

**INTERVIEW OF DIEGO T. BENAVENTE****by Howard P. Willens and Deanne C. Siemer****February 7, 1997**

- Willens: Speaker Diego T. Benavente of the Commonwealth House of Representatives has kindly agreed to be interviewed, although the House is currently in session. Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for being available today to help us with this project. Could you begin by telling us where and when you were born.
- Benavente: Thank you, Howard. I was born here on the island of Saipan back on April 21, 1959.
- Willens: Who were your parents?
- Benavente: My father's name is Roman Manahane Benavente, and my mom's name was Dolores Pangelinan Tenorio.
- Willens: Was your father also born in the Northern Marianas?
- Benavente: Yes. Both my mother and my father were born here in Saipan.
- Willens: How far back did their families go here in Saipan?
- Benavente: I believe my father's father was also born here in Saipan, but his father came from Guam.
- Willens: Was that during the German time?
- Benavente: It's kind of too far back for me, but I would think probably back in the German time.
- Willens: How about on your mother's side?
- Benavente: Both my mother's parents were born here in Saipan, and I've heard enough history to say that their parents as well were from Saipan.
- Willens: What did your father do for a living?
- Benavente: My father was a jack of all trades type of person. Throughout our life he's been in and out of all sorts of businesses, from the fishing business to construction to upgrading a cafeteria at the Mt. Carmel School. We also had a shop for repairing boats and motors at our house. He used to have the largest fishing stores business on the island with a lot of boats and a lot of fishermen going out.
- Willens: Is he still living?
- Benavente: Yes. My father is still alive. My mother passed away going on three years ago.
- Willens: Do you have brothers and sisters?
- Benavente: Yes. I'm one of seven brothers and sisters. I have three brothers and three sisters.
- Siemer: What are their names?
- Benavente: The oldest is my sister Melvia. Then there's Edward, and myself, then Antonio, then Renaldo, Ronald, Margarita, and Melina is the youngest.
- Siemer: Are they all still here on Saipan?
- Benavente: Yes. Every one is here on Saipan.
- Siemer: What is your wife's name?

- Benavente: My wife's name is Victoria Iriarte.
- Siemer: Is her family also from Saipan?
- Benavente: No. Her mother is originally from Saipan, but her father is from the island of Guam. As a matter of fact, she herself was born and raised on Guam, and we met here in Saipan during our junior year in high school when they moved over.
- Willens: Where were you educated?
- Benavente: Through high school, here. I graduated from Mt. Carmel School. I went there during my high school years, which is 9th through 12th. I went to Hopwood for 8th grade, and I was at Garapan Elementary School during elementary times.
- Willens: When did you graduate from Mt. Carmel?
- Benavente: 1977.
- Willens: Did you have any further education?
- Benavente: Just two years in a community college in Twin Falls, Idaho. It's called the College of Southern Idaho.
- Willens: How did you ever happen to find your way to Idaho?
- Benavente: Only because my brother was going to school there, and he went there because my cousin was going to school there.
- Willens: That's the most interesting phenomenon to see the schools on the mainland where people from here go. They end up in Kansas and Nebraska and . . .
- Benavente: Twin Falls, Idaho.
- Willens: Twin Falls, Idaho. How did you enjoy the weather in Idaho?
- Benavente: I never got used to the wintertime. I guess I'm a tropical person, and I hated the cold. But I was very fortunate that I had a lot of good friends and good people that I met over there and worked for. It was I guess a good thing for me, and that's the reason why I stayed for four years.
- Willens: You stayed for four years in Idaho?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Willens: So were you there then from 1977-81 or thereabouts?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Siemer: What degree did you get?
- Benavente: I was never able to get a college degree. I left for college to become an engineer. As a matter of fact, I finished all of my math and science requirements, but because of my problems with English and Speech classes, I didn't pass those and didn't get my first two-year degree there at the college. I ended up just staying there and working. I got married in Idaho, and my wife and I lived there for two more years before we moved back.
- Willens: What brought you back to Saipan?
- Benavente: I missed it. Honestly, I remember this day when I was at work, and all of a sudden I felt like I wanted to go back home. I missed my family, I missed my island. I remember that because it wasn't too long after I felt that that we left. It was almost like a week or two weeks. We just packed up and left. We just decided it was time to go home.

- Willens: How did your wife feel about it?
- Benavente: She has always been very supportive of me, and I think that at the time too she agreed, she wanted to come back home. Both of us had been away from home for four years.
- Willens: Did you come home during the Christmas intervals or summer?
- Benavente: That's probably why I felt like that because no, I never did. For four straight years I lived in Twin Falls, Idaho. I never made it home, and I guess maybe it just got to the point where it was too long; I had to come back.
- Willens: Were any of your relatives in politics during the 1950s and the 1960s?
- Benavente: My father was a village commissioner, and of course back then in politics probably the most important would be the village commissioner. They were the people who were involved with the community directly.
- Siemer: In which village?
- Benavente: Susupe, where I reside right now. My father was a commissioner for that village for five years.
- Siemer: When was that?
- Benavente: That would be in the late 1960s. I remember he was the commissioner in the late 1960s, early 1970s, because he was the commissioner during Typhoon Jean, one of the major typhoons. I remember having to work hard with my father assisting the community at the time.
- Siemer: Is your father related to Luis Benavente?
- Benavente: The former Vice Speaker? Yes. By the way, I don't know if you've heard, but he's in the intensive care unit right now. He had a major stroke. They're first cousins. Their fathers are brothers.
- Willens: I have collected over the years a set of records going back into the 1950s about people who had held political office, and I notice that the mayor for many years was an Ignacio V. Benavente. Was he related?
- Benavente: My father's uncle. He was the mayor and also I believe the first local judge on the island.
- Willens: Did your father have any political affiliation in the 1960s?
- Benavente: Yes. Back then we had the Territorial Party and the Popular Party, and although (I remember this) all his brothers and sisters and family were in the Popular Party, because my mom's family were all in the Territorial Party, my dad was in the Territorial Party, and he would win under the Territorial Party.
- Willens: Did he have any views at that time that you remember about an affiliation with United States? Was that something he supported?
- Benavente: No. You know, we never did. As far as I can remember, any discussion with my dad was mostly just his responsibility, and that's the people of Susupe. I remember my dad being very well liked by the community, because he was always there helping. As a matter of fact, I depended (and still do, actually) on my father's votes to get me elected in my precinct. And that's where he's from, of course.
- Willens: In 1969, about the time that you dad was a village commissioner, there was a plebiscite here and in Guam on the issue of reunification of Guam and the Northern Marianas, and the Popular Party was for reunification, but the Territorial Party was opposed to it. They

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- wanted a separate relationship with the United States. Do you have any recollection of family discussions about reintegration with Guam?
- Benavente: No, I don't. I really don't. And even to that, I don't think my dad ever really got involved. He just never gets involved about much in politics anyway, more than his responsibility as commissioner. My uncle, for example, former Governor Pete P. Tenorio, who was in the Commonwealth Legislature, was involved with our Commonwealth-wide issues, but my father has never really gotten into that.
- Willens: During the time that you were in high school, the Covenant negotiations began and were completed. Do you recall any discussion that you had with your classmates or teachers about the separate negotiations?
- Benavente: I remember that all the issues were brought to our schools, actually. We were fortunately because we had the auditorium at Mt. Carmel School in which most of the forums were held. I guess that's where they signed it, also.
- Willens: That's right.
- Benavente: So as students at Mt. Carmel, we had the benefit of attending most of the forums, whether it was for the island or even we held some for the school. We had the discussion on the separate political status.
- Willens: Did you have any view at the time as to the separate negotiations as distinct from the Northern Marianas staying with the rest of Micronesia?
- Benavente: I clearly remember taking part in the discussions, but I really can't recall if I was for the commonwealth.
- Willens: The other districts were looking for something called free association.
- Benavente: I thought there were three different choices we had. I remember trying to pick from three.
- Willens: You're right. There was an education for self-government program that the Trust Territory had that might have thrown independence into that group of options.
- Benavente: Right.
- Willens: Do you recall if there was any majority view among the students at the time as to which of these options was most attractive?
- Benavente: I really don't recall. I remember taking part, and I can still see some of the times when I would be at the auditorium there, but I just don't recall which one I supported back then.
- Siemer: Were there many students from other districts in your class?
- Benavente: Yes, especially at Mt. Carmel. You know, we had the program there for the Sisters who were bringing in a lot of what we call the resident guests who were from the districts. They were living there. So for Mt. Carmel, there were quite a bit of people (actually just girls) from the other districts.
- Willens: What persuaded you to get into politics?
- Benavente: It was even before I came back in 1977 or 1979. When did we elected our first Governor?
- Willens: 1977.

- Benavente: So it was 1978 when Camacho won, or the fall of 1977. I remember getting hold of the newspaper; I think the Variety was already publishing then. I was reading about our first election for Governor and the Commonwealth government starting. And I remember that day—it was one of the apartments we were living and I looked at that and I said someday I want to go back and—actually I said to myself I want to be governor of the Commonwealth someday. This was after seeing that.
- Willens: And you were in Idaho at the time.
- Benavente: I was in Idaho at the time. Then when I got back, actually I didn't get into politics until about 1987, so from 1981 to 1987, I didn't pay any attention to it.
- Siemer: Was Teno [Pedro P. Tenorio] the governor when you came back?
- Benavente: I came back right in the middle of the primary campaign for the primary for Teno. It was that summer of 1981 when I came back. It was June, and the primary was going on. I remember coming back, and my wife and I and my son (we had my son already at that time, we were living with my father-in-law) and the next morning, after traveling from Idaho, I had to wake up at 5:00 to help cook for the big rally that day. So yes, I jumped right into politics, assisting Teno. But after that, I was always in the private sector. I started my own business, you know.
- Willens: What was that?
- Benavente: Diego's Mart. We opened a small fish market in Susupe where I grew up. Actually when I first got back, I assisted my father with his construction business for about a year, year and a half. Then we opened our own business; it was before 1983. I started my business with my wife, and we still have that business.
- Willens: The Covenant was signed by the negotiating parties in February 1975. Then there was a plebiscite several months later. Do you remember any of the arguments pro and con on the Covenant in those days?
- Benavente: I don't remember the arguments, no.
- Willens: Then there was a Constitutional Convention in 1976, where the Territorial Party got much more than a majority of the Convention delegates, and Larry Guerrero was selected as president of the Convention. Do you remember any of the issues that were being discussed at the time regarding the Constitution?
- Benavente: No, I don't. In 1976 I was a junior in high school. That's just when I met my wife, so I was . . .
- Willens: Other things on your mind at that time.
- Siemer: Were any of the women in your family, your mother or any of the other women, active in politics back in those days?
- Benavente: Women? No. Right now I just can't think of any, and I don't think so. One of my father's late sisters was. I don't know if you'd call it that, but she was very loyal to the Popular Party. And because my dad was a Republican, sometimes he won't even talk to her, you know. It was more just her loyalty, you know, very loyal to her party. She was very outspoken about her party, but I can't say on the different issues.
- Siemer: Were any of your relatives members of the Political Status Commission?
- Benavente: No, I don't think so.
- Willens: What influenced you in about 1987 to leave the private sector and run for office?

- Benavente: I guess all of a sudden that urge, that feeling I had back in Idaho, got to me and I decided to attend a pocket meeting, we called it, in the village of Susupe where we had our business and were living. One evening I went to it, and to tell you the truth, what happened that night was I showed up, I walked up, I don't think I knew more than half of the individuals who were there. There were three candidates for our precinct at the time. The first thing I heard was "Mr. Chairman (one of the people was calling out to the Chairman of our precinct club committee), if our candidate Mr. Manasses Borja is not serious with his candidacy, because this is now the third meeting that he missed (and these were the pocket meetings), then at this time I recommend that instead of Mr. Manasses Borja, we will put in Mr. Diego Benavente to run." And I said: "Hey, wait a minute, I just came to help and attend." But that's how I started, and I guess at the time Manasses was into all kinds of other things and he wasn't really serious about running, and eventually they convinced him to step down and they put my name in.
- Willens: Was he a member of the Legislature at the time?
- Benavente: No, he wasn't.
- Willens: This was 1987, so it would have been between a two-year election rather than a gubernatorial election?
- Benavente: Right.
- Siemer: Whom did you run against?
- Benavente: There were three of us. It was myself, the former floor leader Bill Ada, and also Mariano Bermudes as the three of us in the Republican Party, after I replaced Manasses Borja of course. And in the Democrats was Pete Arriola and this guy named Antonio Camacho and the former speaker Ben Sablan. After we picked out the slot, the ballot was printed, and I've always blamed my defeat on that. I thought I was going to win that election. I had a lot of support. Like I said, my dad's popularity was enough for me to win in our precinct. But they put my name with the former Speaker who was very, very popular in our precinct. So I was lined up with him in the ballot.
- Siemer: Oh, his name was across from yours?
- Benavente: Right. And a lot of people at the time still didn't know that we weren't running against each other, that they could pick three out of the six. I thought maybe even if I was with the former Speaker, if our names were both at the top, then we probably both would win because some of those people started voting on the top, and they could probably say I know I am supposed to pick three so they would probably check mark my name and his name at the same time. But where my name was the bottom with him, you'll probably start out by going is it Bill or Pete, I'm going to pick Bill, is it Mariano or Jun, I'm going to pick Mariano. That's two, now I only have one more. I can't vote for both Diego and Ben. So they end up voting for Ben. I lost by six votes.
- Willens: Did the other two candidates from your party win?
- Benavente: Yes.
- Siemer: And Manasses S. Borja, he's still in the government someplace, isn't he?
- Benavente: He's working for the Public Works now, I think as an editor for their paper there or something.
- Willens: Are the ballots still structured that way?

- Benavente: I think so. I think because you always have the Senate, and you always have the left side or the right side on the ballot.
- Willens: But people have more experience now.
- Benavente: Yes. And now we actually tell them that.
- Willens: What happened next then with respect to politics?
- Benavente: That loss was really hard, I mean I cried. It hit me pretty bad, because I was very confident that I would win that election. I had a lot of support. So I was really down from that election and said I'm not going to run again. I'll continue with the business. 1989 came, and everybody was looking for me to run in the elections, you know. All my friends and all my relatives then felt that I had a very good chance to win, and pushed me, and I ended up accepting. And from then on, I was always the highest vote-getter in my precinct. Four years in a row now.
- Siemer: Larry Guerrero was running at that time?
- Benavente: Yes, in the 1989 election, yes. I ran with Larry.
- Willens: So you've run in how many elections?
- Benavente: Four elections. Five elections all together. Because I'm serving my fourth term now, and I lost of course the first one in 1987.
- Willens: At the time you first got involved in politics, there was a great deal of economic development beginning here on Saipan in particular.
- Benavente: Yes. That was the boom time. I think we easily got reelected in the next election because we accomplished so much in my first term. That was because we had all that money. One of the biggest problems in Chalan Kanoa was the dust and the holes in the road. In my first term, I paved almost all of the roads in our precinct. That's why I got the highest vote in the next election. But yes, we benefitted from that. We really were able to come up with a lot of projects—the lights at the baseball field and a lot of major capital improvement projects.
- Siemer: Was there a Republican majority in the House then?
- Benavente: This was the year, in 1989, there were only six Republicans out of the 15, so there were nine Democrats and only six Republicans who won. That was the year when two of the Democrats switched. We took two of the Democrats and we became the majority with eight. The Democrats had some problems within their own group and ended up . . .
- Siemer: That's when the Speaker switched.
- Benavente: Yes. Speaker Guerrero and the Vice Speaker Benavente. We got both of them. We ended up controlling the majority and chairing all the committees.
- Willens: Some of the people with whom we've spoken go back to the late 1960s and the early 1970s when many significant political figures changed party, and they all say that that started a bad tradition.
- Benavente: Yes, of changing.
- Willens: Is that something you can generalize about, I mean the changing of parties, or is that just highly a personal matter from case to case?
- Benavente: It has happened, but I tell you, even here it's a political suicide. People who have changed parties don't really get too far in their political career. They'll probably win the following

election but then lose. And that's what's been happening for those individuals who switch parties, they'll end up losing.

Willens: You mentioned the relationship between economic development on the one hand during the boom times and the benefits to the people that the revenues made possible. Did you feel that your constituents were strongly for economic development in terms of the hotels and the businesses that they saw coming to the island?

Benavente: Yes. At the time, yes. I think the people were appreciating the boom, the hotel industry especially. At the time it was just a hotel industry. The development was in the tourism industry, you know, so there were properties that were being purchased for the tourism industry, I guess for restaurants and hotels and for tourist activities. And there was nothing wrong with it at the time.

Willens: Do you think their views have changed?

Benavente: Only to the point where now while everyone understands the need for development, I think the local people are concerned with the amount of development and the type of development. This is leading me to introduce for example a foreign investment policy or some kind of a foreign investment control.

Willens: During the years that you have been in politics, do you think that the Covenant has served as an adequate basic document for describing the relationship between the Commonwealth and the United States?

Benavente: Absolutely. I don't think that at this point in time we could ask for anything better. I was very fortunate to have come in in 1989 and be with the former Speaker Guerrero, who is very vocal on this issue and on the Commonwealth issue. I think he's one of those guys who questions a lot of the provisions of the Covenant, of course with the attitude that he wants his cake and eat it too. I mean he thinks all of the provisions of the Covenant work towards the favor of the Northern Marianas, period. I argue with that.

Willens: Was he a supporter of the Covenant, or he was a critic?

Benavente: He was a supporter, but at the same time he felt that all of the provisions in the Covenant work to the Marianas favor. He always felt that the sovereignty issue is separate from the idea of relating the Commonwealth as one of the States. He thought that we were a separate country and we should not be treated as a State. And we discussed that almost all the time, every time the issue of a non-voting delegate comes in or our status with the TT or the U.N. at the time. I can remember traveling to New York to present our case before the Trusteeship Council. But I've always taken the view that the Covenant was something that was so important for the Commonwealth to try to protect. I think we've got a great document. I think we've got ourselves a perfect situation politically. I still feel the same way. I still feel that that's the reason why we're seeing the development on the island is because of our relationship with the federal government and the way our Covenant was drafted.

Willens: My wife points out that people are going to be very reluctant to criticize the Covenant to me. I hope that's not the case.

Benavente: Oh, no. You can find a lot of people who criticize, it, I think. But not me. When I first came into office, this issue of a non-voting delegate has always been something that I have supported, and every time we discuss that, we talk of course about the Covenant and the political status or our political differences or political relationship with the federal government is always discussed. And I've always supported the Covenant and acknowledged the positions taken by either Congress or DOI as far as the meaning of the

Covenant. Because I never really thought that the sovereignty provision was something that made us sovereign. I think that other provisions of the Covenant actually created a Commonwealth as one of the territories, with a separate agreement but as one of the territories, and I accept that.

Willens: What is your recollection of your experience at the United Nations when you went there to the Trusteeship Council?

Benavente: I'd just come into office, and I remember we were presenting our case. We were asking that the Council not terminate the Trusteeship. Our complaint, and again you know this was coming from the radicals, the late Larry Hillblom and of course Pete Guerrero, the Speaker, that the federal government hasn't lived up to the mandate of the Trusteeship. But of course they went ahead and terminated that Agreement.

Willens: Did you ever discuss that issue with any representative of the United States from the Interior Department or State Department?

Benavente: No. I was too young, too fresh at that time. But I don't know if you remember the late Larry Hillblom took part in a lot of that, and of course he was always bringing it up with the Speaker and other members of the Legislature, but personally I was not involved.

Siemer: How did you come to be selected to go to New York?

Benavente: The Speaker just invited me to go along with him as part of the delegation to present our testimony before the Trusteeship Council. I remember working in one of the law offices of Larry Hillblom, putting the package together, and of course we were traveling together to New York with him.

Willens: Have you ever participated in the Section 902 negotiations with the United States?

Benavente: No. I've never been a member. I have followed it ever since I've been in office. I followed the progress. I've kept up with each meeting that they've had since I've been in office, but I've never taken part, no.

Willens: What are the issues that you're most concerned with now in the Commonwealth?

Benavente: Foreign investment. I guess on local issues that's probably about the most important thing at this time. The concern with the local people's feelings right now and desires, I feel that if there's anything that's bothering them, it's the uncontrolled development that's going on right now. That really creates another situation too, on the influx of outsiders and non-residents we have. You know, most people are using their \$4 haircut shops that you see the Chinese are putting up all over the place as just a front to bring in their family under those business applications or business permits.

Willens: Any other thoughts you want to add to our record here today? This has been very helpful, and we appreciate your time.

Benavente: I'm glad that you mentioned the [Section] 902 provision. I know that there are times when we've had problems trying to negotiate certain problems or conflicts we're trying to resolve through 902. I think the Covenant is something that is so important and we need to protect it, and if there are any problems we have the Section 902 we need to resolve that. The Covenant is why we're here right now.

Willens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.