MICHAEL E. LOPEZ-ALEGRIA

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Interviewers: Rebecca Wright, Paul Rollins, Carol Butler

Wright: Today is July 7, 1998. We're speaking with Michael Lopez-Alegria. He served a NASA Director of Operations at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia. We're speaking with him as part of the Shuttle-Mir Oral History Project.

We thank you again for taking time from your schedule to meet with us.

Lopez-Alegria: You're welcome.

Wright: So we'd like to begin, if you could give us your basic roles and responsibilities while you were there in Star City.

Lopez-Alegria: Okay. Let's see. I think I was the seventh DOR [Director of Operations] there. I think they started out by three-month periods and then ended up going to six-month periods. I was there for nine months. And each increment, the office grew in size and responsibility. Basically our role as DOR was to take care of the office, was to run the office. At that time, up until I started, it was exclusively a Phase One Program, because Phase Two hadn't started yet. So I'll focus on that because I know that's what you're interested in.

We had about three office clerical translator people who were sort of both. All three were bilingual and served sort of the clerical functions. We had four drivers. All those people are Russians, by the way. In addition to that, we had anywhere from one to three people serving as, I guess I'd call it a payload training/baseline data collection organizer who was responsible for scheduling the training for both the Americans and Russians on the Mir for the American payloads experiments, basically, most of which were biomedical experiments. And then we had a flight surgeon, always, at least one, whenever there was a crew member there. Finally, the crew themselves, which depended on-you know, people would show up, ideally fourteen months before they flew, and then they'd spend some time as a back-up, training then some time as a prime, and then they'd go and fly. So you would sort of see this overlapping scenario of people coming and then going, and then somebody else would come.

So I think we probably had-oh, I think five or six astronauts there at a time. So when I got there, which was in October of '96, we had Jerry Linenger was the next to fly, Mike Foale, Wendy Lawrence, whom I replaced as DOR, David Wolf was at that time her back-up and prime on NASA Seven, and Andy Thomas. So they all were there basically. Jerry left in December, and Andy showed up in January, and except for those two, everybody else was there. In addition in October, right after I got there, Bill Shepherd [phonetic], who's the first ISS expedition commander, came.

Our responsibility was basically making life for everybody, all the Americans there, as easy as possible, both professionally and personally. That involved dealing on a daily basis with the sort of management of Star City, GCTC, Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center. I would say the people I dealt most with were Yuri Kargapolov, who was in charge of their-I guess it's hard to put that in a NASA equivalent, but he's responsible for the sort of day-to-day conduct of the training, and for him work three or four schedulers. His deputy, his name is Sergei Lobanov [phonetic], and then a few other guys like Maxim Kharlamov [phonetic], and Alexi and Vadim. There are several.

Also we worked back with Houston once Houston woke up, nine hours time difference generally. So around four or five o'clock in the afternoon for us is when we'd start getting going with Houston, and I worked back here mostly with Charlie Brown, Travis Brice [phonetic], Frank Culbertson, and then people within the working groups, but to a lesser extent.

Wright: What type of training or what type of background did you have that they felt would put you in that position so that you could succeed?

Lopez-Alegria: To be honest with you, I think their prerequisite was that you be a volunteer. [Laughter] I don't think there was any competition; let's put it that way. I think that if you were willing to do it, particularly for nine months-the reason that it went to nine months was that, before, the rotations were in October and April, so basically one person would get all summer and one person would get all winter, which is kind of a bad deal for the winter person. So then I went from October to June, or actually July, to make it, you know, half and half.

So I think the answer to your question is, to me it was an opportunity. I had been talked to before. I flew in October of '95 on STS-73, and I was told before then that I would go into language training as soon as I came back and go be the DOR. Well, at that time, shortly thereafter, Wendy, who was over there as a crewman for training, it was determined she was going to be too short, and the Russians basically kicked her out, then we decided to send her back there. She had already been through months of language training, so our management said, "It's silly to waste that. Let's send her back as DOR." So I was then told, "You won't be going as DOR," and then when it became clear that they didn't have anybody else to replace her when she finished, then they needed somebody again.

Wright: When you took it over from Wendy, was she there for a while to help you?

Lopez-Alegria: She was there all the time, and I would say-which is interesting, because you would think that would have made things a lot easier, but, in fact, she was very busy training, and I would say maybe

because we didn't have the pressure of saying, "Okay, I'm going to turn over, and after that I'm going to leave on a certain day," we really didn't execute a very thorough handover, in my opinion, and that's okay because everybody has a tendency to do things differently.

A lot in that job is, you could spend twenty-four hours a day doing that job. So you have to pick your fights and make sure that that's what you think is important and what you think you can resolve yourself. The ones she picked and the ones I picked and the ones Brent [Jett] picked and everybody picks are probably different. So in some ways it was a detriment that she was still there, because I think we didn't really pay as much attention to doing a good concise turnover as we might.

Wright: Was there a typical day, or was every day different as DOR?

Lopez-Alegria: Well, let's see. No, every day was a little bit different. It was a lot of crisis management. By the time I got there, the routine had been well established for the training for the Phase One crew members. You know, we would get a schedule on Fridays for the following week, and typically the first thing we'd have to do would be to have it translated or at least some of the things were sort of in "NASA-ese," a lot of abbreviations and acronyms, which were kind of hard to understand.

But the syllabus that they went through was really not our choosing. We were participants in their program. So content-wise, there wasn't a whole lot of arguing going on, because everybody had been through that. I mean, Shannon [Lucid] had been through that. John Blaha had been through that. So most of the things were pretty cut and dried. But sometimes we would have something scheduled which we really didn't agree with. For instance, centrifuge training. It turns out some of the previous Phase One people had done it, some hadn't, and when it showed up on a schedule, "Why would we do this now?"

The whole mentality that the Russians have toward space flight training is very, very different from ours, and it was hard to reconcile that sometimes. You wanted to put everything in your brain in sort of the same pigeonholes that we put stuff over here, and it didn't fit sometimes. So some of their logic we couldn't find, but we'd have to live with it because, in general, we were basically guests in their program.

So, crisis management was a lot. I would say, in my tenure there, we didn't have too many crises with respect to technical training, which really is the most important thing that we're doing there. The reason for that is because, as I said, it had already been sort of ingrained and all the big variations had been taken out to where it was pretty well understood what was going on.

On the other hand, a lot of things we had hassles with had to do with things like contract-you know, we leased all the space that we lived in and worked in from the Russians. We would get bills for that. Sometimes we didn't agree on the bills. So you're sort of wearing a hat that's operational at some

times, training at other times, and administrative a lot of the time.

We had efforts to put in to upgrade our computer system to get sort of innovations that would make life easier for the astronauts to get access to information, which, you know, in the old days they'd just hand you a book-not a book, but a series of notes, basically, in Russian, and that was your study material. Well, it has to do with the fact that the way the Russians teach is they don't really expect you to do any preparation for class. You go to class, you listen to a lecture, and it's kind of, as they say, [Russian phrase], which means, "Repetition is the mother of learning." So they just repeat it over and over again.

Our style is, we expect to be handed a workbook. We study before we go to class. When we go to class, we basically just hit the high points because it's understood that you know the stuff. So we wanted study materials, and they didn't have any to give us, and we wanted them translated. Basically, they tried translating them and it was a disaster. We just didn't even use them. So, when I was there, a lot of it was getting procedures established by where we would get their what they call konspekts or workbooks and send them back to the States electronically, have it translated by a contractor here, and then given back to the students for their use. That was a very painfully difficult process to get established.

We tried just little things like equipping the vans with cell phones so that we could have access. Well, cellular communications in Moscow is not what it is in Houston, and so that was a constant hassle. So it was always one thing or another. No day was typical.

Wright: The vans and the drivers, were they accessible twenty-four hours a day, or how did that work?

Lopez-Alegria: Basically. We used those vans as if they were our own personal cars, which was kind of a bone of contention for a while, because the embassy to whom administratively or we had some kind of reporting responsibility-not really reporting, but our money came through them, so we had to deal with them frequently, their policy was that you could use their vans for work-related things only. On the other hand, we were basically discouraged-I won't say prohibited from, but discouraged from ever driving ourselves. Most of the people there were only going to be there for a year at the most. So nobody brought a car. Mike Foale brought a car, but he never used it. He wasn't allowed to use it, as it turns out. I mean, he had a big hassle trying to get it licensed. And so without a car, we didn't have any way to get around except using these vans. So we used the vans to go to the grocery store. We used them to go to the theater, to the library, to the bar. I mean, probably not a standard use of a government vehicle, but we thought that it was justified. You know, we sort of felt like we were on the edge out there, and I think we were. So that's how we used it.

Another thing we did while we were there is we made a schedule that we put it electronically on a

server, accessible to everybody. If you wanted to have a van available to take you downtown and go do something, at a certain time you would tell Natasha, one of the girls there, and she would write it in, and that day-you know, like a flight schedule. That's how it turned out.

So the vans were-we had four drivers. All of them had different personalities, very interesting. We had from a young guy, Vadim, who turned twenty-five while I was there, to I don't know how old the oldest guys were, but in their mid-fifties, and different driving styles, different personality styles, different sort of interests. Some were very interesting to talk to. They'd talk to you about Russian history, and other guys just want to talk to you about football, Russian football.

Wright: Did they, over time, feel like they were part of the team?

Lopez-Alegria: Oh, yeah. They were more part of the team than we were. I mean, they had been there-they were the only constants there, were the three girls and the four drivers. I think they have five now. But, yes, they were definitely part of the team.

Wright: Are these jobs that these people normally would have, or is the fact that this office is there basically supports their--

Lopez-Alegria: I think it was a good deal for them. First of all, they got to drive nice American cars. I don't know, because it was all done under contract, so I didn't have anything to do with paying them, but I think that they were paid well, by Russian standards, so I think they were all happy.

The amazing thing is, and it isn't just about Russians, but a lot of people, if you take a cross-section of society, a lot of people are lazy, and there's sort of this standard civil service stereotype where they work from whatever to whatever, and when the second whatever comes, you'd better not be between them and the door, because, you know, that kind of thing. And every single one of our people were enthusiastic. They'd stay late if necessary or they'd come early. I mean, they were really a pleasure to work with, and I think that that's rare anywhere, to find seven out of seven like that, especially in Russia.

Wright: After watching how everybody drives, are you glad that you didn't have a car that you were driving?

Lopez-Alegria: Yes. It's pretty crazy. I mean, it makes Rome and Athens look like Zurich in terms of organization. I mean, those guys are nuts when it comes to driving. They kind of look like they're following the same laws as we do, but in some ways-they have traffic lights sort of in the middles of intersections, and you wouldn't know-I saw what I'm sure was a fatal accident there one night driving by,

and this guy was just completely-he passed us on the right, and his brakes were locked as he passed us, so he was going faster than we were, slowing down, and swerved in front of us and was hit by a car coming in the other direction. I mean, it was pretty eye-opening. And then the roads are just terrible there. Congestion is-I mean, it's really a borderline Third World country. It's different.

Wright: Did you have much of a commute from where you were with all your duties, or was most everything you did right there?

Lopez-Alegria: No. I mean, I walked about fifteen yards from my bedroom to my office.

Wright: You could sleep in.

Lopez-Alegria: Everybody worked within walking distance from our office. Now, to go into Moscow was a different story. From downtown Moscow to where we work is fifty-six kilometers, so I don't know what that is, but it's about thirty miles, and it would take at least an hour and a half. So there and back, for you to go there and come back in a day, that's three hours a day. So I would go in maximum once a week if I had to go to the embassy or something like that. You had to go in for grocery shopping and that kind of a thing, and so there weren't very many people who were married there. The Foales and the Linengers, at the beginning, were both there, and my wife came, too. We got married right before we went to Russia, as a matter of fact, so that was our honeymoon.

Wright: Was that a nine-month honeymoon?

Lopez-Alegria: Yes. But she'd been there before, and she's not American anyway, and just all that to say that she's probably a little bit more adaptable to that kind of a lifestyle than sort of a standard newlywed American wife would be. She ended up in some ways being a little bit a den mother, you know, doing shopping for people, because a lot of the people there-I mean, even if they were used to cooking for themselves and that kind of thing, you don't have time to go grocery shopping when you're in training, you know, because they schedule from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. It's tough to-when you consider it's three hours to get in and out of Moscow, you've got to do it on the weekend, and frankly, on the weekend, (a), you'd like to relax a little and, (b), you probably have to study.

Wright: From what I've read, your background is somewhat international in itself. Did that help you adapt to living that nine months there?

Lopez-Alegria: I think so. I think so. I mean, I look at the people who I think did well there and, really,

the more international experience somebody had, the better they seemed to do. A case in point is Mike Foale. I mean, he's American, but he was born and raised in Britain, and I think, you know, of all the astronauts that flew on Mir, he probably got along as well, if not better, than the others because of that.

We also had ties to other-there were some other non-Russians there. There was a French family and another French couple and two German guys who were there, sometimes with and sometimes without their families. My wife, being European, sort of knew them kind of sort of from her previous professional life, and so we ended up socializing with them a lot, which kind of expands your horizons a little bit, too. I mean, after all, you're really in an American compound there, and you can get buried in there. You know what I mean? It's really pretty sad because you've got this country with all this history and things to learn about, and if you just bury yourself in this little enclave, you're not going to learn that much. But I think, to our credit, most of the people there did get out and look around, at least down in Moscow.

Wright: What did you find to be the most interesting, or the most compelling, of seeing as a tourist or as a part-time resident there?

Lopez-Alegria: Well, we don't have enough time for me to answer that question. You know, these are my personal observations, but I think the Russian people in general are an incredibly hardy, tough, stubborn people who have withstood at least three different periods in history where they have been suppressed or oppressed over hundreds of years, to the point where I think it's almost genetic now that they're pessimistic. They sort of have no hope. It's sort of this whole negative kind of syndrome surrounds them, and it's a shame because, obviously, they're very talented as a people.

To get to the place that they've been in space and other places, looking at their country, is amazing to me. I mean, looking at the people, the way they live, the kind of toughness that they have to have in order to have gotten there with the very limited personal comforts that they have and no expectation of reward, a lot of things that we just wouldn't put up with in this country, for better or for worse. And, you know, at some point I was angered by the history of Russia because it's turned these people into the-I mean, you drive in the countryside-Moscow's one thing. You drive in the countryside, and it looks like the Depression, and it's 1997 back then. I'm not kidding. I mean, a lot of places without telephones, a lot of places without running water, really sort of eye-opening for this country which, ten years ago, we were deathly afraid of, and now, when you see that-in some ways I think it was a big facade. They're very mighty from the outside, but when you look at the infrastructure, it's really crumbling from the inside.

Wright: How were your dealings working with the professional people?

Lopez-Alegria: I have a lot of respect for the guys that I worked with and fought with over there. Again, just like everybody else over there, they're doing a whole lot with very little. I find it extremely frustrating to try to get business done over there, because they just have a different attitude toward the whole thing. When you call somebody on the phone, there's no phone mail if they're not there or any kind of voice mail, and they weren't, basically, at that point anyway, weren't looking at e-mail. I mean, nobody had a computer. So if somebody wasn't there, the phone would just ring, and you didn't know whether you'd be able to call back again in five minutes or if he was going to be gone for three weeks on vacation. It's very compartmentalized, and so Person A doesn't know what Person B over there is doing, and he won't do anything unless his boss says it's okay, but he won't ask his boss, so you have to get his boss to tell him, "Hey, it's okay for you to do that kind of things." So it's a real compartmentalized, non-service-oriented environment, and to try to get anything done there is really hard.

Wright: Is it just dealing with the folks that are in the space agency?

Lopez-Alegria: I think those probably are on the good side of the spectrum, because they're getting used to us. And, by the way, I think that's changing a little bit. But they out-negotiate us left and right, I mean without fail. They're just way better at it. They're not conflict-aversive the way we are, so they'll make a bit stink and storm out of the room, like Khrushchev pounding his shoe on the podium, that kind of thing, and to us that's-"Geez, I've ruined American-Russian relations," you know. And two hours later, they'll have a drink with you like you're old pals. That's just part of business for them, is just sort of arguing and yelling.

Wright: Did you find yourself in these situations often, that got to that point, or were you able to avert that?

Lopez-Alegria: I wouldn't say often, but many more times than once it happened that way.

Wright: Anything specific or just something that happened, part of the routine, typical day that--

Lopez-Alegria: Well, I can remember a couple of things. One, we had some apartments over there that we basically leased, and cottages. I don't know how much you know about the housing, but the housing over there, the families, the Linengers and the Foales, lived in two halve of a cottage duplex, which was built, really, as far as I understand, without us asking, but just for this program, and provided by the Russians. We didn't pay them at all. The reason for that is because in Phase One, the $400 million contract, which was later augmented, part of that money was to pay for housing our people while they were there.

And then we had this thing called a DOR contract which was separate. Through that we paid for things in the Prophylactori, which is a place where most of the American office staff lived, basically the DOR, the flight surgeon, the technical, the payload training guy, and any biomedical engineers that happened to be visiting, or baseline data collection or whatever. And then the other astronauts lived in flats, which are basically two-bedroom apartments, pretty nice, and definitely nice by Russian standards.

In negotiating housing-and I don't exactly remember what the details were-I remember that the guy who was sort of their chief international relations negotiator kind of guy, he became very irate, and he said, "You know, I would love to be able to live in a place like your astronauts get to live in. I've been a colonel for," blah, blah, blah, "and I have an apartment that has this many rooms, and that's for my parents and my children and us, three generations." I mean, he really got upset about it, and I was bit shocked, you know. Luckily, I think, I was able to-really that has no bearing on the conversation. I mean, that's kind of not our fault, and you have to sort of express your regrets to the guy and get him back focused on what's going on. But I mean, that's kind of one of the things that you see a lot, was people would sort of get emotional about things, and you just have to either let it cool down and come back later-but often they use that as a tactic to try to get stuff out of you or get more money out of you or give less for the same amount of money or whatever. I don't remember how it turned out in that case, but--

Wright: Your days as DOR, were they long ones? I know your commute was short, but did you start out early in the day?

Lopez-Alegria: We would start work at nine, because that's kind of when the Russian day got under way, and I sort of tried to make it a point to quit by 9 p.m., and that was because my wife was there and I had something else to do. You know, I had a life, if you will. The people who went over there, DORs especially, without their families or if they were single, you could throw fifteen, eighteen hours a day easily, because there is that much work to do. You just have to know when to say when and put things in priority.

I mean, I don't know what other people would say about their time there, but I really enjoyed my time there. I knew I was going to be there for nine months. If a month before I left they would have said, "You have to extend another two months," I would have been disappointed, because I think you set in your mind, "Okay. I'm going to be there until this date, and after this date I'm coming home." So you figure, "Well, I can do anything until that day." But I think the combination of having my wife there, (a); (b), her and us, I guess, being more European and therefore maybe a little bit more adaptable to that situation helped.

The whole notion that this was only part of life, that your relationship and your family and all that

were something to go home to and therefore limiting the number of hours you're willing to work, that had a lot to do with it. You work hard, you play hard. Anytime you go through a difficult situation with a person or group of persons, I think you bond. You sort of really get to know them better, and it's like being on a team. That aspect of it, that closeness, was really nice.

Wright: So you all socialized a lot together?

Lopez-Alegria: Oh, yes. Typically seven o'clock, I'd be in the office, in my sort of inner office, and outside would be the other office, and somebody would come in with a batch of margaritas or something like that. So you ended up being able to mix, because it's like living and working in a dorm, and you live together, you work together. So the whole line between your personal and professional lives is a lot blurrier than it is certainly now, here, and probably in any work environment.

Wright: I guess you were on twenty-four-hour call. Your work never stopped. You just took yourself in different locations that you worked.

Lopez-Alegria: Right. And the people back here in Houston respected that, for the most part. I mean, they knew about the time difference. After a certain time, you know, they could always get you at home if they needed you, but they would just leave a message or send you an e-mail or something like that.

Wright: The communications worked well by the time that you became DOR between Russia--

Lopez-Alegria: Oh, yes. The communications, the infrastructure that NASA had there was probably one of the best in Russia anywhere at that point, and that really went a long way to getting people feeling closer to home. I think two years before I got there, you know, before we had a kitchen, before we had any kind of computer network, access to the Internet, before they had a video library, which we have now, all those sorts of little things, before you could pick up a telephone and dial the U.S. like that, all that stuff helped a lot, and before that had to be a lot harder.

Wright: During the nine months, did you come back to the States at all? You were there the whole time?

Lopez-Alegria: I came back at Christmastime for a week, and then I also came back only a month before I was to be relieved, because my mother passed away. So other than that, I was there the whole time. Actually, that's not true. I also took a trip to Spain while I was there, for a week, and we did a little bit of tourism there. We went to St. Petersburg twice. We went to Lake Baikal, Irkutsk [phonetic] in Siberia for a weekend.

Wright: I have to assume that during the summertime you were there, or did you go during the wintertime?

Lopez-Alegria: It was in May. It was in early May, and there were still icebergs on the Lake Baikal. That was pretty neat. One fifth, I think, of the fresh water in the world in this lake. I mean, it's a big lake, very deep, and there's nobody out there. I mean, a couple little villages on the shore, but it's amazing.

Wright: Have you been back since?

Lopez-Alegria: To Russia? Once. And I'm going next week, as a matter of fact.

Wright: How was it when you went back, knowing you were only going to be there for a short time? Did you see it differently?

Lopez-Alegria: [Pauses] Yes. You definitely see it differently. One nice thing about being DOR is, it's a very small kingdom, but you're the king. When you go back, you're not the king anymore, you know; you're just visiting. So you feel a little bit different. It was neat to see, especially the Russian people, they really treat you like they missed you, and it's like a family kind of thing, where even though I hadn't seen them in-well, it had only been about six months, but it really felt like kind of a reunion.

Wright: Those eight or nine folks that have been there, the drivers and the clerical staff, they've had quite a few bosses, quite a few DORs. They adapt well to each one being there?

Lopez-Alegria: I don't know. I mean, I think we got along-everybody got along well while I was there, and I would assume that they got along with everybody else. It's hard to say, because especially the drivers, they are almost like in a military situation where you have an officer/enlisted relationship. You're their boss, or, I guess, any professional driver, especially if you have a chauffeur, let's say, you spend a lot of time together, and yet there is sort of this division where they're going to treat you a certain way whether they like you or not, and you hope that they'll go beyond that and be friends. Some of the drivers were more apt to do that than others. It was interesting, because they all treated my wife differently than they treated me, for instance. They were much closer to her. When we were together going out socially, they were different. But that's part of their job.

Wright: You're dealings with the Russians at the training center, Yuri Kargapolov, for example, they've been in place for a long time and they've been consistent, and here you were just for nine months. Did you feel like they treated you any differently than they would someone who was going to be there for the whole four or five years?

Lopez-Alegria: Well, they never knew anybody like that. I mean, to them, nine months was way better than three and better than six. So I think every time a new one comes in the door, they probably go through the whole process of sizing them up and deciding how they're going to work with them. I see Yuri a lot now because I'm still active in Russian kinds of things. I see him at the Cape a lot for launches every time there's a Shuttle-to-Mir launch, and we still sit on opposite ends of the table when we're negotiating, but I would say, when that's over, we're even better friends than we were back then, just because I think you respect somebody professionally, even if you don't like them professionally. You can deal with them nonprofessionally in a better way. I think they look at each new DOR and they say, "Okay. Here's another one," kind of thing, and they probably have their own opinion of each of us differently, and who knows what that is.

Wright: That may be the good point. They look at least everybody individually now.

Lopez-Alegria: Yes. But I think they would much prefer to see us be the same person, because that's kind of their way of doing things, to have somebody in the same job. I mean, there are people there that taught Yuri Gagarin orbital mechanics, you know. That's probably an exaggeration, but that's kind of the way they do things. So to see somebody changing every three months must have really boggled their mind in the beginning.

Wright: And then the age difference was a difference as well.

Lopez-Alegria: Yes, that's true. Yes, they tend to be older, for the same level of responsibility. Rightly or wrongly, being an astronaut made a big difference to them. I mean, we talked a lot about whether it would be appropriate for the DOR to be a non-astronaut, and they really insist on it. The reason that I was always given is that they're going to respect you more, they're going to assume certain things about you.

But the interesting thing is that their system is much less sort of respectful-I won't say respectful, but maybe tolerant of astronauts than ours is. You know, here, when we think that something is-a training class is not required or too long or too short or bad content or whatever, we make an input, and people will listen. They solicit your inputs, "How's it going?" kind of thing. In Russia, it's basically "Here's a plan. I don't want to hear any questions. Be there at the right time, the right place, shut up and listen," kind of thing. So having that as a background, it surprises me that they were so insistent about having the DOR be an astronaut. But maybe they treat the other people worse, I don't know. [Laughter]

Wright: Was that their only mandate for that office, or did they have other input into what they wanted?

Lopez-Alegria: No, I think that was it.

Wright: In reviewing the last year or so of your life, is there significant accomplishment or a significant contribution that you would like to tell us about as a participant of this program, that kind of stands out in your mind as one of the most special things that happened while you were in that position?
Lopez-Alegria: No.

Wright: All of it together?

Lopez-Alegria: I mean, I just think that just by being there, you end up contributing a lot, and probably if you weren't there, somebody else would be there in your place, they'd probably do as well as you. But who knows? You make the calls on the spot as you see them, and each decision that you make, in some small way influences the way things turned out. So I guess all of us who have participated in that have made little contributions here and there which maybe have your name on it. My contribution was probably buying the vacuum cleaner, which I'm very proud of. We shopped all over for that thing.

Wright: Well, that's unique. Is this a unique vacuum cleaner, or just the fact that there's one there now?

Lopez-Alegria: Well, it's kind of a history behind it, but we bought this vacuum cleaner, and picking this thing up was really strange. You had to go through-we had to go into this office, which was-you had to pass through a bank in order to get to the office, and even to get in the bank, it's like going through airport security just to get in the bank. And we go up to the office and we did the paperwork, and they had a bunch of vacuum cleaners there, but that isn't where we were supposed to pick it up.

So they gave me directions, and I explained them with a little map to the driver, and he went to this other completely different part of town behind these rusty gates and in this dimly lit warehouse, and lo and behold, there's this room full of brand-new vacuum cleaners in boxes.

We took the thing back, and it promptly started eating all the carpet because this carpet was falling apart so bad. But there was less dust, though.

Wright: Well, that's quite an interesting story. Is the vacuum cleaner still there and being used?

Lopez-Alegria: Well, I heard bad stories about it, that literally it was sucking pieces of carpet. So I don't know. But I saw it when I was there in December, and it was still around.

Wright: Well, at least the trip was something to remember, anyway.

I was going to ask Carol and Paul if they had any questions for you. Do you have anything you'd

like to ask?

Rollins: I can't think of anything right now.

Wright: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Lopez-Alegria: No.

Wright: We certainly thank you for your time and for all your participation in the Shuttle-Mir Program, especially the oral history part. So, thanks again.

Lopez-Alegria: Okay. Good luck with the project.

Wright: Thank you.

[End of interview]