

Oral History Transcript - Robbie Owens, CBS 11 News

Interviewed by Luisa Alejandra Pinilla

Transcribed by Andrew Wright

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Luisa: First of all, I want to know when and where you were born? And how did your family come to live there?

Robbie: I grew up in an area of northeast Texas called the Pining Woods. Very beautiful, very lush, and it is my ancestral home. That's where my family is from. I don't know very much about my father's family, but we can trace my mother's family back to slavery. And my oldest relative that we can trace, as the family lore is told, was a runaway slave from Georgia. So when we go to our family's cemetery there are the graves of slaves. So, it makes things real when slavery is not something academic that you read about, that you have studied about, but when you go and you see your grandfather's grave and your great-grandfather's grave and you know your great-great-grandfather was a slave. I'm trying to think. It might have been great-grandfather, I have to go think, but it is very, very close. But that is where I grew up: in the safety and beauty of northeast Texas.

Luisa: As a child, how do you approach your family history because you knew that they were slaves. So, in your case, in your personal and emotional development, how was that for you?

Robbie: I think it was older, I was older, before I began to think about the dates on the tombstones. Because I know in the city people go and barbeque and cookout on Memorial Day. But in my family, as a child, you went to the cemetery and you cleaned the graves and that's where I learned my family history. There was my grandmother, there was my grandfather, there was my great-grandfather. And it wasn't until later, when I was learning history and learning about the Emancipation Proclamation and the date of that, that I started thinking about the dates on the tombstones. And going, "Oh my god. They were born slaves." And it was a heavy moment when history becomes real. When it's not something you read about, but it's a part of your story. And then a lot of things began to make sense because none of us show up here as adults. The way we're reared as children is very much connected how our parents were reared and how our grandparents were reared. And so when I think about how my parents grew up during a time when it was dangerous to be a black person. When my father would tell me about having to cross the street if a white woman approached you. So how could that fear stop when you were raising your children? Just because the world was changing around you, you couldn't disconnect from the fears of your childhood to say, "Oh, everything's fine and we're all created equal and everybody loves everyone." That was not my world growing up. There was a lot of fear, there was a lot of concern, and there was a lot of "them and us."

Luisa: Did your parents tell you maybe some particular stories that they faced a long time ago when you were...

Robbie: When they were children or when I was a child?

Luisa: When they were children, during that time.

Robbie: I think the thing that strikes me most as I reflect back on those stories as an adult is how matter-of-fact they were. Things that we find horrific now, for them, was just a matter of life. Even if you were a seventy year old black man, you still had “Yes, sir,” and “No, sir,” to white teenagers. My brothers and I, we were horrified at that. But for them it was survival. Respect and knowing your place was an issue of survival. And so they were very matter-of-fact about how they survived.

Luisa: Religion - religion was a part of your family?

Robbie: Oh, absolutely.

Luisa: How was that? In terms of how did that support your emotional health.

Robbie: We grew up in a very, very small rural town and there were, when I grew up, there were two black churches because church was still segregated. There was a white church that the white people attended and there were two black churches. One was Baptist and one was Methodist. My family was Methodist, but was really funny about that is it was the same people and we would all go to the Baptist church (laughs) on one Sunday and then we would all go to the Methodist church on the next Sunday. And the only difference really was who brought the message. The preacher was different and the choir was different, although as a teenager I sometimes sang in both choirs because my friends attended the Baptist church (laughs). But faith was very much a part of who we were. Faith was community. That was that time when you saw everyone and you visited and it was not just a spiritual experience, but it was a social one as well. And that was just the expectation that you would be in church on Sundays. Honestly, I can't say I probably learned a lot about faith and Christianity until I was older and an adult because as a child in a small town all that was required was that you go. It wasn't that you were learning all that much. But it was just, it was Sunday, it was church, and you had to go.

Luisa: More like a must.

Robbie: Oh yeah. Absolutely, it was a cultural thing.

Luisa: Cultural?

Robbie: It was a cultural thing and if you did not go to church, you were looked down on. You know that it was always this quiet disapproval. Because there was always a few ladies and families that didn't go to church and there was this scorn and this contempt kind of directed toward them. You know, like a, “She doesn't go to church,” you know. So, that is how spirituality played a role in my formative years.

Luisa: You said that you started to become more aware of these issues or situations as you got older. Can you tell me more about the first experience that you said, “Hey, maybe we need a change. We need to start thinking differently in order to have equal opportunities in life.” Can you give me one of those times?

Robbie: I was just always different. In small towns, there’s virtually no economy and so you make a decision early on whether you’re going to make a life within the opportunities - very limited - that are there or are you going to leave. And I grew up knowing that I was going to leave. Because I loved where I grew up, I loved the safety, and the beauty, and the familial feel that you knew everyone and everyone knew you and everyone was in, some way, looking out for you. Those were all good things. But there were very, very few economic opportunities there and there were less as time passed. So I always grew up knowing that I would leave. That I wanted a life that my hometown wouldn’t give me. So I was always focused on where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do, what kind of life I wanted to have, and what was going to get me there. Unfortunately, growing up that often put me at odds with my peers. Sometimes in small towns, all that’s valued is whether you’re pretty and whether you’re athletic and I was neither of those things. But I was smart and so I was laser focused on, “If this is the gift that God has given me, then that’s what I’m going to use.” So I worked to be the smartest I could be. I couldn’t do anything about whether I was pretty and I certainly was not athletic, but I was going to be smart. And with that as my goal as a young person in a small town that often put me at odds with my peers. You know, and I would get things like, “Oh, you think you’re better than everybody?” and “You think you’re this” or “You think you’re white” because I spoke correctly.

Luisa: The stereotypes?

Robbie: The stereotypes, but my family did not support that kind of ignorance. Even though I chose a life that my mother didn’t want and my mother didn’t understand, she was completely supportive of Robbie being Robbie. She was a force of nature. My mother was this wonderful person and she loved the small town life. You know, picking greens at her friends, whoever had the good garden that year, and singing in the choir, and knowing everybody. She was like a rose in May. She just blossomed in that world. She tried living in the city when she was younger and she hated it. So she was happy and she was content and I think that’s about the best life you can possibly live if you are happy and content with the choices that you’ve made. And she was and that kind of joy and contentment kind of rained down on me because it said, “You don’t have to be me. You go be you and I’ll be happy and I’ll be proud of you.” So even though they didn’t understand my desire to want to go to college and go to the big city and live this different kind of life, they accepted early on, “Robbie is different. So you just tell us what paper to sign, you just tell us what you need, and we’ll support you. Because we don’t really understand the world you wanna live in and the life you wanna have. But if you want it, it’s all good and we’re gonna support you having it.” And so I always knew I would leave. They always knew I would leave, but they were incredibly, incredibly supportive and proud of me.

Luisa: How much of a relationship did you have with your mother? Did you have traditions?

Robbie: Oh my god.

Luisa: Things that you remember as a child?

Robbie: I like to say that I had the Rolls Royce relationship with my mother. I got to college and for the first time I met young women who didn't get along with their mothers. And I was horrified! And they would yell and they would scream and they would and I'm like, "You're talking to your mother." That was not our relationship. We had a wonderful time. My mother was fun and joyful and she was not a glass half-full kind of person. No matter what was going on the glass was overflowing. She taught me early that you can't sometimes change what is happening around you, all you can control is the way you react to it. So that kind of pragmatism and she didn't care for material things and she was just joyful. And I was truly an adult before I realized what a gift she had given me. And just knowing how to be happy and joyful and content.

Luisa: Can you imagine that woman of the society, you know, because nowadays you have to do this, you have to do that, you have to buy a car, you have to buy an apartment, and sometimes I just want to be happy in front of the ocean (both laugh). So, I'm very happy hearing that from your mother because I have a lot of friends that don't have a good relationship with their moms and it is tough, it is toxic, you know?

Robbie: Oh gosh. You talk about traditions: my mother liked to bake, I liked to cook. So I sort of took over the kitchen very early when I was young. And so as I grew up and became an adult and went away, she wouldn't ask when you were coming, she would just ask when you would arrive. And she'll like, "I'll have this and this and this ready for you," all ready for me to cook and she'd be napping over on the sofa saying, "I'm gonna get up and help you and," (laughs).

Luisa: Oh my god (laughs).

Robbie: And by the time she woke up of course I'd have dinner ready (laughs). And it was just, you know, the grocery shopping when I'd come home and always complaining about the quality of the vegetables in the store. It was just this thing we did, you know? And whenever I cook, I think of her.

Luisa: Any smells that help you remember?

Robbie: Oh my god...turnip greens. Turnip greens and the smell of chicken stock. Because when we make cornbread dressing we make the stock from scratch. And so home for me smells like those turnip greens cooking and the chicken stock cooking to make the cornbread dressing. Because that's what we would have for Christmas and Easter and special occasions. And even when I married and my husband would come home with me to east Texas it was just running joke how long my mother would cook those turnip greens.

Luisa: Yeah (laughs).

Robbie: It's like she would cook them all night, like she was boiling like a whole cow or something and then she'd go, "Do you think they're done?" and I'm like (laughing), "You know mom, I think they're done!" But they would be delicious, they were delicious. And so when I am homesick now, I cook. I don't have to necessarily eat it. But making the cornbread dressing and

turnip greens and candied yams and all the smells that filled our house as a child, that just fills my heart. That just fills my heart.

Luisa: Yeah, when I cook, I don't know, greens or lentils and it smells homey. That's like, you know. Do you have siblings?

Robbie: I grew up with five older brothers.

Luisa: Wow.

Robbie: I am the youngest and the only girl, so I was very, very special. Four of my brothers are still living. I lost one to a stroke about four years ago now.

Luisa: How is your relationship with them?

Robbie: Overall, wonderful. They're all very, very protective, but it's interesting that I have a different relationship with each of them. My oldest brother was always very, very protective. Even though we had a mom and a dad, he took seriously his role as big brother. So even now I call him number one and he loves it.

Luisa: (laughs).

Robbie: Because he's big brother. So he's big brother number one and then I have big brother number two. They live here in the Dallas area. And big brother number two was everybody's favorite. He was just that person that everybody loved. He just is the nicest guy, always has good things to say about everybody, so he's my positive brother. Big brother number one is very quiet, very introspective, but loves harder than everybody else. Sometimes, because we lost our mom in 2006, and so sometimes he is very brief in his visits at holidays. Because I know it's difficult for him to see me because I look so much like her. And I understand that. So he will give me a quick hug and he will start to cry, but that just says to me how much he loved us both.

Luisa: I understand you because I lost a brother three years ago. So when I see someone...

Robbie: Yeah...(laughs).

Luisa: I start like, crying, you know? It's hard.

Robbie: So, yes.

Luisa: Your father, what about your father?

Robbie: My father was protective. A provider and honestly sometimes when we were growing up he would be the fun one. You know, he was the disciplinarian or he was the one that would be most likely to load everybody up in the car and we'd go for hamburgers. Because back in the day, you know, you didn't do that. It was a treat to go for hamburgers because moms cooked everyday. And so if there was a Saturday where you got loaded up to drive to the next little town, you know, to get hamburgers, oh my gosh, that was such a treat. I think looking back mom was just so focused sometimes on making sure, with six kids in the house, that everybody had clean clothes, there was food, and just taking care of us. She didn't play a lot until I think, you know,

we had more fun as I got older. Because the boys, you know, grew up and went away and then suddenly it was just she and my dad and I and so we had a lot more fun. I know most women get to those teenage years and they butt heads, but I actually got closer to my mother during those teenage years because it was almost like, you know, “What have I done with this thing?” you know, we’ve got the boys out of the house and now we can have fun. But dad was the one who would be, you know, a little bit more likely to have fun when we were younger. He was not outgoing outside of the family, but within the family he was the talkster and we’d stay up all night with him telling me stories about his growing up years and he was just, he was a talker. And a handyman who could build or do anything. And so I remember, I told this story recently, being a little girl and hanging out outside with him while he worked on one of the cars and, you know, washing his tools of gasoline. CPS would arrest him now (both laugh). But I’d wash his tools of gasoline and dry them off and hand him tools when he was working on the car. That’s how I learned to do a lot of things, just kinda being in his way and standing underfoot and him teaching me how to do stuff. As a little girl, I remember one of my sweetest memories was him coming home from work and him dancing with me around the house with me. Because I was so little that I could stand on his shoes. And I remember, you know, waiting for him to come home and I’m thinking back now how tired he must have been and there I am waiting for him to place me on top of his boots everyday and we’d dance around. And he loved to eat, he loved to eat. So he was my first guinea pig, bless his heart. I’m sure some of that stuff was awful but he’d be like, “Oh baby, this is so good,” (laughs) you know, the chicken’s half done and blood’s running out of it (laughs), but he was how I learned to cook, so. Because he would eat anything that I fixed.

Luisa: How were their roles as a man and woman? In terms of...

Robbie: Pretty traditional.

Luisa: Okay.

Robbie: Pretty traditional. Mom took care of the house, she also worked, my mother always worked. But he, you know, did everything else. He could build anything. He built our home, he could fix anything, so he was sort of your classic love to do things with his hands.

Luisa: Does that affect the way that you approach life in terms of equality and gender roles today?

Robbie: No. I think one of the blessings of time is that we now have choices that are parents didn’t have. They stepped into the roles that were expected of them in 1950. You know? I have to do the math, I think they married in 1955 or something like that. So there weren’t a lot of choices and “Oh, I’m going to find myself.” You just kind of stepped into the roles that were expected of you as wife and mother and as, you know, husband, father, and provider. But as I look at my life I would like to think I took all of the good things that they had to teach me and then I left behind those that don’t work for me. I’m married to an absolute fabulous man, wonderful, loving, kind, absolutely wonderful man and we will, God willing, celebrate our 22nd wedding anniversary this fall.

Luisa: Congratulations.

Robbie: But he can barely screw in a lightbulb (both laugh). But that's okay! So I did not marry that handyman, fixity-thing, like my dad but, you know. Obviously I did alright.

Luisa: Every woman has their own path.

Robbie: Everyone has their own path.

Luisa: How is the personality of your husband?

Robbie: Very, very laid back, very kind, very loyal, and those were the things that mattered most to me. Because quite frankly, I can fix things, you know? So we don't have this "Well, I'm the man so I have to be able to fix the whatever." More often than not he's finding the tools for me to fix it (laughs). But that's okay. But that's okay. Because he is for me what I needed. I always say my mother got to choose what she needed and wanted and so have I and they're just different things.

Luisa: Do you have any children?

Robbie: We have a 13-year-old daughter.

Luisa: Remember the days of school...

Robbie: When I was in school?

Luisa: What was school like for you in your younger years? How was it?

Robbie: I grew up in this tiny little town called Killdeer. Killdeer was the smaller town of the next larger town, Lyndon. And so they were both so small so the school district was combined. So from zero to five, I only knew little girls in Killdeer. So it wasn't until I went to school that I met the girls from Lyndon. Well, they had already formed their little social cliques and whatever. So early on I was kind of an outsider. Because Lyndon was the larger town and that was where the bulk of the population was. So younger years were fine, but middle school fifth, sixth grade started getting dicey. But junior high seventh, eighth grade, horrible.

Luisa: Yes.

Robbie: Horrible. So when I talked to my daughter now about being bullied and being teased and being picked on, I am able to say to her, "I am not telling you what I think, I am telling you what I know. Because I have lived it. And I promise you it will get better." It feels like when you're in those seasons, that fourth grade or sixth grade or whatever difficult year, it feels like it's going to last forever. I said, "But I can promise you: it does not." And the way you make bad times last forever is if you allow those bad times to shape your decisions and direct your path. That's how bad times last forever. And I can specifically tell her about a period, it's probably seventh, eighth grade. It was really when I started to split apart from the pack and I think, I feel like everybody or most people, who have a fork in the road and I tell young people when I talk to them, "Don't think that you will make those fork in the road decisions at eighteen when you're thinking about going to college or twenty-five when you're deciding who to marry. Your fork in the road decision point will sometimes come very early." And for me, it came about seventh

grade. Because I'd always been smart. I'd always been the straight A student and that was no big deal, "Robbie was smart, let me look on her paper." But suddenly seventh grade was when I was became ostracized because I was smart and I'd be, now we call it bullied, and it was torture. Back in those days, the teacher would grade the paper and say, "Well, Robbie got the highest grade in the class," or "Robbie got a hundred," and I would just slink down in my seat because I knew at recess nobody would talk to me. And they would tease and giggle and torment about how I was a bookworm and I was a nerd and you didn't really know all the horrible things they were saying, just that they whispered and giggled and you were on the outside of the group. And I remember there was another girl and in her class, another black girl, because of course I'm only talking about the black because that's all you associated with. You didn't play with the white girls because they were white and you stayed with your own. And so if your own ostracized you, then you were just kind of alone and so they'd giggle and they'd laugh and there was another girl that was very smart as well. And at recess, the in-crowd, they'd together and laugh about how they got a thirty or a forty on the test and, "Oh, let's see who can do the worst." The other smart girl in my class, she started deliberately failing tests so that she could say, "Oh yeah, I failed too." But fortunately for me, even at a young age, I had my eyes on a destination far beyond Killdeer. And even at twelve, thirteen I knew, "Hmmm, failing tests is not going to get me there."

Luisa: Yeah.

Robbie: So I continued to do my level best and they teased and tormented and so it got to where I would just go in the library during recess and lunch and read. So guess what was happening while I was going into the library and reading? I was just getting smarter. I was getting stronger. Because I say when difficulties or social situations arise now, "If I could be a lonely and alone twelve year old in deep east Texas and say, 'You know what? I'm going to be me. You don't have to talk to me. You don't have to like me. But I'm going to be me.' I could certainly do that now." So I kept my eyes straight ahead and what I tell my daughter is that some of the girls that teased and tormented me: I left them in east Texas working minimum wage jobs while I have traveled the world. So you tell me what lasts longer.

Luisa: Yeah, I think that's the key in life. You've been mentioning since the beginning that you knew your future and knowing that you were going to leave town and pursue your future and certainly you did achieve that, but one thing is envisioning that and another thing is the path that you need to go through to achieve that. What were those experiences that maybe you said, "Ok, this is not exactly as I was imagining this would be. I knew this was going to be tough, but this is definitely harder than I expected." There were experiences like that in moving on and leaving town and college life, starting to work?

Robbie: I think the early years it was just working hard and those things fell into place very well. I graduated valedictorian of my class, first black, first African-American to ever do that in my little town, and I think still. So, all of that fell right into place. Went to the University of Texas at Austin and that was the first time that I'd run into things like, some of the classes were a breeze, "Fine, I'm good." But whereas my small town taught me how to study so I had great study skills. In a small school there was just so much that I was not exposed to, so it exposed the gaps in my preparation. I'd wanted to take a foreign language, but who in my small town - I think there were

two other girls that wanted to take a foreign language - but there weren't enough students. Because they weren't going to college. So, there weren't enough students to take a foreign language. So I got dropped into a foreign language class at the University of Texas where most of my peers had been taking foreign language classes, you know, Spanish or French, since junior high. Well I didn't have that opportunity. Some other things that, you know, I struggled I think not because of my work ethic, but I just had not been exposed to it. And I think I got through those difficult classes, I always hated math, always struggled with math, because I looked back at on what I had already been through. And that when the, what's the saying? "When the going gets tough, you have to be tougher." So while some of my friends were going to the parties, you know, there I was at the kitchen table with the math and the tutor or whatever (laughs). But I had to stay focused because I couldn't go back. My peers could go back to their hometowns in the big cities and, you know, probably live at home and get a decent job and have a decent life. But I knew that safety net was not there for me. I couldn't go home to my town of 300 where there's a post office and a general store. There was only one direction for me to keep going. So, graduated - with honors - from the University of Texas. Got a job in Dallas in a different, as a matter of fact, for a couple of years. But I had this one friend who kept nagging me about journalism and she was like, you know that I have a journalism degree. But it's so difficult, back when I graduated it was so difficult, to get a job in journalism and the pay was so horrible. I thought, "Well, okay, well I'll just go get a job for a while. Work a little bit, save a little money." And so I got a job in the business world and, you know, a job turned into a promotion and, you know, started becoming a little career. You know, I was actually making some money! But my friend, who had been in journalism school with me, she was just like this pebble in my shoe. You know, like "You know you're supposed to do this. You know you're supposed to do this." And she would not let me rest. And finally I decided that if I was going to do it I needed to do it then. Before just sort of inertia and life kinda took you in a different direction. So I quit my good job, which my father thought I'd lost my mind, and went to graduate school at Northwestern. Got my master's degree in journalism from the Medill School with a 4.0. I know I'm a little old to be mentioning that now...

Luisa: (laughs).

Robbie: But I think it says: even later I was always focused on doing and being my best, whatever that was. And Northwestern was an absolutely experience. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. Because having been away from it for a few years I thought, "Okay, if I'm going to do journalism, how am I going to get back into it when I'm working in the business world everyday?" And so graduate school was my way to sort of get back into it, get fresh, and let that be my launch point. Following graduate school with my, you know, fabulous credentials my first job in TV was in Waco, Texas where I earned - wait for it - five dollars an hour. With a master's degree. So when I was talking to my parents about going back to graduate school my dad was like, "Well, okay, I mean, you've got a good job, but if you get more education than you'll get a better job and make more money, right?" And it was like, "Uhh, not exactly..." (both laugh).

Luisa: Yeah.

Robbie: And my father was like, “You’re going back to school to make less money?” (laughs). It was interesting. But I had so much fun working in Waco, Texas for five dollars an hour because we were all peers. So we were all starving and it was like...sometimes in the evenings we would choose the stories that we covered based on whether there would be food. And so they would be so happy for a TV crew to show up and we’d shoot 30 seconds worth of video and put it on air. And they’re like, “Oh, we have all this food left. Take it back with you to the station.” And so we’d get out on the loudspeaker and go, “Hey! Robbie and Ethan are back! There’s food in the newsroom!” Because we were all broke and starving and it was fabulous. It was fabulous. Because we were all so focused, we were all so excited to be there, to be pursuing our journalism careers, and we knew that it was just, you know, it was paying your dues. And so we had the most fun, you know, figuring out how to make a chicken stretch for a week and just all the things that you do when you’re just starting in your careers.

Pause in recording

Luisa: During your career what memory stands out the most? Were there any historical situations that you had to cover?

Robbie: Oh, so many. I have been at CBS 11 for 19 years in July. I’ve been a journalist on air for 22, twenty something years, I’ve lost count, 20 to 25 years. So there have been a lot. There have been a lot. People often ask me that question and I think they expect me to tell them about meeting presidents or the big stories, but I think the ones that I remember most are the times were my being a journalist, my doing what I do and the way that I do it, has allowed me to touch the lives of those that life doesn’t always give a very fair shot. One of the stories I like to tell when I was a reporter in Austin and I always managed to hook and crook and negotiate so I can get Christmas off so this was the first time I think ever that I was not going to have Christmas off. So I had all kinda attitude and I was so mad that I was having to work Christmas and not be at home with my family. So on that Christmas Eve my photographer and I dispatched to cover a fire at like a, what are they called? By-the-week motel, you know where people rent out rooms for like a week and they basically live at the hotel. And so I had an attitude because it was a big eye roll and so like who cares. And I get there and they had moved the people who were living in this hotel to like a nearby gym at like a junior high. And it was Christmas Eve so I interviewed this family and I talked to this little boy. The little boy and his mother lived with her mother, the grandmother, and the grandmother hated the father, you know, baby daddy situation. So they couldn’t spend Christmas at the grandmother’s house so he’d scraped together some money so they could go and be at this hotel for Christmas. So I’m talking to this little boy and his name was Ramiro and Ramiro’s biggest concern was that since they weren’t going to be at that motel and it was Christmas Eve that Santa wouldn’t be able to find him. And suddenly all of my attitude about having to work Christmas was in perspective. So I remember doing my live shot at six o’clock, hurrying back to the newsroom. And, no it wasn’t my first job, Waco was my first job, Austin was my second. So I had a little bit more money, not much, but it was Christmas. So I went back and I was like, “Hey guys, how much money do you have?” And so I called Target and they stayed open late and I’m like, “There’s this kid and I gotta get him something for Christmas and he said he wanted some Power Rangers toys.” I guess that was, in that year, that was the big deal: Power Rangers. And so go back to the gym and I’m talking to the family and he’s concerned and he’s pouting and mad because Santa won’t find him. And I asked him what

he wanted and he told me he wanted these Power Rangers. Then his mother interjects and says, "Well, what he really needs is a winter coat." So then I noticed that he had on just a really thin little jacket like the track guys used to wear a long time ago. These really thin little jackets and Austin is an incredibly generous city. And our station, as a public service effort, we would collect coats every year and we would get all the donated coats and we had a partner dry cleaner who would clean them for them and we would distribute them. It was called "Coats for Kids" and it was a big deal! Well we'd just done that a week or so before. And so I'm looking at the mother like, "What do you mean he needs a coat? We just gave away coats." And she told me, "Oh but it was raining that day and I would have had to walk to the bus stop." And in that moment she could have crawled out from a rock and I would have thought more highly of her. Because I'm thinking, "Your child needs a coat and your talking to me about how you couldn't get him because you would have had to walk to the bus stop in the rain?" And I thought about my mom and what she did to keep us clean and fed and loved. So fine. I go, I get my story on, I call Target, "Please stay," I explained the situation, "Please stay open for me. I gotta get this kid a toy." They did. I got there, the manager, it was Christmas so they had found the last coat that they'd had. He'd found two Power Rangers toys and this coat, which I think was like a size 16. But it was the only one they had (laughs). So I got the coat, got the Power Rangers toys, wrapped them that night, and so we found the family - they had put them all up in another hotel - and so that Christmas morning I found them at the hotel. And I knocked on the door and I said, "You know what, Ramiro? You were right: Santa didn't know where to find you since you all moved last minute so he dropped your toys at the station." And he put on this coat, the sleeves were like (laughs), and he was pulling it up and going like, "It fits me, mommy, it fits me!" And I thought about my well loved nieces and nephews who I would see in a couple of days when I went home. I thought about my car that would be loaded from front to back with gifts for them. How much they were loved, how much they were protected, how much they were provided for. And I thought about this little boy for whom a stranger had to deliver Christmas and I put it all in perspective. The look in his eyes, that his faith in Santa had been restored, you know, that's been...25 years ago now. He now knows that there was no Santa. But I hope that somewhere along the way that he remembers that story as much as I do. And knows that a stranger can show you love and grace and I hope someday, somehow he has paid that forward.

Luisa: Does that story affect the way that you cover your stories?

Robbie: I think it's just who I am.

Luisa: Yeah.

Robbie: Because I was an adult when I became a journalist and so I didn't change who I was. It just gave me a different way of being who I was. Right? I didn't suddenly become kind because I was put in that situation. That was who my mother had made. That's the woman that I was when I met Ramiro. And so yes, that story stands out, but I believe throughout my career when I have been able to make a difference I have done so. And you do that not because someone notices, but it's who you are. It's what I call integrity. What you do when no one is watching. Before there was Facebook and Instagram and people were doing things for attention. How about you just do it because it was the right thing to do?

Luisa: I mean, right now with the social media, in terms of journalism, good information and everyone's just want attention - it's just crazy.

Robbie: In my humble opinion, it has corrupted the business. Because when I became a journalist it was never about "you". It was always about the story. And that was what journalism was. That's how it was taught to me. That shaped who I was as a journalist. Ramiro's the happy story. Fast forward many years and I was here at CBS 11 and I was working for the ten o'clock at that time. And I was trying to get some dinner and back in those days we had scanners and pagers. We didn't have cell phones. And I got a call from the desk saying I needed to hurry to the Adam Hats Lofts. A man had murdered his two daughters. And back then you were listening to the police scanner so you were catching every other word and often what you heard on those scanners was, you know, a bad report and so nowhere in my mind was that going to be what actually happened. Because nobody is killing their daughters. And then I got to the Adam Hats Lofts. That was in May of 2001. And I saw police officers crying and I thought, "Oh no. This is bad." And it was such a horrible thing and in my mind and I wonder, you know, eighteen years later, did I really hear that? But I feel like I could hear the screams of the mother. If you know the story, a man named John Battaglia murdered his two daughters because he was in a dispute with the mother over...child support. Child support. So that they'd apparently had a nasty divorce and they were fighting about the child support and he had his little girls on the phone and had them call the mother and say, "Mom, why do you wanna put daddy in jail?" And so he had this woman on the phone when he murdered their daughters. I could not imagine that kind of evil. And as a journalist, I was taught that you never show your emotions because your emotions take away from the story and it is not about you. Now, in our social media obsessed world, it's all about that. But I grew up in a world where journalists kept their emotions in check because the story was never about you. So in, had I been given a little time, had this happened at two o'clock and I was going on the air at ten, but it had just happened. And literally it's like I got to the scene, I saw police officers crying, we got scant information, and now I have to go on the air. And I didn't have time to go, "Okay Robbie, you're a journalist and you can not cry." And you know I had my mic on, had IFB, and, you know, and it's like it's breaking news, it's huge. Because not only had he murdered his daughters, then he was on the loose. So police were looking for him. So he murdered them and ran. So a man had just murdered his daughters is loose with a gun in Dallas. So it was a huge manhunt. It was public safety so we needed to get on the air, let people know, show his picture, and in that moment all I could think about was, "If I cry, I'll be ruined." Because I was new in the market then. I'd only been with 11, you know, maybe a year or so. And back then...women were still fighting to be taken seriously. To not always be doing the dog and pony shows and the features, but to be taken seriously as a hard news journalist. And so in this market where you had legends still on the air, here I was: a newbie at this station on this huge story and I remember calling my husband and waking him up because he was waking early so he had gone to sleep. And I remember calling and waking him up and saying, "You gotta pray with me right now. Please pray for me. Because if I cry I'll never be a reporter in this market again." And I didn't realize that I was mic'd and I could hear my wonderful AP at the time come in my ear and say, "You're alright, Robbie. You're alright. You got this." But I needed him to pray for me right then because I didn't wanna cry. There were police officers crying, there was a mother screaming because her daughters had been murdered on the phone, she's hearing her daughters be murdered by their father - the man that she chose.

And I had to step in front of that camera and go - with dry eyes - "This is what we know. This is what's happened here today." Because everybody that was watching in Dallas, they needed to be thinking, "Oh my lord, let me pray for this mother. Let me be on the lookout for this killer." They didn't need to be saying, "Did you see that channel 11 reporter start to cry and fall apart?"

Luisa: Yeah, yeah.

Robbie: We live in a world now that I think some reporters would have cried just for the attention that it would bring. But I needed to not cry.

Luisa: Yeah, because in that time women - still of course, we're still in this process - women were, as you said, just in journalism with lifestyle stories, home and health, beauty and wellness, not crime, not even sports. No political or economic things. So that's, yeah. I can't believe...

Robbie: So that's how serious it was for me that I be taken seriously. And I got through that live shot and I cried all the way home.

Luisa: Yeah.

Robbie: But I got through the live shot because that was doing my job. It was not about my feelings. I had my feelings after I signed off. And you know, thinking back now, I hadn't thought about this in years, I think after I signed off, I put the mic down and I think I went and sat on the side, on the tire, on the side of the live truck and cried. But I didn't want anybody to see me cry. Because that would have called into question my ability to do my job and in that moment I needed to do my job.

Luisa: This story reminds me of one story of one friend of mine here. So a Mexican friend of mine heard that it was murder this November in Dallas. Did you hear that story near the mall? Yea, a guy just entered her apartment, she just graduated from UNT, a guy just...I don't know...just entered into her apartment, murdered her, then Maria, who is her mother, came to the apartment and found her dead. Yea, that was in Dallas Morning News. And I encouraged my teacher to cover the story and he told me, "Why don't you cover it?" and I said, "Because I'm close to her mother and I don't want to corrupt the story because I'm going to start crying and I know her." It's kind of hard, you know, when you have to make decisions, you know, about your career.

Robbie: Sadly and unfortunately, I do feel that some female reporters are not as concerned now about being taken seriously. And I won't say reporters. There are people who are journalists and then there are people who make a living on TV. There's a difference. And sadly, I believe the public sometimes is not able to tell the difference between a journalist and someone who is just on TV. And it saddens me that some women who are now on TV are not journalists and because people don't know the difference the behavior of some of those women, it negatively impacts us all.

Luisa: Yeah, totally. In your opinion, what are the most important ethical values that a journalist has to have in order to be good at their jobs?

Robbie: I believe it is critical for journalists to always be fair, to always be accurate to the best of our ability, and to also bring perspective. Last week I was covering the White Rock machete murder trial. Horrible story. Sad story all around. And I stepped out of the trial to do an eleven o'clock live report. And I looked over and the defendant's mother and aunt were sitting there watching me do this report. And sometimes people can be very hostile even though I didn't, you know, choose the story, I didn't have anything to do with it, sometimes people just are angry and the reporters are the people that they can take that anger out on. So I finished my report, I looked over, they were looking at me, and I didn't look away because I had done nothing wrong. And I said, "Do you need something?" So I gave her the invitation to say whatever was on her mind. And to my great surprise she said, "Thank you. We've been watching your reports. You've been very fair." That is a high compliment for a journalist.

Pause in recording

Luisa: I just want to know what advice do you have for journalists, women journalists, who are right now dealing with this feminist movement, equality movements, because you have a wonderful story and a really important story for any woman who want to believe in themselves. So what is your advice for them?

Robbie: I think the advice I would give to all journalists, not just female, but all journalists would be to work hard, respect your craft, and understand that what you do will impact the impressions that others have of journalism. So be a journalist. Don't be somebody on TV. Be a journalist. That means do the work, that means be fair, that means be accurate, and remember that the story is not about you. For female journalists, I would say be mindful of giving away your power. And all freedom is not freedom. There's an Aesop's fable or story we were told when we were young and I forget all the details, but essentially the story's sorta about a fox who is able to lure the rabbit into the pot by convincing that rabbit that that pot is something else. And I think sometimes freedom is that way because you can do something can do something does not mean that you should do something. And over the years, the attire for women has gotten, how shall we say? Extremely casual. Some people see that as an advancement. I do not. Because if you look on the air tonight everyone male anchor and reporter, almost without exception unless they're doing sports or, you know, an outdoors story, they've got on a suit and tie. They look professional. But what has happened to the attire of women on air? It has gotten so casual to often brink unprofessional. And I know some will get angry and say, "Well I should be able to wear everything I want." But my mother always told me that the way you dress and the way you present yourself is the first impression that people have of you. And if you don't want someone to treat you like you are not a lady, then do not dress and carry yourself in a way that says "You are not a lady." And to me, with the mother that I had, being a lady didn't mean that you were weak. Being a lady meant that you were aware of your power. And that you carry yourself in such a way that you always commanded respect before you opened your mouth, before you said a word, someone could look at you and know that you were about business. I could say that in a more casual way, but I will not. Basically if you don't want to be treated a certain way, don't dress in such a way that says that you would welcome that kind of attention.

Luisa: Robbie, thank you so much. That was really amazing. When I got here I didn't realize the important historical situations that you've had to deal with during the last few decades. Thank

you so much for sharing all those important moments, situations, experiences, memories that will contribute to other female journalists, to their paths. So thank you so much.

Robbie: It was fun! Thank you for thinking of me and as I stepped out and I thought about it, I started during the generations, my great-grandfather was a slave. It wasn't seven generations ago. It was, just think about that, my mother's grandfather was a slave. Bought, sold, slave. My great-grandmother was the daughter of a slave and the white slave owner. So this wasn't "Roots," this was, when I think about the history of grandmother Susanna, she was the half-white daughter of the slave owners and the slaves that they raped. That was not that long ago.

Luisa: Yeah, that was like...That was like written history.

End of interview