

Transcript of Interview with Oscar Fernandez by JJ Wandikbo

Interviewee: Oscar Fernandez

Interviewer: JJ Wandikbo

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Location (Interviewee): Cincinnati, Ohio

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Summary: Oscar Fernandez an emeriti faculty member of the University of Cincinnati who served in DAAP was influential to the Hablamos Juntos project. Fernandez with his fellow associates from other universities worked on the Hablamos Juntos project to help those with a language barrier understand hospital signs nationwide.

Categories: DAAP, Cincinnati, Activism, Student Engagement

Tags: Hablamos Juntos project, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

JJ Wandikbo: Alright, would you like to first introduce yourself to us?

Oscar Fernandez: I'm Oscar Fernandez, and I taught here for 15 years, and I was the program coordinator for the graphic or the communication design program for 10 years and presently I live in Columbus, but have very many, many fond memories as I was driving down here for this interview. What questions did you have for me, where do you want me to begin?

JW: Maybe we can start out with, when did you come to UC and what brought you here to the campus?

OF: Well, I was thinking –I know how did I discover or how did I learn about UC. It's kind of funny, I'd have to go back all the way to 1974. I was this—just started my first year graduate program at Yale, university for graphic design—and my first year class there were 15 students for that first year. Each one came from a different institution, a very reputable one, some very small schools. I was the only art major in the group because Yale had this, desire to have a very diversified educational background. So for graphic design, there was someone from physics, someone in the English major, someone who was in the—a geologist, it was amazing. So I was the only art one and they all came from different schools except for two students, both came from the University of Cincinnati, and I remember that it impressed me, wow two, not one, but two came from the University of Cincinnati. These two Mark Eberhart and Paul Hoffman, I started learning about UC from them, through wonderful stories, you know that they would tell me about their professors and the school and the city. I recalled often how enamored I was at the design solutions they would develop. They were good, both of them and the reputation of that design program, of course it extends out to the whole university, always stayed with me. So it started become like this, somewhere in that top 10, I don't know a document that supports it, but they gotta be in that top ten somewhere. So that always would continue in my early career like that, and in a way I would remember Mark would draw some sketches in his book, sketch book, some caricatures of his teachers and they were really well done because you know, it was just amazing when I finally did come here, I encountered them and I say, wow you look just like your caricature back 20 years ago. So yeah, the University was always on my radar as a good school, a good excellent design program. I became a not so much a goal that I wanted to be there, but it was like the beacon, it was the place that set standards and really rigorous education took place

there. Then I moved to Columbus, I was living in Texas at the time, eventually I started teaching at Ohio State and I would frequently come down and visit because they would have wonderful lectures and I started knowing these people that I started knowing in the little caricatures sketch books live and I got to know them. One in particular, Gordon Salco, who in a way founded the graphic design program in the late 60s, 67, 67. I got to teach as an adjunct as a full year to replace someone on Sabbatical, a woman named Anne Gorry Goodman, and there lo and behold, I'm there, I'm part of the faculty, part of the UC graphic design program. That whole year got me to introduce to learn more that it's not just the graphic design program but it's the whole University of Cincinnati. The black and red I would start seeing often and I—but anyway it got me an inside look to how the, not only the program operated, but the whole university, the culture, there was always that energy that seemed to exist to pursue excellence but have fun at the same time. It was very—very diversified collection of people, not only in the faculty but in the students and I enjoyed that. So yeah, the expectation of walking in or seeing a house for sale on the web nowadays, you go wow that's really nice and when you do go and visit. All the expectations are met and that's how it was for me. Just as a way of how I first started getting to know about UC.

JW: Nice, that's cool. So, next what did you hope your students took away from your classes when you taught here?

OF: What, what was that JJ?

JW: What did you hope your students took away from your classes when you taught here?

OF: Took away from my classes when I taught here. Well one thing about me and teaching I have both a good many years both professional practice as well as teaching but I wanted to teach always because I'm one of those to give it back. Because I had some incredible teachers and mentors that—really it's about developing yourself and finding your skill sets, your knowledge, your expertise and using it to make a difference in the world and to give that commitment, hopefully it will be adopted by your students. One thing about me that you need to know because it does relate to your question about students take away, is how much your life will impact your early life. Things unexpected will really shape not only who you are, but it will also direct you to what you will become and how events that occurred in your life early, you won't realize how they will reemerge and really make an important impact on what you do with the, everything that you work on in your project. To backup all the way, I'm from Cuba, originally. I came to America, in hot political buttons, an immigrant, but I remember the difficulty of not being accepted at first. I remember my mother dressing me up the first day of grade school, the first day, this is in Hoboken, New Jersey, kinda rough neighborhoods and my mom didn't realize Americans weren't very formal. I have this picture somewhere, but I'll describe it, I was wearing a suit, a tie, coat, and even an attaché little bag for a kid. And here I am going to this real rough school, a catholic school, Saint Peter's and it was a place where a lot of longshoremen worked and their families and so here comes this kid who doesn't speak any English with a little satchel, coming up with this little bag, suit and all that. Anyways it started to set in motion a desire to communicate, to be understood and that people understand me. Communication became very important to me and so there on, many years later when I was trying to decide exactly what to do with my design, it was to create communications for other people to understand data, to understand abstract concepts, how to communicate in bilingual, trilingual ways, and but for the students to realize, my students in my field who were communicators, that we had this incredible privilege, I just wrote an essay on it and I called it "The Quiet Conservator", that's what we are as graphic designers, quiet conservators. Conservators of the greatest invention that

human kind came up with was writing and all that, that's on your paper and we take all that so much for granted, but when you think about it, it is an amazing invention that those little marks that are on that page convey sound, phonetic sounds and it's incredible flexibility and resilient but that's what I tell my students when they walk away with. Do you realize all you guys have that you can handle this invention, this greatest invention of mankind, of human kind and that you can do something with your abilities and you know its workings, how it operates, how it functions, that you can make a difference in someone's life, not in masses but in very incremental ways, just someone how to be able read instructions on how to put together a device or how to find their way on a map or whatever. They have a lot of amazing power for good, so that's what I like to get my students to walk away with.

JW: Wow, that's amazing. So next, you said that when you came here that you heard of UC through the students and through them it opened your eyes. Could you talk about your hiring process and what they did to hire you here?

OF: Let me see, so this would have been in 2003. Well the hiring process would go as usual, you generate a number of candidates, this I know really well because I was in a way an administrator and I know all the workings, but you make sure what you need, what expertise you need in a curriculum, you have to post it on a number of publications, nowadays on the internet, back then it was in its infancy and, you first have people review the documentation, the resumes, the portfolio, your publishing work and they will narrow it down to people they will have a phone interview and seeing the person whether he's got, if he shaved properly or nothing, that's not known but to see how this person would respond to a whole set of questions. Like you're doing right now and, even though I knew the people that were here, I always, admired them and was very excited and nervous. It was a tough interview, they asked good questions, but they were very challenging ones, ones that intellectually you had to go in quite a depth to answer correctly and you know. So they would have these mysterious people, I mean I know who they were, some of them I did and then you would hear these voices come through the phone asking you this question and then asking you that question and what would you do if this happened in a classroom and what are your feelings about this article written by so and so. So there was little sweating here and there and they said, after about an hour or so that ends, and they said we will call you back and thank you for your time and then you get the call from the search committee chair, and her name was McCrystal Wood at that time, and to tell, inform you that now you've made the next round to come on campus for an interview and now you have to come prepare a presentation. A presentation given to an audience of students, faculty, and open to the public and boy how do I prepare, what do they want to hear and you wanna make sure you can speak to that audience and yet you have students that just entered the program and they don't have any idea what design is and yet you have faculty and professional practitioners from the city who are going to be there. So how do you with these extreme levels begin a presentation. You have many meetings, first with the dean, then you have one with the school director, and you have one with the faculty with that program, usually a lunch and you have one with the students. So it's a long, long marathon day of just questions, of questions that have already been asked and you have to come up with the right answers and then you finish it with the search committee, in this room, actually it probably took place in this room. It's called the exit interview. So the presentations, you walk it through, you have about an hour, how do you eat up an hour time, how do you address things, you go back to the job description and find exactly what they're looking for, how do you give some facts about yourself, so little nuggets I call them to help them remember you more in a positive way. I remember the theme I was using, I still think of myself as a foreigner, even though I don't have an accent anymore or whatever, but I still think not in a very

detrimental way that I'm an outsider, but I just know that difference that I still have that, but I use it to my advantage as a designer, we design for other people, we design for people who might not think like us, who might not have our education level, who might not have our skill sets but I always try to bear that in mind in any problem I try to resolve, how is that experience the first time. Like a good designer will tell you when they're designing a web, an interaction device, a map or whatever, you always design for the novice, the first timer. You don't design for the full expert, because will expert will obstacles forget it, they will just plow through it, but we always design for the novice or the intermediary person. So having that memory I had when I couldn't speak English whatsoever, that sense of inability of not being involved, I always keep that in mind and that's always helped make me a better designer, yeah.

JW: Okay nice. So you said that you were in administration?

OF: Well I was, I think that when you're a program coordinator, it is an administrative role, you have to have been involved in hiring, you are involved in scheduling, so even though technically they don't have it as administrator, but I, you know wearing several hats.

JW: So going on with that question, how did you feel and interact with the administration?

OF: Well, for the, I can't speak for all the departments throughout campus, all the units, but for us, it was a very—one of a—always mutual respect, always very accessible, the administration was always willing to be supportive, because many time—I had already known them years before as professional colleagues or as fellow educators and then as they advanced as they became more senior and finally became full administrative roles as director and dean. One thing I always remember was the—on a consistent basis was the support on any ideas that you had or any proposals. They might not have happened because of budgetary limitations, but there was always a 100 percent support for any new ideas you were proposing, new course content you were proposing, new teaching methodology that you wanted to introduce, you wanted to create an event, I never ever heard the word no. But that's Ludacris, that's a stupid idea. No it was always them saying, 'let's figure out how we're gonna do it.' And I think it was because they themselves were at sometime a junior faculty, senior faculty member who also wanted to make a difference, not only with the students, but with the society and community as a whole. So it was very congenial, it was very amiable, all of them were and very receptive, doors always open type thing, yeah I never saw any barriers.

JW: Wow that good. So you were here 15 years?

OF: Yes, almost 15 years.

JW: What changes did you witness at UC, during this time?

OF: Well the biggest one was going to semesters. I remember at the time, when oh my god, people who, see before I had taught at already other schools, Carnegie, I taught at Ohio State, not at Ohio State they had quarters too—Montana State. I was used to semesters, and then when I came here to UC where everything was 10-week quarters and I thought, my god I felt everything was so fast. Before you know it, the quarter is done and you gotta get people to submit work and get work done, but I remember the UC community bearcat nation was concerned about, oh my god it's the end of the world, no more quarters we're switching to semesters. What's going to happen? I remember all these meetings took place, brainstorm sessions, transition meetings, how are we going to take all these courses, some had to be combined, others had to stay but we had to add 5 more weeks and how are we going to do that. So we're scratching our heads, how am I

going to add more course content, but the sun came up we were now semesters. That course content you had, I remember towards the end they were even saying, oh my god I don't even have enough time in these 15 weeks, I need more. But that was huge, that was a big switch and I was here as part of that history, the switch from quarters to semesters. You know why quarters existed?

JW: No.

OF: In fact, it started in Ohio State. If quarters were, I don't know the actual workings of it but this is how it was told to me but quarters were created in short academic terms of 10 weeks was after the second World War as the American guys started coming back, they wanted to get people back into the work force to get their degree and it was seen as an accelerated way to get all these former G.I.s, men and women, back into the workforce with degrees and programs and with proper training. So it was the 10 week quarters that was created. But yeah I remember that there were people just scared to death, people who were students and then taught here at UC, quarters was like so set in stone, it was like an architecture. Other changes—the technology changes of course were dramatic, I mean in just that short about of time 15 years seems like a long time but it was a lot of developments and—sizes that grew, but not the caliber of the students. That's one thing I can compare with my Ohio State friends, I don't mean anything by it, but I could tell that the caliber of students at UC were just a little higher. The admissions standards were just a little bit higher and—I always noticed that ever since the first day I was here. The type of questions and inquiries I would ask from students—incredible work ethics always. I was always hoping for a class I would call my Nike class, because they were students that just did it. No complaints, they just did it and—they reminded me a lot, because I did mention Montana State, I taught in—that's where I started teaching in 79-80. And this is in Boseman, Montana and I had students that came from towns of no more than 200 population and some had never even seen a big city and—they had incredible work ethic because a lot of them came from farms and they knew that to get to a certain goal you had to put in a lot of work. So they reminded me, in fact I remember kidding some of the UC students saying, 'you must be from a farm and they said why would you say that [laughs]. But—yeah I saw a lot of changes in—how different academics programs had to adjust to new curriculums as new knowledge was being added and expanded, not only new technical skills but the body of knowledge was growing, so how do you accommodate that. I saw a lot of curriculums, even like ones in here—courses that used to be so foundational finally become specialized. Curriculums were become more of a generalized approach especially in the undergrad levels and that's something that's been going on for quite some time. What other changes? The diversification never changed, in fact we used to, out direct Robert Probst who would eventually become our dean, he'd always call us the U.N. college because we always were—real rich with different perspectives and that's something I've always enjoyed and needed to thrive in my kind of work, design work. It mirrored real well the outside, the professional community. I always liked working with people of teams with different specialties and different areas. I'd always work on a project with a child psychologist, an engineer—a I.T. person—a writer a, I mean I just loved those different perspectives.

JW: Very nice. So have you seen UC's priorities shift as a whole campus since you've been here?

OF: Not so much priorities, but I've always seen it—very welcoming, very eagerly wanting to accommodate—the new technologies and trying to find often synergy between different disciplines, really mirroring the—interdisciplinary nature of the field, the professional field, the

community because the type of problems that exist today in society are so complex, one discipline alone can't solve it all. I think that UC was always a very—strong advocate for that, it was always encouraged. Their research grant programs, they would always provide undergraduates, always stipulate interdisciplinary grant forcing, I don't really want to say forcing, but really encouraging faculty to you know, walk across campus, go to the medical campus, go to the business school, go to the marketing, go in you know—some possible collaboration and that's something I remember from when I first arrived in 2003. The university was always a strong advocate.

JW: So, going on to a similar—where do you see UC going in the future?

OF: Where do I see them going? I don't have an answer, that's just a big question because so many things could happen.

JW: Yeah.

OF: I think the university, one spirit, or quality, or attribute or whatever you wanna call it, was just this incredible sense of high optimism. That's always existed, I've never seen it on the decline. I think we're, the university—will start—because of this—encouragement of interdisciplinary education that there's going to be a creation of new disciplines—that don't even have names yet, I think are going to be born on this campus. Some mergers are going to take place, some evolutions, some morphing of—different knowledge bases are going to start taking place and I think they already have. I think the—wow yeah that's a big question, it's an exciting one to think about but I have to think about how to best put it. I think the university has always seen attuned to—social issues that have gone on. They do—you know—ardent supporters for—community of humankind with all its tapestry, rich tapestry that it has and wants to continue that. It doesn't want to ever exclude, its always been inclusive since day the one. That's something that my former classmates Paula and Mark way back in Yale would share that with me because they came from diverse backgrounds. Whatever it is, I'll just say I won't be surprised, you know. It's never been, you hear the University of Cincinnati technically as it started used to be a city university but, I don't think its ever seen themselves as—ever been locked into one city, it just goes by name. I mean it's really the university of the world, that's what it is, I mean there's bearcats all over the world, even in Antarctica, you know they probably need a coat but [laughs]. And I think that's what the university has always proposed, you know I mean we've always had amazing dynamic problem solvers that we produce and we try to create exchanges, to better understand each other, and we want to do it with the most capable people we have. What inspired me and it I think will always be there and I'm using him as an example for my consulting work, you'll notice the name, Bridge, I do that in honor of—I forgot his first name but Straus, who helped engineer, engineer the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, a UC alumni. Because I use it as an analogy for what, I create bridges, I'm a bridge builder, I bridge communication and he created this beautiful bridge and that an aesthetic, from an aesthetic point of view—it's intriguing, it's attractive and yet hundreds of thousands of people cross that bridge every day going to work, going to meet, have lunch with their loved one, going to teach some students at an elementary school on the other side of the bridge, and they might take just a hundredth of a second glance to look up at that bridge and see that beautiful red color and that's how I would like to see my designs. That—sure I'm gonna make it look attractive but its what it does, its what it can do, how it works and how—that's one thing you know the university gave me role models like that and—how to explain what I want to do and design. Did we take care of the big question [laughs]?

JW: Yeah, a good amount [laughs]. So talking about that bridge you were talking about, what would you say would be the most proud accomplishment at UC?

OF: Oh my god—there's so many—and that's something the university made possible and I think one of the larger ones that I touched on, in 2010, we completed, myself and four other teachers from four other schools, we were involved in this national design initiative supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and they are strong supporters of improving medical literacy. And, myself and the three other teachers from other schools were part of this school consortium to work on, this national design initiative to help people who were L.E.Ps which stands for, Limited English Proficiency, because the growing problem that still exists today that—there are thousands approaching millions of people who, English is their second language and some they still can't speak English and yet healthcare facilities around the country have these huge issues, how do they communicate, how do they help way find someone to get to their radiologist and they don't speak English. They can't create 8 different signs in 8 different languages, that's just not feasible. So its always been known through research and studies that have been done that symbols, universal symbols as the term, can break through those barriers. So this was part of a project, a national design initiative to develop a set standard of symbols that would be ... placed in hospitals to help people that are in these different language groups. It was a project that had been on going but this was the second phase of students from these, and maybe after the interview I can show you for reference and I can show you a pdf later. You can see ... we developed 50 universal symbols for students to be used in public domain hospitals, the Children's here uses them right now. These were all user tested, in a very scientific method ways. We were using a research method by this Austrian fellow—and how to—have data enough and a—enough of a percentage of results that this is working to qualify it and then at the end of these two years, 50 standardized symbols were produced and created and is now public domain and, of those 50 symbols 17 came from UC students, the basis of them came from there. So it's very relevant to me because at the beginning I said I didn't know any English at all and that here I came to this university and through my association with it. We got introduced with this program, this proposal, we applied for it and we became part of this consortium, it was all part of the NPR radio, this work that we did. So, here I was not only giving back to students but I was also giving back to people at this moment are trying to find their way to the dialysis session and their daughter dropped them off and he can't speak English and get their way. And the students themselves when we were going through that process I remember, then many iterations we created, the many testings, we had graduate students from here who came from different parts of the world, you know—and they provided a great perspective saying , well for you guys you understand it in the states, but for us this means this. Real quick example, like for the symbol for alternate healthcare—was the symbol acupuncture and I remember the Asian students, the grad students saying, well for us that's not alternate healthcare. That's a very interictal part of their medical treatments in Asia, acupuncture. So it got a lot of other students to think twice, like wow, they would never have thought of that. How do you connect, how do you create these bridges and—but yeah that along with many others I was proud of doing. And I still get emails from some of those student participants about how much they enjoyed that project and how it made them a better designer although they're not working on more symbols. But it made them think and have empathy for people that they're working for. It's called Hablamos Juntos, in Spanish, means we speak together was the name of the program. I can send you a link later, I'll send it to you in the email and you can look up it and there's all this documentation done, but it's Hablamos Juntos, we speak together. It's started by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation but they funded the, one of the Californian medical schools where they started because of course in California that's a big issue—and a—but yeah that's one of the proudest projects. Even though I

didn't design each of the symbols, but I helped advise and guide many of the students and we together as a team. I mean we went out to Mason and all that and conducted these surveys—with a, there's a large Chinese community up there and you can see them having to figure out these symbols and if they mean this. It's a very intriguing method they, the display, you come up with 5 candidate symbols for mental health, okay, and you put one in this category and there, there and all 5. Then they're asked a basic question, of these 5, which percentage of these symbols that the U.S. population would understand that this would be mental health. Oh, I only think 20 percent would get this or only 5 would get this or 0, but then someone put 82 percent and it had a rise meeting of above 80 percent then it means its pretty effective. And so we would gather the data and say why this one would be weak or why this one doesn't work—and then we would do it again and test these people. So—and that's something that I love because in my area as graphic design, that's something that's usually not tested. How do you know that thing is going to work? Well here's the data, here are the tests we've done. So yeah, that was a proud moment, the Hablamos Juntos project, yeah.

JW: Okay cool, I'll have to look into that for sure.

OF: Yeah!

JW: So, I guess kind of talking about that, you went out and did surveys in Mason about that. One of the questions is, have you seen or how have you seen UC connect to Cincinnati?

OF: You mean with the city itself?

JW: Yeah, with the city itself.

OF: I think it does, I've seen a lot of it in the ground roots of it, maybe not on a high-profile political end platform, but in the grassroots. By that of having students do field trips out to a technical facility, like in my area a printing facility or working on these symbols we would visit the airport and make observations, see how people look and do kind of a—ethnographic studies like an anthropologist and watch how people interact with signs and symbols. Some of the senior capstone projects we would do the seniors would be finding a map of the different neighborhoods in Cincinnati and here they go, start conducting field trips themselves and they tell citizens in different neighborhoods what we were working on or trying to do. So they get, you know, yeah they learn about the university but here students are trying to attempt better connections, better ways to document the heritage of these neighborhoods and communities, historic communities, how to give them an identity, how to start getting people to talk about their neighborhoods and all that. We did that several times in my communications and graphic design program. Whether doing a brand identity for Oakley, or Mt. Adams or whatever, I remember many teams of students would take one neighborhood and then try to create and understand the history of that neighborhood and how they started and what were all these famous characters at this time. They would hook up with the amateur historian and this and that and I think that's something I've always enjoyed and felt—gratification of the students in a way of being create this quilt works of all these neighborhoods within in city. What other things have they done? The city acts as their backyard, its their scenery, its like their landscape, it's the national, they discover, and they learn the qualities of a place. I know some of those teams before they go out the don't know anything about those neighborhoods, I would always remark the famous book, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, because at the very beginning, I don't know if you read that in high school, but in the beginning there was the customs house, a little kind of intro and if you remember, he—Hawthorne makes a good point and I told my student teams this. The native will sometimes take for granted the qualities of a place, the attributes. It takes an outsider to start

recognizing them, resurrecting them and making them aware again of those wonderful characteristics and qualities of a place. And I think that's what the students did as they created and formed these relationships with the people. So, that's the way I think, the university connects with the city.

JW: So maybe moving on to one of the last questions, I guess. Was there a time that the university you felt could have done better or disappointed you?

OF: Oh my goodness. I don't even think I even need a university or any organization I worked with there are always cases where you wished they could have done more, but, I think when you're not in the administration you don't know all the inner workings of all that's going on behind the scenes and sometimes something can be possible. But I can never recollect a wall, you know, not a wall of lack of vocal support or attempts to make that a reality. There was always maybe some financial limitations, some event that occurred that impacted that ever happening, but I don't remember, for me anyway, I don't ever recall a resistance of that kind. I think the university, I think it really was always up to you, you can make it possible, there was never really any shackles or anything holding you back. You can go as far as you wanted to and see how far the endurance would take you. I never recall it being any resistance, yeah.

JW: Okay, so I think we've gone through basically all the questions. Is there anything you would like to tell me that we haven't gone over or talked about?

OF: Just the, that the highlights in my career both teaching and professionally that, would not have been possible had I not been here and had not the university and I'm saying that sincerely. I mean, you know my mom used to say believe in fate and I used to disagree with her but I you know maybe she's right. Some good opportunities came along and it was here, the Hablamos Juntos project, I would have never had access to that and would never have encountered it and yet there was that wonderful opportunity that I got to experience and make a difference and that's something that's still on going for those students who were involved with those people like I said as of right now are involved in some medical facility. I'll never meet them, my students will never meet them but you know it made a difference. Incrementally, but you know it—yeah, that would not have happened had I not come here to the university.

JW: Alright, well I think that's all the questions that we have.

OF: Okay.

JW: Thank you for your time, I appreciate the answers.

