and reassuring that nothing is going to happen. Mr. Ford went and got the pilot. This is what I loved about him – whenever I had doubts or fears, he took me to talk to the

pilot so that they could explain to me how and what was going to happen, and how the plane worked, and that there was nothing that could happen, and that they have extra special cargo - meaning Mr. and Mrs. Ford - and they weren't going to let anything happen to them, so that I didn't have to worry.

Get in the plane, we take off, this thing goes straight up in the air and I would be sitting facing Mrs. Ford, and Mr. Ford would be in the seat there, and then the two Secret Service, and the two pilots. I would bring the lunch on and we would fly from Palm Springs to Eagle Creek, which is Colorado, to go to Beaver Creek.

Smith: How long a flight was that?

Ornelas: I believe it was like an hour and half – maybe not even that long. But I remember being so scared my very first time, and she just kept talking and reassuring me all the way, never got irritated and he just kept talking conversation. He even fell asleep, and I thought for a minute that if he took a nap he must be obviously really comfortable and feel safe if he's sleeping. It was dark when we got to Colorado. I had no idea where I was. I've only flown one other time in my whole life. We were driving, we had to drive from Eagle to Beaver Creek – it was about 45 minutes to an hour, and I've never seen and never felt so much snow in my life. When I got off that plane I was like in shock. Mrs. Ford kept reassuring me, make sure I buttoned up, make sure I had a thing around my neck.

Smith: You'd always lived in the desert?

Ornelas: Yes – no, I'm from San Francisco, but I had lived in the desert for like, five years or so. I'm accustomed to it – the warm weather – I love it. So there I am, not having a clue, and this place is magnificently beautiful. I think they had the most snow they had in Colorado in ten years that time that we went; it was for Christmas.

Smith: What was their house like?

Ornelas: When I first saw it, I thought it was gigantic. I've never seen anything like it. But it was a nice, I think it was a three-story house in the mountains in Beaver Creek. Did you ever go?

Smith: No, never saw it.

Ornelas: It was in a circle in a cul de sac on the top of the mountain, which was very nice, and there were other houses around it. It was beautiful.

Smith: I've been told there is a deck where sometimes they'd have parties, I guess during the warm weather. With a view.

Ornelas: Yeah, the kitchen, the deck, the view was beautiful. Mrs. Ford, in her bathroom, her big tub, there was a view out to the mountains which was magnificent. It was just beautiful. That was my first time ever seeing anything like that. I just went along and I didn't really know what to expect. I knew I was going to work. The whole family was going to be there. I think that's the first time I met all the kids and the grandkids.

Also, I remember a story and I'm going to tell it. It is Mr. Ford and skiing and being part of the Ford family. He said, "You need to learn to ski." And I never skied. Those mountains are big. He said to me, "You've never skied?" And I said, "No, I've never skied." "Have you ever drove in snow?" "No, I never drove in snow." "Okay." They called Dick Garbarino, who looked after their house – called him up, "Teach her how to drive in the snow." So I had the house car which was like a Jeep Cherokee or something. So Dick teaches me how to drive in ice and the snow, by Mr. Ford's wishes.

Then Mr. Ford said, "Tomorrow morning you and I are going to go down to the ski school." I had no idea what ski school was. "And we're going to enroll you." I'm like, okay, I've never skied before, I don't have – Ann Cullen had loaned me a bunch of sweaters because I'm from the desert. I had flip flops and tank t-shirts and jeans. She lent me a pile of sweaters, she gave them to me and said, "Here, take jeans, take warm socks and hats." So that's what I did. I didn't have anything to ski in – what do you ski in? Mrs. Ford's like, "You need a ski outfit." I'm like, "I don't have a ski outfit." She goes, "Well, you use mine." I'm like, I couldn't believe that she would lend me her – Betty

Ford's going to lend me her ski outfit to learn to ski and Mr. Ford's going to drive me down to ski school. I was like, "Okay, this is great." I'm always up for an adventure. So we get up the next morning, we have breakfast, I go down to meet him in the hallway, get Mrs. Ford's – she geared me up – she gave me goggles, she gave me everything – head to toe.

Me and Mr. Ford go, with the Secret Service in the car, sitting side by side, driving down to ski school, which is right down the mountain like a quarter mile. Drives me in. I thought he was just going to open the door – you know – he walks me all the way to ski school. Here I am walking with Gerald Ford, people are looking because, of course, he's a big deal in Beaver Creek, Colorado, and Secret Service, and we're walking to go to the ski school. We go in there, he wants to see the ski instructor. They run up, "Yes, Mr. Ford, what can I do for you?" "This is Lorraine, she works for us now. She needs to learn how to ski, make sure she doesn't get hurt." He leaves me and I go to ski school. And I'm not really one for the cold. I liked the snow as long as I'm somewhere warm with a fireplace.

Smith: It's nice to look at, rather than be in.

Ornelas: Yeah. I learned to ski, though. I learned to ski pretty good actually. I surprised myself and it's one thing I'm grateful for – I don't know if I would have ever done it. Who could say Gerald Ford took them to ski school, dropped them off – and that's how I learned to ski. All the kids, Susan and Michael, Steven and Jack are all tremendous skiers. They took me out skiing once, and this is another story.

Mrs. Ford, I remember after the fact, told Susan, "Why did you take her with you?" Because I was just a new skier and they were sixteen years into skiing. Well, I had a fall because, not because I was trying to keep up, but I just was inexperienced. Thank God I didn't break anything, but with Mr. and Mrs. Ford, I always felt like they were, of course they don't want me to get hurt, but they were always looking out for me. I remember Mrs. Ford saying to Susan, "How could you take her with you guys? You guys are so much better skiers." She was keeping up until I had that little fall but I remember Mr. Ford always telling me I needed to continue. I think I went up to all these levels, I

think I went up to level five, because he didn't want me to stop. Didn't want me to get hurt – he wanted me to go have fun and learn how to do it right. And I did and I'm grateful for that, because I see people out there skiing now and I can tell the ones that went to ski school and the ones who didn't. I'm grateful for that experience.

Smith: I take it that they were as visible around Vail as they were here in the desert, and beloved up there. There is celebrity, and then there is something much deeper than that.

Ornelas: I think in Vail, because it was smaller than Beaver Creek, it seemed like they could get closer or it was closer knit. So wherever I would go people would know that I worked for the Fords in Beaver Creek. I remember they took me – I did a lot of things – I look back – did a lot of things with them. They took me to a show, we went to see *Apollo 13*. The whole family went because it was Christmas time. Mr. Ford, Mrs. Ford, the kids – I think it was Susan and the girls – myself, and I felt like a celebrity because they roped off the whole thing and they waited for us to come in and the Secret Service – they have to go ahead and a car comes and we all go and we watched the movie. It was a great movie to see with him. He really liked it a lot.

Smith: He was really interested in the space program.

Ornelas: Very much so. They took me out to dinner from time to time. I think we did a lot of things in Colorado, when we were in Beaver Creek, because it was mostly at Christmas time. They cooked for me from time to time. I remember two times during the Christmas season they all turned the tables and cooked for me.

Smith: So Mrs. Ford *could* cook?

Ornelas: Mrs. Ford could cook, yeah. She cooked before she became the First Lady and he became the President.

Smith: There is a wonderful story. The night that he was sworn in. Of course the Nixon's left so quickly that it took a week to pack all their things. So every night the Fords stayed at their house in Alexandria, and he would commute to

work for that first week. So on the night of August 9<sup>th</sup>, the night he was sworn in, they are back at the house in Alexandria and she's in the kitchen with a pan of lasagna and she says, "Jerry, there is something wrong with this picture. You're President of the United States and I'm still cooking."  
(chuckle)

Ornelas: Yeah. Well, she still cooked. Like I said, she would cook on my nights off and Susan – what I loved about them – they were just like normal people. I don't know what you'd classify as normal, but they were regular people, genuine people. He just happened to be President, she just happened to be the founder of the Betty Ford Center. I learned so much. Like I said, I was in my late twenties when I went to work for them. I left when 35 or 36, so I had that kind of important growing up time, especially for me, because I had just gotten sober and it's like starting over.

I learned about family through the Fords, I guess that I learned about discipline, because Mr. Ford was very disciplined, and very goal-oriented and I have that now and I have that because of him. Mrs. Ford, she had spunk. I have to tell you, it wasn't always smooth sailing, let's say. Like I said, I was young and arrogant sometimes, and I would just blurt out things and I remember her always coming with a comeback. I remember one day they went out and the next day they were in the paper on the front page of the Desert Sun. And I don't know what got into me, but she said, "Oh, look Lorraine," and I said – because they seemed to be in the paper a lot – and I would say crazy stuff, and I said, "Oh, wow, it must have not had anything else to put in the front page of the paper?" And she looked at me and she elbowed me so hard, which I deserved, and she said, "You know, there was a time when I was young and I learned eventually to think before I speak." Which, to this day, I think about that and I think about it because she helped me a lot to not be so abrupt. You know, when you're young and you don't think, but I think about that situation all the time now, when I want to say something of whatever, and I now know a different way to say things.

But, because of their kindness, I never remember their saying they didn't like anything I ever cooked. A couple of times I know they didn't like it, but how

they would put it would be in such a delicate way, in a nice way, that I got the message, so we wouldn't ever have that again. But it taught me that there are different ways to treat people, there are different ways to be treated. There's a finesse to Mrs. Ford – she had this finesse about her. She could make her point very strongly, but tactfully, and you learned something.

Smith: Did she ever talk about entertaining in the White House?

Ornelas: She told me a few stories.

Smith: Did she tell you the story about Queen Elizabeth's visit? The famous thing was the screw up with the Marine Band. The visit went beautifully and it came time – they were all in the East Room – and they were going to dance. So the President takes Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip was with Mrs. Ford, and the Marine Band breaks into *The Lady is a Tramp*. To this day, the Marine Band's playlist is checked very carefully before they perform.

Ornelas: Oh my God, that's great. She loved to entertain – Mrs. Ford, I think. She liked to keep things also simple, but it was very important to her. She had these plates she loved to use, the Rothschild pattern. I didn't know anything about patterns and silver and plates until I met Mrs. Ford. She taught me a lot about that.

Actually, people are still impressed about what I know about service because of her. Linens and chargers and all these things. I used to think, "This is a lot of stuff..." but she loved it. It was the art of entertaining that she loved and she was a very classy lady. Like I said, I learned a lot. Mr. Ford, every morning and every evening would swim in Vail and in Palm Springs.

Smith: So he had a pool in Vail as well?

Ornelas: Yeah, in Vail it was enclosed because it's cold out and snowy and he would go out there and I was welcome to use the pool. I was welcome to use – they had a little workout room, there too, where everybody used it – the kids, myself.

Smith: You know, its one thing about her...we all want to put a label – look at Washington, everyone wants to put somebody in a pigeonhole. And she

doesn't fit in a pigeonhole. On some levels she is the most feminine, and traditionalist of figures. And yet she is a revolutionary figure in a whole lot of ways. Transformed how women see themselves, shattered all these old taboos and barriers. So she doesn't fit into any convenient pigeonhole.

Ornelas: What I liked about Mrs. Ford is that you could tell her anything, and we had some intimate, private conversations, and she was never shocked. She was very open-minded about everything. I relapsed while I was working for them and she sat me down, I remember, on the couch in the room in the house, and I expected her to fire me. I had been having a little bit of a difficult time in the beginning, and I think it was because I couldn't really believe that they were as good people as they seemed to be and I was waiting for the bomb to drop or something.

The first two weeks I took Mrs. Ford aside and said because I felt like I wasn't getting it, "I don't think this is the job for me." And she said, "Let's just wait two more weeks and see." Two more weeks turned into about six and half, maybe seven years. And then I relapsed and that's a hard thing. I told her I relapsed and if she wanted to fire me, then she could do so. She said she wasn't going to do that. She sat me down and talked and we talked about the program and she talked about meetings, she talked about her own addiction – I mean, one on one with Betty Ford.

Smith: Pretty powerful.

Ornelas: Very powerful. The fact that she didn't fire me and was going to give me another chance and told me to hang on – I just never could imagine that. I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Ford had the discussion about that, but I still was employed and we continued on from there and I could always discuss things as I got to know them.

I'm very dyslexic, so whenever I would want to write, like if I wanted certain days off, or a week off, or a vacation or something, I'd write Mr. Ford a note. And I loved that – the first time he did it, I was kind of like – I wasn't annoyed, but I was kind of like – I wrote something – I wanted to go to I think Santa Fe, New Mexico, I was going to go for a week, I had a vacation coming

to me. And I wrote him this little note about it, telling him the days and all this. I submitted it to him and then he brought it back to me and he had corrected in red ink, my phonetically and my misspellings. I'm very dyslexic so I do everything phonetically. And he didn't do it – after I thought about it – he didn't do it for any other reason than to help me. And that's just the way he was.

He would tell me time and time, if I ever needed help with something, his doors were always open in his office. And he would always tell me stories about his friends who never graduated from high school, because I never graduated from high school, and they became these big lawyers or famous people. He told me a story about Charles Schwab, who is very dyslexic. So he would constantly be reaffirming and telling me that you can do anything because this person did it and he has dyslexia and this person never graduated from high school and he's now famous, or he's successful.

Smith: He was the consummate optimist, wasn't he?

Ornelas: Exactly. He was very much so. And I learned about being impartial from him also. He was the fairest person. He never took sides that I saw, and even sometimes Mrs. Ford and I would be on disagreements, he would always assess both sides, and then he would make a decision. But I always felt like it was a fair deal if he said that no, you can't have this because we made this deal, I was okay with that because he was very fair about it.

Smith: Everyone talks about his judgment. He took this rap about his intelligence – his IQ, because he wasn't as glib, I think, as a lot of folks, but his was a special kind of intelligence. An emotional intelligence, among other things, and an integrity that goes into judgment. Pretty clearly, he had those.

Ornelas: Very much. I learned that from both of them. He, especially. I just remember him being so fair, and always, if I had a problem, first I'd run it by Penny and then Penny would make me an appointment.

Smith: Tell me about Penny's role in this whole operation.

Ornelas: Penny was great. They had a closeness – you could tell she knew him very, very well. And so Penny was the one I always ran things by because she was always running around here, taking care of things. I liked Penny a lot. That’s a reflection of them. They all had great staff people, also – every one of them was wonderful. I think Penny just knew him so well, she was perfect for him and he respected her. He respected everybody, but he respected Penny. I think they had a trust and a mutual thing for one another.

Smith: It is interesting, too, because clearly his mother was a very significant part of his life, but he was sort of on that cusp, but unusually for so “conservative Republican” from West Michigan. He was very comfortable with the women’s movement. I’m sure being married to Betty Ford indoctrinated him to some degree. But, in the Republican Party they were increasingly isolated in their support for a woman’s right to choose and they were supportive of gay rights, and a whole host of things that didn’t make a lot of friends in the party as it was evolving. And yet they seemed perfectly comfortable in their positions.

Ornelas: They were very comfortable, and that’s why I’m blessed and grateful I got to see this first hand. People always ask me, what were they like? And it’s almost hard for me to articulate it because it comes a lot from my heart how I felt about them, how they accepted me into their family. I didn’t graduate from high school, I’m a very talented chef, but I didn’t have, but I do have a high school diploma now, and a big part of it is because he showed me that you set a goal and you do it day after day, in and out. I just saw such discipline from him and how he did it was, he just did it and he did it with integrity and he did everything.

Smith: There must have been some celebrated people who came through this house and dined here. I know Bob Hope – they were friends. Did you see folks?

Ornelas: My favorite, and the one I was closest with, was Leonard Firestone. He was a little buddy of mine – we would meet at Pavilions Market and have Danish and coffee. I’d be shopping for the Fords. Mrs. Ford, of course, introduced me to him.

Smith: I'm told she saved his life.

Ornelas: Yeah, and he was the nicest guy – we had a little bond because we were both Gemini's and he once told me, "Everything you touch will turn to gold." And I remember that and people tease me because I've had a lot of success with businesses and business ventures since I left the Fords. Leonard Firestone and I would run into each other. He was like already in his nineties, I think. He was still driving around, but he would just drive to Pavilions – he loved sweets, so we had this sweet – he would say we had a love-sweet affair, but we were talking about desserts. I would be shopping and he would run into me at Pavilions and we would sit down and have a Danish and coffee and just talk a little bit. He was also their neighbor here and in Beaver Creek. That's like the only one – but I've met people through the Fords who, of course, came to dinner a lot. Bob Hope, Delores Hope, there's numerous ones.

Smith: Sure. Now, they were aging – you left around 2003? You worked for seven years, around then.

Ornelas: Probably earlier than that, actually, because I opened my first restaurant 2002-2003.

Smith: But he'd be in his late 80s at that point, and he was still very active. Still traveling. How did they deal with getting older? And I'll preface that – I sensed that they liked to have younger people around them. That they actually made an effort to sort of keep in touch with...

Ornelas: Mrs. Ford is probably going to probably elbow me for saying this, but when I came to them I thought they were old already. I mean they were in their 80s and late 70s and I was like 29 or something. I would always call my mom and tell her that, "Man, you're not going to believe how active they are." And my mom would always say, "Well, of course. They are Betty Ford and Gerald Ford." But I would always tell my friends also that they are so active - him especially - and she walked a lot, too. But mentally – sharp – she had one over on me most of the time because she was always on it. She was the chairman of the board still then when I worked for them. And he was on all kinds of boards and he would fly here and there, and he'd have a schedule. I'd get their

schedules, and they would do more things than I would do, and I was so much younger.

Smith: How did it come to pass that you left?

Ornelas: My family lives up north towards the Bay area, that's where I'm from, and he [grandfather] had colon cancer, so I wanted to be freer to go and visit and be there for my family. I think I needed to be where I was with the Fords and this job to teach me discipline, to help me grow, and it was time for me to leave. Of course, they hated to see me leave, but they didn't fight it and they were totally understanding. And I think that's part of who they are. That when it's time to move on, they actually were happy that I could go do that.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him? Did you have contact after?

Ornelas: Yeah. I can't remember if it was the Betty Ford reunion, I saw him last – the whole family. I saw her recently at the last year's one, of course. I had come to visit them a couple of times after – from time to time I would come and just say hi. I think it was a few years back, last time I saw him – in '05, probably.

Smith: When he passed away, were you surprised by the reaction? I was working for ABC, part of the week and then I was with the family the rest of the week. I can tell you, in the media, people were surprised at how much reaction there was because he'd been out of the public eye for quite a while, in terms of the country.

Ornelas: I wasn't surprised, but I tell you, I felt so good inside because I felt like he got what he deserved and finally everybody could see what a wonderful man that I know he was and I used to talk about. They got to feel that. I had a friend come up to me, my chiropractor, actually. After the funeral, they ran a Gerald Ford biography over and over again on A&E. And he came up to me – a couple people in my restaurant – I have a picture of him in my restaurant and people would often ask me, "Why do you have that picture of Jerry Ford in here? He was a good guy and all, but..." and I said, "Because he was a wonderful person and I loved him. I worked for them." But my chiropractor came up to me and said, "I saw the biography of Gerald Ford," and he also saw part of the service on TV and he was like, he couldn't believe it. All this

time he didn't know what a wonderful person he was. I said to him, "I've always known what a wonderful person he was, I was just waiting for everyone else to catch up with it."

People would say only things that they saw in the media, which I used to get very defensive about sometimes, because it was very unfair. And Mrs. Ford, also – I saw this program about her. It was about women who are heroes, she was one of them. And I always feel so proud, like I'm beaming when I see things about them on TV because I actually got to be a part of this, and they are part of my life – a huge part of my life. I think about it – 28 years old – being in their presence and learning things just by watching them and seeing how they do things with family and problems – we didn't always have easy times. Just the way they handled themselves. I was telling Mrs. Ford when I went to see her at the service they had at St. Margaret's - that Mr. Ford was a hero to me.

I really looked up to him and we had a bond, a special bond and we would have conversations. I would ask him stuff and he would always answer. It's funny, a couple of things I asked him, was one of the all-time – probably he's been asked this a million times, like why did he pardon Nixon? And he took me in his office and we had this long conversation about it and I thought, "He's brilliant." He was really a brilliant man and nobody knew it, really, got to know it until after he was gone. I also asked him another question about UFOs and the space program. When he was president I think I was twelve or ten or something and I heard that he knew about UFOs and he was hiding it. I asked him about it and he answered me that it was military propaganda and we had a discussion about that. I would ask him about all sorts of little things and I was always surprised that he would just take the time to answer and talk to me about it. I felt very special.

Mrs. Ford would always take the time also, if I ever needed anything to talk about she was always there. It was like one big family and I felt really a part of that because I spent most of my holidays for six and a half years with them – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, all of them and they always would take

me out to dinner, have a present or whatever. It was nice, I really loved the way they celebrated with the whole family and the tree and just everything.

Smith: It made it kind of rough for him to pass the day after Christmas.

Ornelas: I think Mrs. Ford said to me that it was just like him to do that. He knew how much they all loved Christmas and he waited until the day after, because he was he was always thinking of others.

Smith: That's perfect. Listen, this is wonderful.

## INDEX

### C

Circle, Penny, 15

### F

Firestone, Leonard, 15–16

Ford, Betty

character traits, 11–13, 18–19

Ford, Gerald R.

character traits, 4, 6–7, 11, 13–14

funeral, reactions to, 17–18

remembrance, 17

skiing, 9–10

Ford, Gerald and Betty

relationship, 5, 11

### V

Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 8–10, 12