

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education Oral History Project

Norma Alcala

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Rhonda Rios Kravitz

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California State University, Sacramento Library

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Rios Kravitz This interview will be video audio recorded and will form part of the supplemental Movimiento, Chicano and Mexican-American Education Project or History. It's archived at the Darnell and Beverly Special Collections and University Archives and C issue Sacramento. Do you agree to this recording?

[00:00:35]

Norma Alcala Yes.

[00:00:36]

Rios Kravitz So today's August 1st, 2023. The time of this interview is 948 and we're in Sacramento, California. Can you state your full name and spellings?

[00:00:48]

Alcala Okay. It's Norma maiden name Villarreal. And by married name is Ocala. So it's and o.r. May be a real v ileal a oriel Alcala hla.

[00:01:04]

Rios Kravitz Can you provide me with your birth?

[00:01:06]

Alcala April.

[00:01:07]

Rios Kravitz David.

[00:01:08]

Alcala Thank you. April 29th, 1961. So I'm 62 years old.

[00:01:14]

Rios Kravitz Where were you born?

[00:01:15]

Alcala Brownsville, Texas.

[00:01:17]

Rios Kravitz Where were you raised and where?

[00:01:18]

Alcala Sacramento, California used to be called. And we still call it Braddock and Bright.

[00:01:25]

Rios Kravitz What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:28]

Alcala Well, my mom was actually she trained under a CPA, so she did a lot of accounting and and books. And then for a while, she worked for wine stocks for a period of time. She became an operator, telephone operator. She worked on J Street. And my father had been in the Air Force. You were just as a mechanic because he joined the Air Force. And then he, you know, learned that trade. But then when he came to California, he started working for the county of YOLO in the Welfare department. And then he transferred into the state where, you know, he worked for a long time and then he retired there. He worked recruiting psychiatric techs for the state.

[00:02:12]

Rios Kravitz And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

[00:02:15]

Alcala Well, my mom and dad from their marriage, I'm the eldest, then my brother Vince, my sister Melissa, and my brother Robbie. But then my father married years later. So I have half sister and Christina. She's a nurse and she's gosh, I think Christine, I think I was like 19 or 20 when my dad had her. So she's probably in her forties now.

[00:02:39]

Rios Kravitz What was your primary language growing up?

[00:02:41]

Alcala Spanglish. Primarily, I would say probably English, but a lot of Spanish was spoken, especially when they didn't want the kids hearing what was going on. And my parents were separated because my dad, when we initially traveled with him, when he was in the Air Force, you know, to Georgia during the civil rights movement. So we saw as a kid, I remember seeing a lot of that action. And after a while, he didn't want to be pulling us up and down. So we went back to Brownsville to live with my grandmother for for a while. So, you know, the I had young aunts and uncles are really into like civil rights and and that movement. And it was interesting because my aunt and my grandmother, they were more into the conformed, you know, the the church groups. And also I got to experience a lot of different things. One of my aunts was very

bohemian. She she loved the arts and all. And and another out was very she was cheerleader and very much into her her sewing, you know, and they used to have beautiful pageants set up for what they call charter days, you know. And it was it was a Pan-American type of pageant and they had rodeos and everything. So she was very involved in that. And then my Uncle Ernie used to have he was very involved in like Little League. And later he formed Cherokee and the Raiders, which was a band that used to play at, you know, school dances and all. So I think I totally spaced out your question, but I got to remembering all these fabulous things growing up. But it was I would say it was it was definitely English and Spanish. Whenever my grandmother's friends came over or the adults wanted to talk in private.

[00:04:26]

Rios Kravitz Actually, you anticipated the next question because it's please describe your experiences as a child and the youth in your family and in your neighborhood

[00:04:35]

Alcala as as a child. Because when we lived in Texas, I you know, I have some really fond memories, but I think it was because I was so young, I hadn't realized, you know, there are a lot of things you to realize. I thought we lived in this huge house. My grandma lived in this huge house. Years later, when I realized how tiny the house was. But there were a lot of great experiences. My uncle and aunts always made fun things, you know, they would play with this. I remember them building a brick house. It was just a bunch of bricks around, you know, They always made things interesting. They always read to us. So I really had a real fondness for books. And my Aunt Valya love French. She was taking French. So she spoke. And actually, as a kid, you pick up a lot as a kid. So later when I took French in high school, I was able to pick that up. But I remember wonderful things. You remember little puestos that they would have right next door and I'd go over there with my, you know, dimes and they'd fix these little glass busts that were delicious, you know, the chicken mother. And I remember the beach Brownsville was a port town and actually had a lot of industry. So at one time my grandfather had worked for the Port of Brownsville and they would and my mother worked for the Brownsville Shrimp Exchange. That was a huge, huge industry there. And I used to love it because she would bring in these boxes. They would let the employees take these huge boxes of prawns, you know, and we'd have those. So my grandfather on my dad's side, his name was Jimmy Switzer. It was just stepped up and seen my grandfather. When you and my grandmother had been in real estate, his mom and I remember he would also he had two shrimp boats. So as a kid I used to look forward to always we always had seafood in Brownsville. I look forward to when the watermelon trucks would come. And I remember him stopped by the wayside. And they give you samples of watermelon. Those are the things I think I remember best about Brownsville. And I used to love to go there. Boca Chica, Mother Island. They're huge hotel havens now for the kids to take spring break. But back then it was just families that were out there. And I remember one of the favorite things I used to love to do is pick the little shells because they have little, you know, little holes in it, and we'd make necklaces. And those are just fun things that I remember all the kids in town doing. Just we'd make our little necklaces out there and we'd build sandcastles and. Then we'd go to Matamoros, right across from Brownsville, and they used to have the votes of Republicans. I used to love these. You have these daiquiri drinks. And of course, they didn't put alcohol. You

know, they would put. LEMON Those are my favorites. And I remember we'd go to the party on the markets. I just love to get those little dishes and stuff. They always had great things. And I remember my family, the senior, this would try and sell them something. Not in Northwestern Mutual. No, no. So to this, though, I'm not a tourist. Don't give me a better price. And there was mangoes, some great prices. I remember Sunday mornings going to after we went to mass, we would go to, oh gosh, with the Derby Coast. I think it was one of the good restaurants there. And Sunday mornings people watch sports or something like that on TV in Brownsville, they had the bullfighter. So I remember saying then I know a lot of people, you know, say, Oh, it's so humane and stuff, but as kids it seemed real natural to us to watch rather than a baseball game to watch, you know, the bull fights on TV on Sundays and some of the great. Bakeries that were there used to love walking past people. Smell that would come out. You remember all those things as a kid. So then we moved when the jobs dried up for the family. My grandmother was a nurse, so she had a good job. She became a nurse later in life and she had a good job with Mercy Hospital that was run by the nuns at that time. But I remember that the jobs started drying up in the in the area for a lot of people. So a lot of the old families started moving out and Archie was one of them. My aunt Gracie got married and she and her husband moved. They were the first ones to make the exodus out of Brownsville, Texas, and they moved to Sacramento and they said there are a lot of jobs. So slowly the family also started moving out of Brownsville. I mean, we had relatives behind. Later, we'd go and visit, but the majority of the family came over here and there were more jobs in Sacramento. So that's what brought us. And my first I remember coming, we were driving and it's so funny because I remember it now. My mother drove with my grandmother and I still remember them getting dressed up nowadays, you know? I mean, look, I'm in sweats, hardly dressed, but my mother and my grandmother get up in the morning. They would rather hose their jewelry in the car. And I remember looking like we were going to Sunday mass and we were just actually driving. My mother drove all the way from Brownsville. It's a three day trip. Car broke down one time and a very nice truck driver. I mean, you wouldn't do that nowadays because you can't trust who you're being picked up by. But the man was really kind. He took us to a hotel and we told my mom, there's probably a mechanic there. I took off. You know, things were different in those days. I think a lot, you know, it was exceptional when you heard about something horrible happening. But I remember that. And then coming to California, I remember waking up and I live here in what used to be called Broderick and Bright. And I remember getting up in that morning and the houses were different. You know, there were newer, of course, back in the sixties. And I remember going to to the we we walked in, I thought we were like in Hollywood. I thought we were in Hollywood because I had watched so many movies. And I remember going to the store and I kept expecting to see a movie star. I kept expecting to see a movie star. And actually there was a man he was a father of one of the girls who looked just like John Wayne, and we thought that was John Wayne and kept following him around the store. So it was a different environment. And I remember seeing my first hippies and I thought that was so cool. I had never seen people dress like that in Brownsville because they, you know, dressed very conservatively and coming to California. Wow, What a culture change.

[00:10:59]

Rios Kravitz Did you or your family experience any discrimination going?

[00:11:03]

Alcala It was subtle. You know, one thing I'll just I'll start because I lived in different parts of the South. It was it was very evident over there. It was very evident. I remember when traveling to parts of the South in Georgia because we were, quote, lighter skinned Latinos, Mexicans, Hispanics. We didn't face a lot of the folks down there. It you know, it wasn't a problem, but I saw it when the we'd go into the restaurants and they had the black go. I mean, the colored that's it, the colored restrooms. And they would have the white restrooms or the stores and stuff. And I always I didn't it didn't dawn to me what colored and white. And I was too young to really understand what sort of explained it. But I often thought, I wonder what kind of people colored people. I was thinking green, blue, orange. You know, as a child, that's when you hear the word colored. So I kept waiting to see, you know, people that were purple and and green come out of the systems in terms of discrimination. I think I saw it more in California than over there. I remember once playing with some little girlfriends, although there were Latinos. And I remember the first time I heard white kids say, You dirty Mexicans. And I was like. Really talking to me. It wasn't. It was something we hadn't heard before. And as I got older, I became more aware, you know, the subtleties and, you know, not being picked for something, you know, because you didn't have the blond hair, you know, and the blue eyes and the lighter skin. There were it was it was more subtle with us. When I saw Ben, I. I saw that also. And my aunt would go and apply for things and she wouldn't get the jobs. And she probably had some of the best credentials. And I heard them talking about discrimination. So as a younger child, it was those real subtle nuances, but they were definitely there. You'd go into a hospital, you wouldn't see, you know, Latinos, you know, in any of the registration desks or just working in the hospitals. You'd go into offices. Same thing you wouldn't see. It was it was subtle. And I think that's the thing in California that was supposed to be so liberal, much more accepting. And even now you see still you still see it. When I got on the school board, I started asking, So how many Latino principals do we have? How many Latino vice principals do we have? When I was a school board member, we had seven schools. We still have seven schools out in West Sacramento, and yet we had no Latino principals, so or vice principals. So I started asking these questions. And when I came on the school board, I, I was the third vote to get rid of the previous superintendent. He was a white male who hired almost exclusively all white men to be principals or women to be principals of the school. When we had a superintendent search, I found a Linda Luna, and I thought she was letting it first turn out. She was Asian American Chinese-American. She was married to a Latino. And I asked her a lot of those questions. So when Linda came in, she changed things completely. I got more than half of our principles. It became Latinos, people of color. She understood, because as a young girl, she'd been discriminated against horribly because she was Chinese-American. And she saw that. She saw that we needed to have role models for our children, people who understood, people that parents could feel comfortable with. And I tell you, when we started getting more principals and vice principals, people of color in there, we started getting incredible parent participation. And it really made a difference. The the whole atmosphere of of schools change. You had more people coming to parent teacher meetings. You saw we slowly started seeing the the charts rise in terms of, you know, improvement in student scores and all it was it was very impactful. So we saw a lot of that. And when I was a kid, I think. There was just an expectation that kids that were minorities weren't going to do well. I remember I went to a Catholic school and the sisters were good. They were they were nice Irish nuns. They were really strict. And I remember one time they they

brought in I don't know what kind of tests they had and that in those days they had to take some tests. And I remember a woman coming in and she she looked at some smart kids like Jeannie Gonzalez, Mary Montemayor. Mary, by the way, became a doctor. And Jeannie with some she became an engineer. But I remember they sat the three of us down. They said, well, look at your scores. And she said, Well, you girls can be bricklayers. And we were all really disappointed, you know, with that with that comment. And I do remember that there were some. Children in the class that were, I guess, Irish descent or a were North American, obviously. And they were they looked at their scores as, oh, you you make a good doctor, you make a good attorney. And I often thought, wow, we must we must really be dumb people. Not that the lawyers. That's a wonderful profession. But you know what I'm saying? It was it was more labor related. It's like you can't think of anything. You guys have to, you know, focus on being always. Focused on more manual and demanding jobs and not quite the respect that's given to doctors or lawyers.

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Rios Kravitz On those experiences and memories. What attracted you to the movie?

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Alcala I think my my first exposure probably was with my aunts and uncles. I think that was from the time I was a little girl. The family had always been very political. I mean, I remember them as young as I was. They would talk about like JFK's assassination. They talked about, you know, the Chicano movement and how important it was. I remember my Uncle Robert being real passionate about that. My mom had she was she came from a family of seven. The family was very close. My outlived my oldest lived with my grandparents till she was 40. But everyone lived in my grandparents house and as a kid I would just listen to what was being talked about and they were talking about the farm workers and how unfair it was for these people, you know, who, you know, brought food to our tables to not be getting decent wages started. The first time I heard people talking about Cesar Chavez and that. It's interesting because when you were a kid, I remember watching the old Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella, and the girls look beautiful in frocks and stuff, and, you know, they're all so I assumed that that's what farmworkers did, you know, picking these grapes like the like the like the girl on the raisins, you know, those beautiful bonnets and stuff. And then I remember once we were taking a trip down to Disneyland, seeing these people in their cultural fields, and you could see how hot and how miserable, you know, the weather was. And my uncle said, See, these are farm workers. And you could see how, you know, how hard they were working. So for me, the movimiento started from a very young age, understanding the injustices that were done to to what we call Hispanics back then, what we refer to now as Latinos, Mexicans and other people from Central and South American countries. So for me, when I got into high school, I had some great activist teachers who also talked about it a lot. And I went to a Catholic school, but we had some very enlightened young people who spoke about it. And then, of course, when I met my husband, I think I really got involved. My husband was a he's the he was a lawyer for Cesar Chavez. Carlos grew up in El Paso, went to law school at Harvard and was recruited. He won a lot of huge cases for the the United Farm Workers. So that definitely, you know, was a strong cattle. The cattle was already there when I was a kid. I think this was the full blown explosion into that. And it's

continued on because I that was one of the things when I was on school board, I had someone once approached me and say, All you ever talk about is Latino kids. And I said, Well, someone has to, because no one ever has before about their needs and their parents needs, and how are we going to elevate them?

[00:20:21]

Rios Kravitz Now, how do other Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Latinos react to the term chew gum, that kind of thing?

[00:20:29]

Alcala When I was a kid, my dad hated the term. Because he was always a Hispanic. That's what he was used to. And that's Brownsville. It's the South. It's a different orientation. He went to the military, so he was sort of like conservative in his feelings. My uncles and aunts embraced the word Chicano. They were a different generation than my dad's, and at least by ten or 12 years. And they definitely were Chicano and Chicanos, and they felt that it was an appropriate term. It was an awakening of the importance of fighting for their rights, having the same privileges that other Americans had. But at the same time, embracing our cultural traditions, you know, in spirit. So. Yes, definitely. That's the way the family reacted. Yeah.

[00:21:17]

Rios Kravitz And you've already talked about the civil rights movement, but what were your thoughts about connecting it to the movie?

[00:21:25]

Alcala That's really critical. You know, a lot of our Latinos helped march help support a civil rights movement for African-Americans. And there used to seem to be some sort of really strong connect. I don't think it's there anymore. I think it's if anything, you know, we did a lot to to promote civil rights for all individuals. And I'm really happy for all the strides that the African-American community has made. But I don't believe that Latinos have been given the same opportunities. You have black colleges. We don't have Latino colleges. We see that even though like here in California, for example, you know, the African-American community is 4%, Latino community is well, I would say a few years ago is like 40%. It's probably more now. Although I hear that one of the fastest growing demographics is the Asian community. But when you look at the different boards and just companies all around, you know, we we place very low. We're usually less than 20% of of the numbers. So getting back to the question, I think that we were definitely warriors, but we didn't quite reap the same benefits from the movement as as other as other groups have.

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Rios Kravitz Were you in the Mexican-American Education Project at 60?

[00:23:01]

Alcala No. No, I wasn't. I. I attended took a long time to get through school because when my father left, I had younger brothers and sisters. I had to work to help support my household. And it took

me a while. I would always, though, work political campaigns for Latinos, always my Saturdays and Sundays. That's what I would do when I wasn't working. So I did not attend six eight. I attended Sex City College. Then I went to UC Davis and finally finished at Arizona State.

[00:23:31]

Rios Kravitz Did your knowledge of cultural issues influence your involvement and participation in the.

[00:23:37]

Alcala I think so. I think it really helps when, you know, and you see the discriminatory practices of people against your own your own anti. It it definitely. Reading up I started reading up a lot about our histories and a lot of people aren't aware of that you know, in Texas. The education system. Rarely portrays Latinos in a positive in a positive frame. I remember just as a little girl later when I'd go there, you know, some of the songs that I would hear very racial in content, actually. And they talk about Jim Bowie and all these people, you know, at the Alamo and stuff. And these these people were slave owners. They were horrible people. And so Donna actually did a pretty graceful thing, what the kids and, you know, but so right there, you know, it's very evident that, you know, the the majority we know that the majority of people who write history are white males. When I joined the when I was the school board member and I joined the California School Board Association, had some good conferences and stuff. But the best one with Latino School Board Association, we had tremendous speakers that really opened our eyes to history. We had one speaker that came and spoke about the very close relationship the African-American and the Latino community had. That's not known in the United States, nor is it nor is it nurtured in the United States. But in Mexico, it was because so many of the Latino generals and and heroes were actually Latino and African-American. I was just I was sharing that with my gran, some of my grandchildren. Because when my grandchildren are Latino and African-American, I said, you know, so is that very strong bond? Mexico outlawed slavery way before the United States ever did. So in terms of perspective, yeah, I think I had some really good insight. And I was thinking, like, if it was done back then, it can certainly be done now. So I think in terms of in Movimiento, you know, and I would let other friends know about this and they were like, Hey, we didn't know about that. And I said, Yeah. So I think that gave us a very good perspective that, you know, they even even in the past, you know, our our folks coalesced and, and, and they did some really tremendous things. But because we don't write those history books, people forget about it. And they're certainly not promoted, you know, in schools. I think that's a great thing when they started bringing ethnic studies. But even then we had to struggle to really put our stories out there because the powers that be, the money that was out there, you know, they write history. And that's why I buy a lot of independent press books, you know, and try to share those. How did your involvement in moving to change it personally? I think it made me much more proud. I think at one point I told you when I was when I was a little girl. You only saw those white Barbies, you know, thank God things changed. You started. See, I love the Barbies that they have now. People that you saw on TV, they were white people. And if they portrayed Mexicanos or people of Latin descent, we were either the maids or we were the, you know, the gardeners, or we always have these X underwear drunk geeks and y'all. It was it made you feel ashamed as a kid. It made you feel shame. They did a shaming on us. I'm so proud now

that we have so many strong Latino activists in the film industry as well. The Eva Longoria. And I know people like that that make you proud to be Latino, that speak out. And as a child, I remember. You know, I was. I was. Shocked when I think I've got my first doll that had dark hair. She was beautiful, but still she had that light skin and stuff like that. So as a kid, I think shame that went on that we were that we were Latinos. So I'm sorry I digressed. What was the question again?

[00:27:50]

Rios Kravitz Just how you were change person.

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Alcala And that's what I'm saying. And then I think when we started seeing these activities was changing the total dynamic, whether it was politically or whether it was like through media, different representations, I started feeling more empowered. I felt there were more people out there. And then what I would say this movimientos, when I was in high school, they had a it was a mecca club. That's the first time I'd seen a lot of young Latinas really come forward because. For us. I think there was. It's a word I'm looking for. We're sort of acclimated to the white culture, and we didn't hear too many activists, especially in some of the parts that, you know, we grew up. It was sort of like acclimate, acclimate, you know. So even in our dress, you know, we didn't. That's why I like being in Brownsville, because we'd have that that wonderful childhood days where people, you know, would wear the Mexican costumes, chin up old town and different parts, and you felt proud and you saw the beauty in it. But when you start traveling, like other parts of the south and even here in California, before Chicano activists really started, you know, voicing. You know, their activism. Everything was very. What's the word I'm looking for? It's a date. So when you started hearing, you saw the empowerment, you saw people being elected to political office, you saw were positive role models on TV and all. We I started feeling really proud and as a teenager, and I felt it was my part also to start continue the momentum. And that's what I've been trying to do ever since. Let's get to this next question.

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Rios Kravitz What role do you believe that she garners by the movement?

[00:29:42]

Alcala Total incredible parts, just like everything else. It's interesting that you should bring that up because I was just talking with and I'm 62, some of my husband's friends, my husband's 74, and so my friends around the seventies and these were these were the vanguards, you know, to the to the movement. They were fantastic people. Janie Vargas, for example, And some of those folks out there, they were talking about about the movement and. They were. So they were more than 50%, I'd say, you know, because they had to do so much more. I mean, the guys were great. They got to speak. But sometimes even when they'd have these discussions, typical males, they would say, hey, well, you know what? Can you go get some coffee? And something? We're trying to we're trying to figure this out. And they were like, Heck no. What do you mean you're trying to figure this out? You know who made you the boss. So they would speak up? They weren't, you know, going to be, you know, relegated to taking care of the babies and, you

know, fetching the coffee and stuff. They were very, very profound in their opinions. And and as I said, they were the vanguard. You know, they were out there. They weren't afraid. And I, I smile because sometimes men are given all the credit. When I talk with the people who knew Cesar and Dolores, Cesar was a marvelous leader. But Dolores was there, you know, was was pivotal to the whole farmworker movement. And she doesn't get the credit. Well, now she does, thank God. How many years later? But I remember hearing that sometimes even, you know, Cesar and some of the others would sit down roundtables and Dolores would bring up a very important issue. Carlos, my husband would tell me this and say, you know, he says, Yeah, he says, that can happen. You know, guys have a tendency to do that and to learn to say, Cesar, this is, you know, And she'd explain something and she'd say, okay, all right. And then he turned to the gentleman. He became Dolores, his husband. He he sees his brother and he'd say, Well, what do you think, rookie? And he'd say, Well, you know, and he'd repeat would, Dolores said. And he'd say, Yeah, that's a great idea. Dolores would get very frustrated because Dolores would bring up very significant points, very salient points, and. And make recommendations and. You know, Caesar was a great leader and total respect to him. But I think that even men who are great leaders have a tendency to have a bit of chauvinism in them so women don't get their due. I see a lot of women really fighting the great fight. And when it comes down to it and they're the ones that are in there in the trenches. Rarely do they get mentioned. And once again, it's because 80% of the historians, people who write books and all are men.

[00:32:42]

Rios Kravitz What did you personally initiate or help initiate them?

[00:32:47]

Alcala Well, I'm very proud that when I was on the school board, as I as I mentioned, you know, we had we had a very homogenous administration. I brought in a woman who was tremendous. She and I, we were actually the same age. I was the M.O. is it seems I'm always the oldest, whether it was school board or even now that I'm on city council. And I'm very proud that we brought in all those Latino administrators. And when Linda was and I would say, so how many do we have now? And Linda would proudly, you know, say, well, we have more than half of our principals are now Latino because the schools are predominantly Latino. Kids didn't have role models, you know, and we really we really pushed to hire. So I was really proud to do that, being a woman of color as well. And she understood she was Chinese-American. I her husband was a Latino. She saw him. She knew she understood how critical it was to have people who could communicate, who could be trusted, who would also garner that enthusiasm, you know, with parents to to want their children to do well in school and show them the roads, you know, show them the ropes of how it was done. So I'm very proud of that. Then I really push we didn't have a dual immersion and I push for the dual immersion over at Alcorn, and that was before Linda came out. I had just gotten on the board, so I was talking with one of the male assistant superintendents and he and I were on the same. He was a good guy. He, he he understood. He went to another job, higher paying, but he before he left, I really pushed it and we were able to get the dual immersion program. And when we first had the dual immersion program, we only had like I think maybe seven or eight kids in the program. Now they're well over a hundred kids and they actually come up from the different schools into Alcorn. And it's a tremendous

program and stuff. But I'm really proud that I was the one that really pushed for that. So that was one of the things you did.

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Rios Kravitz Exciting. And then what organizations were you involved in?

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Alcala Currently or back then or when? Oh, gosh. Well, I've always been involved in so many everything from from, you know, my church. And, you know, I was president for the for the parish council. I've been a member of actually Soroptimist because I thought that it was important to make a presence, a Latino presence, where there was none. So I was a member of Soroptimist. I am currently the chair of the California Democratic Council, and it's first time we've had a Latina leading that organization. So it's definitely making them much more aware. We take some very strong positions. We are there's three independent democratic bodies that can use the word Democratic, one scalar in Democratic Party, California Democratic Council, and young, young, young Dems. So we are probably the Bernie crats. I was a big Bernie supporter and when it came to to to Sacramento, I was very proud to I was the only Latina and I got to introduce Bernie as the only female up there. They got to introduce Bernie. I still remember it was it was I laughed and say, it's my Woodstock moment because the place was packed. There were over 20,000 people. So that was really wonderful. People often think that only like older or, you know, the white folks are out there. Bernie was strongly supported by incredible Latino activist Desiree Rojas, who's president for Lachlan, and her father, Al Rojas. It was a tremendous I mean, he was one of the co-founders of United Farm Workers. They were all Bernie supporters. So anyway, California Democratic Council Roger, Bernie people. But they weren't this the first time they've had such a full executive board because a lot of the people from Chicano Latino Caucus who I'm one of the last years for a lot of those same folks belong to the California Democratic Council. And we are very, very progressive. Our focus is really on we do endorsements, but I've always said for three, four years now, I've been talking about how important it is to reflect on local races because that's where it all comes down to, especially school board races. The Republican Party has come in. I mean, you know, they're starting to burn books now, you know, just like they did, you know, you know, and before World War Two, you know, set off like the Nazis did. And so it's really important to have good school board members, you know, who are going to protect, you know, independent, independent thought, you know, of the public education system and not do what we're seeing is happening in Florida and other states like that. I'm also president for the National Coalition of Hispanic Organizations. And most currently we have had a building named after an incredible civil rights leader, Mario, although his his wife, Jenna, is the executive director. I'm the president of this coalition. And we had Senator Ana Caballero. She is really a tremendous champion for our people, incredible champion for our people. So, Estella, assembly leader, she is the leader of no majority leader I'm sorry, Luis Reyes, I believe, Anyway, but Senator Caballero carried that bill. We actually asked. He's now the majority leader, Robert Rivas. But he was afraid that she, by some people, would would not go along with it. So that's why I say, you know, women don't get their due. A caballero champion. She went out there, she got the bill passed. Now we have a building named First Building. We're going to have named after a Latino leader.

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Rios Kravitz So in looking at how they these organizations contributed to the movement, can you speak a little more about that, the importance of those organizations and those activities to really move and contribute to what I'm

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Alcala sure? Well, I'm vice chair for the Chicano Latino Caucus of the California Democratic Party, the Northern region, and. My husband, Carlos, is chair. We've become very close friends with. We were all a very strong group of activists. We have vice chairs. We have within the party and it is probably the largest group. We also have a very good relationship with the Progressive Caucus. Armor Shargel was a one, and we talked about how important it was, you know, to elevate people of color. And that goes, you know, when people say people of color, they normally only reach some people. And we reflect on the black community. We're talking about Latinos, we're talking about Asians. We were talking about, you know, everyone on the spectrum. So in terms of what we meant, we would we would push resolutions that eventually legislators adopted into bills, you know, which which changed the dynamic here in California. Years ago, you could use monikers like the Redskins, which is so offensive. Well, our our caucus put a resolution talking about how, you know, insidious the name, you know, was and one of the legislators picked it up. I forget which legislator anyway it's now you cannot use such derogatory terms like that. Another thing we did was we pushed the empowerment for our dreamers. We had a young woman. She's an incredible activist. She's a member of the San Francisco Democratic Club. We have these incredible women and they're really pushing, you know, come to think of it, everyone both mentioned that it's gotten these things done have been the women services and other young, incredible women. That's not to dismiss the men. But I want to give due to the women, because I think, you know, we we shortchanged these women who do these things. And Sarah seduces young activists in her thirties and she she championed we all talked about how important it was for the Dreamers to be active within the California Democratic Party. So we actually we put a resolution. The party approved it and it was carried and I think it was Monica Barreto, again, who carried this bill for us. And what what it does is it allows Dreamers to participate and become they can become delegates to the California Democratic Party. None of the Republicans opposed it either. I guess they figured, well, it's Democrats asking for their own in House type of thing. Now, that doesn't mean that they have a right to vote. If they're not if they're not citizens. That's not if people were trying to use that mentality, that's not it at all. What it meant is they were going to be allowed to run as delegates to have a voice within the party. So it was it's an internal thing, but it's a big thing because when I first started going to conventions, I remember once again it was very homogenous, very, very homogenous. You didn't see a lot of Latinos. That dynamic has changed. I worked with the California legislature from 2000 to 2009. Same thing. You know, slowly the the number of Latinos started increasing in assembly members and senators. When I was a young girl, I remember there were a few very, very few Latino legislators. And by the time I left the capital, that dynamic changed. I think now, you know, it's it's a very high percentage. Yeah, when you talk about that. So I have worked all their campaigns, if you're asking me. I've also been very active. I have worked, I have phone banked. You know, my husband and I have contributed money. We've gotten other people involved. It's it's exciting to see a true leader. A true leader that really has. A strong agenda to

help promote social and economic opportunities for people. And those are the people that we back. And because we do have a very good network, I think, you know, through the coalition building of Latinos, that you can make that that that difference in an area.

[00:43:06]

Rios Kravitz Next. It's next question. Your consciousness regarding social, cultural, political issues. Yeah. Did the movie ever really raise that in you?

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Alcala I would say so. It's so easy to just. You know, to sit home and, you know, turn on the tube and phase everything out around you. But, I mean, do you really want to look back and say, I did absolutely nothing for anyone else? My Catholic faith, I think those Irish nuns sort of played an impact on that, wanting to do something for people. We had we had two Latina nuns to that would say, you know, our people suffer and stuff. So that changed that with the dynamic of activist around me. I mean, it's it's it's sort of it it gets like a grape blender, you know, it it. I think it had had a big impact on wanting to try to change the status quo. And I'm going to have you repeat that question again. For me, it was a it involved a lot of thinking above.

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Rios Kravitz How did it impact your consciousness regarding social, cultural and political issues?

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Alcala We knew, yeah, the Movimiento said we had to do something. We couldn't sit still. I think I read stories, heard stories, oral histories from, like I said, my uncles, my aunts, my mother, my mom was mom was an incredible activist as well. Am I giving her her due here? She she's she's so much a part of me I always think of because everywhere I would go, she would go also and she'd be in there even when we went to work. I remember Dolores, a son, ran for Congress and we took we took caravans. We had caravans coming in from everywhere. We walked those. And so it's a tough thing because Republicans usually, you know, have that area. And but I still remember my mom and a bunch of her friends were older ladies. They couldn't they can't walk a lot, but they would get on that phone and they'd be on there, you know, making those calls. So I think that that had a we saw the impact. I mean, there's so many and I often say this I did a lot of high school voter registration, reached over 15,000 kids, and I would go in and show them how to after a while, you know, you get tired, you get old, but you show the leadership in those classes. And then they started because we want to create leaders in the schools. So the kids really got a taste for, hey, you know, this is this is how we could do it. I would tell them, you know, one thing, we don't have the money that other other other people do, but we have the numbers and we have to use it. Don't let them brainwash you into thinking that, you know, because we don't have the money, we can't win these elections. Our numbers alone can do it. If we all you know, if as long as we get away from the brainwashing that you know, that one vote doesn't count, every vote counts. So I would see these young people get really excited. And that was what the movimiento did. It excites people. It's it's like it's like it's like a match that, you know, domino type of effect. And it's fabulous because we learned that things could be done when you train when when the numbers change for our folks and that comes through the vote.

So for me, being a political activist, getting people involved politically, making them aware of how changes could come. That was all the movimiento telling us that we just couldn't sit on the sidelines, that we really had to do something to change the dynamic of, you know, the future for our kids and our grandkids, my children, my husband, all kids, all our kids. You know, we would say, hey, we're going to support this candidate. We'd go we'd go out. We'd walk. Members of our family, my cousins. And I think that's it. You have to really in our own homes. To me, that's the movimiento. You get the dynamic in your family going and it's contagious and you have to have that. And that's what I think all Latinos have to do. You know, you just can't say up or what and stuff. You take that attitude, we're never going to win. And the movimiento is it's. It's like. It's like a bonfire to me. That's what it was. And it really ignited those passions.

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Rios Kravitz Yeah. And you're this is the next question is how did it impact your personal relationships with your family, with your peers and your significant others?

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Alcala Oh, well, my significant other is one of the biggest activists, you know, that California has now known, Carlos, is is I said even when he was working with Cesar, he won all those cases and stuff. My family, I think, because we all talked about the importance of. Of making changes. Economic changes and social changes. Cultural changes for our people. We talked about it and it was always a dinner conversation. Our family often talked about that. And people say, well, you know, we're you know, we have to worry about, you know, putting a roof over our heads. And yeah, everyone, everyone does. Our family do, too. We certainly were born with silver spoons in our mouths, you know. I joke and I said, you know, even if you're working with the plastics brewing or use a tortilla, the point is, you know, there has to be more than just your stomach. You know, you have you have to do a lot more. And it doesn't mean that you have to. Some people can't obviously devote their entire lives, but you can do what you you have to do something. You have to do something. And like I told you about those ladies, you know, sure, they can't walk anymore, but they were on those phones, you know, rather than watching another novella, you know, for an hour, they picked up those phones and they did that. And it was to bring about a change. When we I'll give you an example. When we when we were with the California we are with the California Democratic Party. But the first time they had phone banks, I remember Carlos became chair and it was talking with Emma Harper, who's one of the ladies there, and she said, okay, yeah, you guys are a caucus, but what really do you do? And we had just we had just the week before become the new board. So I said, Well, we're going to do something. She says, Well, the end of the Asian Pacific Islanders to contribute a lot of money to the party. And I thought, Well, Latinos don't have money that that community does. So when talk with Carlos and he said, Don't they have a phone bank? And I said, yes. And and as I said, they had a phone bank. They don't that she was thrilled because they'd gotten 25 people on the phone bank. Well. Carlos sent out a newsletter with, you know, I had asked for a newsletter. We've got an electronic newsletter. Our caucus started making calls for this one candidate. He was running for San Diego. Was it San Diego mayor? I believe so. So a young Latino is running against some. I forget who was a Republican white candidate. Anyway, our caucus wound up making 15,000 calls for the for this candidate. And they said they saw the the the momentum

the paper reported. All of a sudden, they started seeing a swing. And he lost. But guess what? He didn't lose by a lot. I mean, it was it was tremendous. So the caucus was recognized by the party for all the calls. So then after that, we continued those phone banks. And and it was enthusiastic. You know, we all we all made calls and we told our caucus member and and the officers, you must make at least 300 calls minimum. So everyone they made those calls. And the next time we did it, we actually beat all the. We always we always would beat all the caucuses and all the central committees. We made 25,000 calls. And it it was very impactful because it was the Chicano Latino Caucus that was doing that, and he was being recognized for that type of activism.

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Rios Kravitz So you've talked about this a lot, but I wonder if you want to any more to your involvement with the movement and its impact on your career.

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Alcala I have. You know, I. I work for a law firm that worked for the California legislature. I've actually been a small business owner at one time I i under bail bonds. In terms of a career, I've never really thought of, quote, having a career. You know, I'm a public I'm a public servant. I've been a school board member. I'm currently on city council. I think I bring up issues and sometimes, believe me, I'm the only person that brings up the issue and I'm sometimes the only vote. But I do bring up issues that are connected with movimiento, whether it's individual rights or whether it's a position. I'll give you an example. They recently tried to have. City Council passed a resolution to honor the past. Mayor. I didn't have a problem with that resolution when it came to the board. They changed that resolution to a naming of a an artery of West Sacramento after the former mayor, a guy by the name of Cobalt and who had not been a friend of the Latino community nor labor. So I got up and I spoke against it. They had not followed the procedure. You know, normally you only change a huge artery like that or a bridge if a person has died. It's it's that's one of the requirements. Well, the. I was the only lone vote against that I had recommended. I said. You know, in. We have Alfred Melbourne and he often comments that we have these land acknowledgments, but he feels are empty land acknowledgments to our to our Native American communities. And of course, as we're indigenous, as Latinos, we're indigenous, so we totally get it. So I made the recommendation and that was because once again, the movimiento trying to trying to elevate and and, you know, show people, you know, that, you know, our cultures are important. So I tried to get it named after maybe one of the indigenous tribes. Well, I was voted out 4 to 1. But the point is, I wasn't going to go along to get along. That's not what the movimientos about. Sometimes you are that only that one person, but you go down doing the right thing. And to me, that's what the movimiento sometimes may only be that one person, but you're never separated from the other people in the movement. Even if they're not around.

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Rios Kravitz And that's what you've really highlighted, your impact on community life and what it means. Do you want to add any other. Experiences do that. I mean, you've been very articulate and

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Alcala there are probably too many, you know. But I think I think the one thing that that has really driven us is in it drives me. I want. I want my contributions to the MeToo movement to be continued by others. And I guess the big thing is not to be afraid. And that's what the movement's about. And there are a lot of things to fear out there. You know, I'm not always the most articulate person and stuff. I'm actually probably one of the not not from this interview. You'd get it, but I'm usually one of the most succinct people like, you know, when I serve on boards because I, I believe it's important to listen to what other people have to say, which I really do. And I take it to heart. And I realize we all have different experiences. But some of us have have, you know, had to learn the hard way and we haven't had the advantages that others have. And I think in terms of a movimiento, we have to continue to repeat these histories because John F Kennedy actually quoted from one of his Harvard professors. And then it was it was actually when a Harvard professors who I believe quoted it was a Latino. But basically it is you know, if you if you don't remember history, you repeat it, you're doomed to repeat it. So for me, I think this project that you're doing is so tremendous. It is going to inspire people, not necessarily my story, but other stories that you have out there. You told me that there are about 100 people that you've interviewed. And this will keep that pride that Ghana's, you know, the want to do things for our community to elevate it. So yeah, that's one of these days, you know, the you know, we also will not forget and become the what's the word I'm looking for. We will no longer be the people who oppress if once you know, we are in a position. Of power. So I think those are important lessons to learn, you know, to value ourselves, but never to forget the struggles.

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Rios Kravitz Thank you. You know, many of the activists have passed on. Can you identify an individual or individuals that you feel had an impact and explain their significance?

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Alcala You know, everyone. There were so many people that that were part of the movement. Of course, everyone knows about Caesar, and we're blessed to have Delores. But there are other people that and I read about them all the time. And it's not just here in California, in Texas, in so many places I read. I started reading these these these histories about these incredible women that were Latinas that published these anti-slavery pamphlets back in the 1800s that were so, you know, and then we talk about just individual friends that we knew there were people like women, like Manuela Serna that started things. And there was there were people in the arts as well that brought this a lady, Mrs. Cobb, that brought dancing, you know, cultural dancing into the area. Every one of these people, whether it was in the arts and politics, things that they did to it, could have been something as simple as, as like the bakeries that we have, Mexican bakeries. When we came to California, you couldn't find you couldn't find Mexican food. And. Now, you know, you go into any store and they have a mexican section, which is a great thing. So many Mexican restaurants, so many more businesses opening up. So there's so many unsung heroes out there, many who I'm not aware of, but we all know individually. So those, you know, our grandmothers or grandfathers or things that. Yes. Those are those are the heroes that we have. And we don't always recognize that maybe they don't get the publicity and the media

attention, you know, that that that they should because some of them have had probably have the most incredible stories that they can share. And some people are very humble. They do a lot of stuff and maybe they don't get elected to office like I do, but they've done so much tremendous what I called the, you know, the trench work. I'll give you an example. My friend Maria Grijalva. My God, this woman is incredible. You talk about an activist, a woman who is and she's let me tell you, she's she's taken real hits. People have been really nasty to her. Why? Because she speaks the truth. She talks about the lack of accessibility. You know, that She knows how to resources. She's an incredible woman. She helped bring single member districts. I've been trying to get them on, on school board and on city councils, you know, and a lot of I mean, I've tried the nice way. I would bring it up at every meeting, got knocked down because people don't want change, especially the people in power. But remember, white people that didn't want that and Maria helped get that done. You know, she she she filed some lawsuits and it was found that there was discrimination. I had been saying that all along, but no one no one wanted to change the status quo. Maria did that. So one of those heroes, Maria Grijalva, she spoke. She has an incredible history, the movimiento. We'll have to do one with her. Desiree Rojas, another one. Her father, brother Alvaro House was tremendous. And Desiree continues that legacy. She just recently had a dinner with likely acknowledging individuals within the movement. There's so many people. I met a lady who had been shot in the fields by growers. JUANITA When the UFW came in, my husband and I would open our home. We got the the church was great. God bless. And Father John got a lot over at Holy Cross. He allowed us to use the auditorium, you know, and a bunch of the ladies. These are other unsung heroes, ladies from Maria mendoza and Cissy, my mother. We got together. Carlos and I paid, made food for the UFW when they would come in and stuff. So there's so many unsung heroes out there that contribute in ways that that maybe don't get mentioned in the media. But, boy, they're remembered in the heart, I tell you.

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Rios Kravitz You know, looking back at your experience of the moment, are there any issues that have been left unresolved and you've talked about the single districts, and what do you see as current or future challenges for the Chicano community?

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Alcala Economics is always one lack of housing. You know, I see in my own district in West Sacramento. Mercy Coalition puts up a lot of housing, and it's important that we take care of those people that with the drug addictions and stuff. But when I was walking, when I was walking precincts for my own campaign, it hurt me to see so many Latino families. They have some you have two or three families living in one house because the rents are so high. So this comes in with labor also. I'm strongly supported by labor when I've run in my elections. And housing is a big issue. Housing is a big issue for our folks. How can kids, you know, have that have that peace of mind, study and feel good about themselves, you know, and want to achieve? When so many things are not being attended to, you know, the parents work so hard, they're working two jobs and and yet the pay's not there. There's something really wrong in this country where people work so hard and then they're living, you know, day to day. It's it's horrible. So for me. Huge changes have to come. We have to put people who have experienced the struggle. They can hopefully help fix the struggle. That's something that the about that we have to get more people who

have experienced the struggle and are really willing to do it, not just, you know, run for office, you know, and wait for the next higher office to come in. And people who are really willing to dig their heels in and make some changes and some of those changes are going to be really hard. You have to convince people, you know, that this is the right thing to do. So. Once again, I mines running in a lot of different areas because there's so much I want to get in. And it's hard to to get so many things that I want to say. So if you can repeat that question for me once more, I'll try and focus in on you.

[01:03:10]

Rios Kravitz The answer in many ways throughout the interview. So it's not that you have to condense into this one question, but really looking back at the experience in the movie, are there any issues that left unresolved?

[01:03:24]

Alcala Quite a few. And we talked about and we talked about housing, health care, you know, and that that's, I guess, for all Californians. Are there issues? Yeah, apparently there are a lot of issues now. There are a lot of yeah, there's still a lot of challenges, Like I said, getting our people on boards. The governor recently appointed someone for judicial appointments. Oh, what is his name? Trying to remember suspicious. And we several organizations wrote, I live in Yola. We have eight judges there. We have one Latina judge. When we have like 34% of the population in YOLO is Latino, yet only one judge. The rest are all white, either males or recently appointed a female. We had been pushing for Governor Newsom to appoint a fabulous justice in justice. Well, I got Mr. Rojas to the bench. Incredible story. Great, great resume. I mean, if you read it, you're so impressed with everything that he's done. He would have been a fabulous judge, spoke Spanish, of course, his family from Mexico, they knew the struggle. He graduated from McGeorge Law School, where my youngest son graduated from McGeorge. And we wrote letters to the governor. Not only did his credentials stand out, but the fact that YOLO needs judges because the convictions for Latinos in YOLO is so high. So, you know, we wanted to have someone who understood someone, of course, who was, you know, going to go by the letter of the law and all. But it's important to see role models out there, also inspiration for young people to maybe want to be judges someday. And once again, you know, Governor, let us down. He was not. And he had a lot of letters written. So there I think that's that's what happens. You know, people like Newsom, they you know, they purport to support the Latino community, but we certainly didn't get, you know, even a response. Thanks for your letter. You know, thanks for letting us know. We'll let you know Nothing like that. Governor's office was very dismissive. So in terms of what is still left to do. To have some some impact, some real impact with these powers that be. Our community needs to start flexing its muscle in terms of voting, voting these people out. If they don't, they use this for the vote. But then when it comes to listening to us. You know, crickets.

[01:06:11]

Rios Kravitz Funny. The last question. You know, you've been elected to the school board at city council, so your hopes they are involved in trying to meet these challenges. Do you see yourself staying involved throughout?

[01:06:22]

Alcala Absolutely. To my dying breath till my dying breath. I want to be able to to maybe be one of those old ladies one day who picks up the phone and says, you know, we can't move around anymore, but my mouth will keep going. So I definitely will. Most importantly, I want more people to continue the momentum. And when I and that's what I really enjoyed when I was doing high school voter registrations. It was talking with these young people, trying to inspire them, but mostly, I shouldn't say really inspired them because they inspired themselves. But sort of giving them, you know, a little little shove. And they themselves, we have so many incredible leaders out there. That's another thing, though, I want to say. I think it's really important and the Latino community is great in this. We want those new leaders out there. Problem is, sometimes you have members of other communities that, you know, they've been there too long and they're not giving the new leadership a change. And that's where, like me, when I was running for school board, I was going to accomplish the things I did. I got it. And I said two terms. And then I was out there mentoring, trying to groom new Latino leaders. And I have some great Latino leaders, by the way, when I was like a from school board, they appointed someone that was not elected and didn't understand the community. Teachers came to me because I had always been strongly supported by the class, by my teachers, and they said. Person. Stop working out. Can you find a someone? I knew of someone and she is now sitting on that board. I was the only elected official to support her. All the other school board members and the others supported. I had the best candidate. She was a Latina growing up in the area. Her name is Virginia Mendez Coffey. She had her master's in education. She was on the executive board of the little football team there. So all the parents knew her. She was heavily involved in the school in the district. And, you know, I had to I had to three days before, you know, the cut off. I spoke with her, begged her, and she ran and she won. So I think that's really important. We have to, as is older, the older generation. We need to start really digging in and finding the people who are going to continue this momentum. By the way, they all over on the board now, teachers supported her. And even people who were we're not supporters of hers are very much now because she brings so much to the board and she listens and she's out there and she is dynamic. And that's Virginia, my discography. So.

[01:09:02]

Rios Kravitz It's great that you in with that. I want to thank you for your participation in this interview. I mean, this is the well, really, you know, your words, your voice will contribute to our efforts to document, preserve and eventually archive all of this oral history. So I cannot thank you enough. It really is significant, particularly, I should say, for you, those that we want to. To see and hear our stories.

[01:09:30]

Alcala Well, I want to thank you because I mentioned that only old white guys are historians. You are Latina. And you were an historian. Thank you.

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Rios Kravitz All together. So if you. It's exciting to see.

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Alcala Videographer. Thank you.

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Rios Kravitz All right. Now, again, thank you very much.

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Alcala Thank you.