

Jorge Garifuna (Reyes) Los Angeles

Ben: Umm... just to start, I always ask people their name... if they will say and spell their name.

Jorge: Sure. Subtitles right? Are you ready to record? Well, my name is Jorge Garifuna. The way you spell it is the typical way you spell Jorge J-O-R-G-E G-A-R-I-F-U-N-A.

Ben: Talk about like what websites you have, like where you started, where you are now.

Jorge: Well, it all started back in the 90s, the early 90s. I always like... I always liked technology ok and I was born out of umm... out of a... that was a joke that I had with three of my cousins. So, the joke was this, we were about 8 years old and uh so we're playing around in the neighborhood and one of us said, hey whoever becomes a computer engineer is going to get a million dollars ok. So that started when I was eight years old right (laughs). So when I uh... so we left it... it was just a kid's joke right. So I lived in New York for several years and then my dad moved to LA, so and that was in ninety two now, ninety one, ninety two I had moved to LA, so I came and paid him a visit here in LA and uh and I was bored right, cause here in LA I found it to be very different than in New York. In New York if you wanted to go somewhere you just get on the train, get on the bus and off you go. Here, you have to know how to drive, right and I was a teenager. I had... I didn't have a car. We only had a car for the family and my dad would take it to work, so. Ummm... i remember when I was eight years old I had this bet with my cousins about computers, so I told my dad, hey dad (laughs). And he said ok fine uh so it took him a while to get it, but he did get it, uh eventually through a mutual friend, a Garifuna friend whose name is Rocky Bernadez. he is one of the individuals I know that was he was into technology very very early on and we're still friends up to date. Ummm... so we um. So he got the computer and he he st.. around the same time that he started working around with the dictionary. So he started researching words in Garifuna, english and Spanish and he... I remember he has this old notebook that he had, he would carry it everywhere and when he would meet with people, Garifuna people, he would ask them hey, especially the older people, hey what does this word mean, how do you say this word? Right, so and he would write it down in his notebook and then he would come he would give me the the notepad and he would ask me to put it, input it in the computer. So, at the time we were using this software called word perfect right. It was in the 90s so there was no microsoft word yet. (laughs) so uh, I would type it in the computer. Frankly I used to hate typing, the reason being because I wanted to open the computer and find out how the thing worked, right, that's what I wanted to do. My dad was, hey type this thing and then I didn't... that was not fun for me. right. So uh. But I would type it in anyways, so we created these columns and then we started putting in the words, the Garifuna words. We had this blue screen on the computer in micr...in word perfect so from there we uh, I went back to New York umm... and then I asked my dad to send me the computer, so he sent it to me and that's when I really had the great time of opening the thing up and finding out how the thing worked and would remove the cables and then put them back together and find problems. So umm... everyday I would disassemble the computer just to learn something new. right. I did not know that many

people who were into technology at the time and now I'm talking about maybe ninety-three, ninety-four ummm... so I decided to go into Barnes and Noble, reading and buying books or if I didn't have the money I would sit in Barnes and Noble for most of the day and just read computer books right. The ones that I could buy, I would buy them and then while on the train in New York anyone that I would see reading a computer book, I would make them my friend. Hey you're into computers. Let's be friends. (laughs). So, like that I met a few people that were into computers at the time, so umm.. so I, you know made a few friends and I, I would now we will exchange hardware, hard drives. I would buy hard drives from them or memory for computers and uh you know and some of them would sell it to me for very expensive, which I learned later on once I got more into the game. So, I'm the kind of person that really, really like to help umm... Early on when I was very young I used to build these toys in the neighborhood and I used to share with my friends right and then from there I used to build, I used to re... I learned to fix bike, bicycles... ummm and I would fix the bikes of everyone in the neighborhood. Ummm.. and now my new thing that was was computers. Learning about computers, teaching everybody that I you know, about computers right. So, I started in high school ummm. I started sharing what I knew with teachers some students, and ummm... from there they noticed that I had this, I had this skill and and they, I by then I was, because I was going to bed at 6 in the morning almost every day and waking up at 8 o'clock to go to school um, I was learning this thing very very well right, so I was fixing computers at school. So they said, hey you're very good at this, can you fix my friend's computer? And then maybe charge for something. I'd never really thought about charging anyone for what i really had a passion of doing. So I um I said sure, so then I started going out to people's houses to fix their computers and uh I... not to pat myself on the back, but would solve 97 percent of the problems right, so uh, from there I uh through the school, through high school, the recommended me to this university call Polytech University in New York, Brooklyn New York uh which is an engineering school ummm again, I I just I'm guessing like most students, most high school students, they don't know much about college is and what college is all about like where to go and how to go about the process, but I was lucky enough to to be able to give some to the school so they helped me back in return by assisting me in the process by going to a good university. um So off I went to the university no i'm talking about ninety five. Nineteen ninety five um and I I I I knew they have several degrees that had to do with computers which I knew not much about. um. I know they had computer engineering, computer electrical and computer science so I I looked at the list and I like the way this one sounds. Computer science, so I picked that one and uh umm, so luckily I was accepted to the university um and then by then I was I was building, disassembling computers from scratch and uh and putting them apart and helping people solve their computer problems and I was very very good at it. But at the same time I also noticed that more people were coming into the field of fixing computers. Um so I wanted to differentiate myself to a certain extent by learning the other part of it which is the software part. How to build programs how to uh uh programs that people use to interact with the computers uh these were really hard for regular individuals back then, so um. I went to college I I learned the programming side umm. While there I met a few classmates, we became great friends, very good friends and as usual, I would spread the gospel and teach them what I believe and what I know about computers. So we started doing, we formed a small business. We would go out to different small businesses to fix their computers um. so that went on for a while uh and I really had a great time. Um

in school then at at the time the web was just in its infant stages. We were using netscape in college and uh which is a web browser ummm. What is called html nowadays, which is the language which is used to build websites, to create websites was also in its infancy, but we were already learning that. So I learned it on my own. um. I bought a book and I I read the chapters and I practiced it on my computer and that's how I learned html. So out of that, then I I um found a job within the university maintaining the website. Um just out of the things that I had learned right. And uh so from there I through this program that I was involved in I got hired by the university as a full-time employee um to work in the library as far as you know doing programming jobs and other aspects of of um technology. So including distance learning for the university and so I I that was my first real job um and then I uh I also got a side job uh in the city Manhattan with a Arabian company uh that was doing TV, TV production for the Arabic speaking community, so uh so I was doing literally four things at the same time. I was going to college, I was uh. I had my own computer repair business on the side. I had a uh. I was working full time for the university and I had this part time gig in the city. So my life was pretty much split with these four things. Um, so that was, I really had a good time doing that. Um at the same time I learned I noticed that I was the only one in my school that was Garifuna at the time, into technology and I was I was antisocial per se. So I didn't have friends, that many friends other than my closer relatives. So I started putting together, so this idea came to me about creating a project a website that would allow me to connect with other Garifuna individuals in the uh in the country and around the world. Uh cause I knew this great thing and I love to share, so I wanted to be able to connect with my fellow Garifuna so I could share with them and learn what they knew. Um, so I created a website, I came up with this idea called Garinet.com and Garinet stands for the Gari part stands for Garifuna and the net part stands for network. So I I made up this word Garinet, which is Garifuna network um. So I I came to LA again, I was in New York. I came to LA, I uh and I it was the summer and then my dad had... uh there were some family members here like that came out of New York, cousins and so on and so forth so. Right about where you're sitting right now I sat with them and I said hey this is what I have in mind this is the project I have in mind, I want to be able to connect people um what do you think? So they were engaged idea, so I wrote everything down uh, so I went back to new york. Uh, one day I was surfing the net and I have AOL so I had the AOL instant messenger and there was this guy that got connected. And I uh sent him a quick message. His name is Dixson Marin. I said, hey how are you I'm such and such I am working on a project um, I've seen some of the CD covers that you designed um you seem to be a person who is completely opposite from me from a social standpoint. Right you know, you seem like you know a lot of people. I know nobody but my computer, can we meet up and uh and and so I can show you what I have right? So he said sure, so I came over. I went from Brooklyn to the Bronx in New York so we had a little meeting, I came to his house and knocked on his door and there were about twenty individuals there, Garifuna people k. I had no idea that he was gonna, I thought it was just a one on one meeting but he was able to call some of the people that he knew um. So I I sat there just like I'm sitting now I had all my notes with me. By then I had the project formally organized ,everything typed up, typed up and ready for delegations. So I presented and uh I I kinda was the youngest person in the group, so I present to everyone and and then at the end, I requested for assistance uh. So I wrote... so most people actually volunteered I wrote down the name of the individuals next to the item the task item um. And that's how Garinet pretty much got

off the ground going from a concept into reality with the assistance Dixon Marin that knew people. So uh, so then we started collecting the information from individuals. Some of them came back, some other ones did not. Um, but the project moved on anyways. Um so through that, I, we launched the project called Garinet.com in nineteen ninety eight or nineteen ninety nine um and luckily the word spread like wildfire. So um friends started other friends. Family members started to talking to family members, not just locally in New York, but also in different states. As you ma already know there are major concentrations of Garifuna people in New York, Florida, LA, New Orleans, Texas and so on and so forth. And through the website I learned that there are some Garinagu in um... Garinagu by the way is the plural of Garifuna. So, so there are some Garinagu that I learned are in the Netherlands. I learned that there are some in Japan, um. Maybe in servicing the military I believe. Uh but I learned this through this website, this website called Garinet.com. So from then on, a lot of the people that I met uh had been pretty much through Garinet.com So in a in a summary, the project has been a huge success in my opinion. It's been one of the few Garifuna websites that have lasted for over ten years um. I I got to different places and there are there are people that I have no idea who they are and we start talking and they say hey oh yes I found this information through garinet.com. And I just said, good I'm glad, so umm. So that started that again, by now the the the my dad having worked on several other Garifuna projects because he was very, he's always been very involved with the community, so my dad being here in LA, me being out in New York I started attending any and every organization, Garifuna organization meetings that I could. From different villages and different countries to Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and so on and so forth um. And that's how I really got more acquainted with the culture and how our people interact and I learned so much out of that. Um. So I was able to see not just how my how how individuals from a specific country interacted and and and, but also how across the diaspora, I should say, the um the the there were common points. Even though they say some individuals from a specific country spoke English or Garifuna and Spanish, some other individuals spoke in Garifuna and English they were able to interact with this mutual culture in a very very similar way. Um. And I was, I was very passionate about that. I really loved what I had learned. So when I um so then I I made, I decided...

Ben: Can I interrupt you?

Jorge: Yes.

Ben: How did it make you feel to know that you were connecting the whole community, I mean you're doing something that previously is done through phone calls...

Jorge: Right.

Ben: How does that make you feel?

Jorge: I don't think there are any words to describe it. I was extremely passionate about what I did. I mean, I I I I felt very, uh I don't think happy is not even a word that could describe it, it is beyond happiness ok. It it it made me feel like, which I learned later on, it was like seeing a sir (?) my my child being... your own child being born. Ok, your own first

child being born ok. It was, it was, it was, it was something that is extremely passionate ok. Um and I really really love what I saw, I love what I learned about my culture um. Right and that and that fueled me to keep doing what I was doing as far as my small contribution in technology. Um so, I I was able again to spread the gospel, teach anyone and everyone that I could within my culture about the little bit that I knew um and and people were very receptive. I mean, I would volunteer now to teach computers at local organizations in New York. There was one other time called mugama uh which is Mujeres Garifunas en Marcha at the time, so I volunteered to uh to teach a class in computers. I split it into two sections one about html and the other one about basic computers, how to use computers, how to use the keyboard, what is the key, what are the peripherals that computers need to operate uhm so I was very passionate about that. So um then I I made the decision to move from New York to LA, by now it was nineteen ninety, it was two thousand and one actually when I decided to make the move from from new york to LA. Um. So, by then I had my first child um uh and uh his name is Jimmy so we we made the move and uh, so we stayed at my dad's house for for a few um. and then I had to see how I could get a job and you know go out into the work force. I mean I was fresh out of college, go out in the workforce. So I found this job in this (audio glitch) in two thousand one. Uh and then uh and as you may already know in two thousand one nine eleven happened uhm the the stock market went down and uh most things went down with it, including technology, so I, even though I have found a job. Then I I, because the technology dropped just like everything else because of the unfortunate nine eleven I uh I in in assisting a fellow family member I learned that he was doing real estate and uh. And and so he offered me to get into the business with him so I jumped from technology to doing real estate now um so I I did real estate for quite some time. uh I did it a couple years, a few years or so um so we uh I learned so much about real estate and really really enjoyed it. Excuse me. But then, technology was my passion, it has always been my passion, so I when I had the opportunity I moved back into technology, so I created... I noticed the community now was has always been involved with music um but there was a lack of consistent distribution of the music. Um so I I started learning a little bit more about the music business um. As to how our distribution. How the standard distribution channels of regular products were set up and how our the Garifuna distribution music channels are set up. And the way that is, that I learned was normally the artists would print a thousand cd's and then take it straight to the store and sell it try to sell it to the store owner. They would skip the uh, the distribution companies and the wholesalers and so on and so forth. So um, I decided, I thought about a way to assist um in the in in in in assist in helping to streamline the music distribution process by coming up with a project called puntamusic.com. So umm, puntamusic.com the concept was, so we have this great music what I had learned in New York is that we don't have a problem with talent. Our people are extremely talented ok. Um but somehow our our our talent and that does not go very far um. And I learned one of the problems was distribution so in trying to create a solution for this, what I thought to be a problem, I created this project um so I started contacting individuals in the music industry and um. A lot of them came on board and we started putting the project together as usual uh so that went on from there and uh so we decide... we created this distribution channel uh now the the individuals, artists, the bands could have access to see how their product's actually selling um from a technology standpoint I created two systems. One was the public website that anyone could see and then the other was the administrative site that um the artists have access to to view in real

time how their products were selling, how the music was moving, who was accessing their music and so on and so forth. So I I um. (noise) Sorry. (noise) I'll wrap it up shortly. Ok sure, I'll wrap it up sure

Ben: Can I ask you a couple more quick questions about your ipod, your iphone app.

Jorge: Yes, sure.

Ben: what are the roles of technology doing for the Garifuna people to connect them, I guess, make them... standardize the language. Tell me about all of this technology if you can sum it up and what's happening with it in preserving the culture.

Jorge: Sure, ok. That's a very good question actually. And I thank you for it. Well the the the Garifuna mobile app um has just been released recently. It's a project that's been... the Garifuna dictionary itself it's a project that's been in development for over twenty years. Uh, we started, my dad started out back in nineteen ninety one as I made mention earlier. The um, throughout the years, we have made the attempt to to take the knowledge of the language and distribute it in a way that anyone is interested in learning more about this his... this great culture could but until now. We have not, we just found the perfect ingredient to bring everything together in this Garifuna dictionary, mobile app. The reason being and there are many factors the contribute to this. We feel that the technology is mature enough for anyone to have it in the palm of their hands, which is something that did not exist before. Not just that, but people are open enough at this point to embrace technology. When things started out back then, people would see computers, but they they will see it as spaceship up in the sky something that was pretty much untouchable. But through a sequence of several events now we see we see that people have acc... these devices are accessible to them and apple has made... the company apple has made a huge inroads as far as making that possible. Um. Companies like google have also made that possible with phones like Android and apple with the iphone and ipad. So, So we know this, we always look up to the future and and how it is that we can bring our talents and contribute to our community and individuals and organizations to make, to make, to bring more exposure to our Garifuna culture. So we we we saw the trend, again we we we we try to we architect our plans. We we try to engineer our future and and we see the things that you are seeing today didn't, did not just start today ok you are seeing the future, the the the fruits of years of hard labor put into, packaged in a box ok that is presented to you as an individual in an easy to use way to learn about our culture. Ok So so we decided to to to work on this project, to actually bring it to the masses, to the people ok where whereby before there were projects here, there were projects there there were projects there, projects were just scattered, but the the accessibility to this project was limited to the individuals who knew something about computers or have access to a computer. Now it's accessible to anyone that can get their hands on it through mobile phones that are using Android or iphone or ipads where they can sit down in their living rooms and say hey let me see what love means in Garifuna, so they could punch it in on their mobile phone and get it, get a translation right away. Um. now that I think up to now, we had not had that in the past and and that was a moving factor as far as inspiring us more to to take work that's been in development for twenty years and package it into a mobile app to to share this this

this treasure that is Garifuna culture that we have um in our hands. So I I feel very fortunate to be, to have been a small contributor to this project uh on the software side uh my dad has has done a tremendous job as far as working on the words, researching the words, going to several Garifuna communities, several Garifuna countries, several countries where Garifuna live to say. And and finding out the differences between each country's and and brining it all together, making it easier for us to actually enjoy his his hard labor. So, so I feel honored to be a part of this this historical project which is the Garifuna dictionary mobile app.

Ben: Ok. Ummm.... sounds like you gotta go...

Jorge: Oh don't worry.

Ben: I want to ask another question are you ok?

Jorge: Don't worry

Ben: I want to ask, your dad told us a story the other day about how you all would come in and ask for ice cream and he would say I don't understand in Garifuna. And he made you learn the language that way. Tell me about learning the language from your dad and kind of how it happened.

Jorge: Sure, so it was again, the um. Growing up, I grew up with my grandmother um. For some time. My mom was there also but she would work, she would go to work. So most of the time I was spending with my grandmother right so. My grandmother would speak the language to me, but I would re... the Garifuna language to me, but I would respond in Spanish right. So when I ... getting involved with my dad, when he decided to get involved with this dictionary. I'm not sure if this happened systematically, consciously or unconsciously, well he kind of, kind of like forced me to get involved and to learn the language at the same time because by taking the words from his notepad I would have to type it into the computer and at the same time learn what they meant. So So, that that on its own was one factor that allowed me to get more exposure to that language and feel more comfortable about about speaking the language and being proud of of who I am as a Garifuna person. Ummm... so and then from there everything, the rest is pretty much history I mean, that was one of the beginnings, to to get I should say. That was the foundation to get started uh and and cement the the the fact that hey this is a great language, this is an awesome culture. Let me embrace it and make it part of me of who I am. Umm. Why is that important you may ask, well I noticed that at the time unfortunately, a lot of our youngsters were not, were losing the language, were losing the culture. Ok. To the point where I think they felt embarrassed about speaking the language. Because of the, I guess, outside influence. Ok they want to be more like group x as opposed to their own group right. I, as I got more involved with the culture in all these aspects, including the language, I I realized that you could have yours and still learn other things and it doesn't make you, it doesn't diminish who you are as a person. In fact, it make you a stronger person, a better person. Because now I feel fortunate enough to communicate with individuals that speak English, like yourself, Spa... when I go to, when I see my fellow

Garifuna, I communicate with them in Garifuna and when I see my fellow Spanish man I speak to them in Spanish. I do business with all three of them. As opposed to just doing business with one. So that I think is the blessing ok. And I I throughout the process I learned that it does not make me a less person, a lesser person to embrace other cultures and leave mine behind. I can bring the entire package with me and it only makes me better.

Ben: Great. I think that's everything.

Jorge: Well, you're very welcome.