

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education Oral History Project

**Sammy Rios**

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Claudia Rangel

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California State University, Sacramento Library

[00:00:09]

**Rangel** Please state your full name.

[00:00:10]

**Sammy Rios** Samuel Renaldo Rios. [assumed spelling]

[00:00:12]

**Rangel** Please provide your birthdate.

[00:00:17]

**Rios** 21 September 1953.

[00:00:26]

**Rangel** Please provide your marital status.

[00:00:27]

**Rios** Married.

[00:00:27]

**Rangel** Do you have any children?

[00:00:30]

**Rios** Thirty-nine years, June 21st, one daughter is 39. One granddaughter is 19. One grandson is seven months.

[00:00:49]

**Rangel** So where were you born and raised?

[00:00:50]

**Rios** Born in San Francisco, California Presidio Hospital during the Korean conflict. Let's see. Left at five years old and been in Sacramento ever since.

[00:01:06]

**Rangel** What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:08]

**Rios** My mother was a housewife. My father was in the Air Force, electronics, fixing electronic equipment, installing radar, stuff like that on Johnson Island and here and there, and working at McClellan Air Force Base and Aerojet. And then, he decided to become an instructor. So he taught here at City College and at Sac State. Sam Rios, Jr.

[00:01:41]

**Rangel** How many brothers and sisters do you have?

[00:01:45]

**Rios** For my mother, we have three brothers and one sister. And my father got remarried and had two brothers and one sister.

[00:01:56]

**Rangel** Okay. Were you a fellow or [inaudible] during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:02:02]

**Rios** I was not.

[00:02:05]

**Rangel** Okay.

[00:02:07]

**Rios** I just hung out with all of them.

[00:02:10]

**Rangel** What were you -- what are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to Movimiento Chicano?

[00:02:17]

**Rios** Probably my great-grandmother. She was part of the Lado Lupanas [phonetic] at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. And my dad said, yeah, your great-grandma is out there, welcoming Cesar after his march. So that was -- And then high school, during high school, all of high school, the beginning of high school, '68, 1968.

[00:02:42]

**Rangel** Were you involved in anything?

[00:02:46]

**Rios** High school, I was the president of the Maya [phonetic] Club. Then it became the Meche [phonetic] Club, and we did quite a few things. Around Cinco de Mayo, when, you know, just something that we -- Since I knew quite a few artists from the RCAF, was able to get their artwork. We have an art large show in the cafeteria, in a side room. We'd have an assembly. We'd have soccer matches. We'd have a variety of activities during the week. You know, food in the cafeteria. It was quite -- and not only there at Sac High, but at all the different high schools all up and down the state. It was a fire in the air. It was exciting. Yeah. Now there's some of the high schools, you know, they'd have floats, make floats for the homecoming, you know, a big old huelga eagle, you know. So there was -- it was -- it was pretty -- it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun.

[00:03:58]

**Rangel** How did other Mexicans, Latinos, Mexican Americans react to the term Chicano and Movimiento Chicano?

[00:04:09]

**Rios** They were varied, you know, from positive to negative, the whole spectrum. Yeah, and pick something out, and that's what it was. So anything specific I can't remember right now. But generally, it was -- there were a lot of different things going on. It was coming, you know, from Cesar, which was probably the primary one. And then there was trying to register people to vote and let them know that, you know, that may have never voted. You know, and they've been here for quite a long time, but they just didn't vote. And there was a time where it didn't -- the Mexican vote didn't really factor into elections. So, you know, fast forward to today where it's, you know, it's extremely important, you know, for city, county, state, federal offices now. So it's quite a transition and movement. But along with that, you know, we still call the road. [phonetic] But, you know, there's with the negatives, there's positives. You know what I mean? They get caught up in that, but it's, I got my inside contact to the Capitol suck. Some pretty funny stories current about, you know, there are people that are down there right now. So can't share those stories, but they're pretty funny. But yeah, no, they, it was just a new kind of awakening, you know. And there was a lot of change going on. And there was -- hopefully you'll get the guys from Davis, you know, the Machetes, they were kind of a group of Chicanos. It was the heavier -- Are they still there?

[00:06:19]

**Rangel** I'm not sure.

[00:06:21]

**Rios** Oh, okay. Well, then you would know if they were still there. They might not be together anymore. But there was so many people doing so many things at that time. It was just amazing, and a lot of them just weren't recognized for their efforts. But it was just a ton of good stuff that was going on.

[00:06:41]

**Rangel** Mm-hmm. Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement at the time?

[00:06:47]

**Rios** Oh yeah. Yeah. My father was in the Air Force, and he was stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi. And he has pretty -- he's darker than Sunam. [phonetic] And my mother is real fair-skinned. And she went to visit him. And they decided to go downtown, but she had -- he had to sit in the back of the bus, and she had to sit in the front of the bus. So, but they got downtown. It's just that it really didn't matter as long as your skin was dark, you know, you had to, even if you were -- You weren't black. It was pretty obvious. You weren't African American. It didn't matter. I mean, if you were Indian from India, you had to sit in the back of the bus, you know, it's all your skin color. Yeah. So, yeah. And hearing those stories, hearing the story my dad said when he was a teenager. A white woman is walking their little son down the street. And the son goes, Mom, look, there's a nigger. No, no, that's a spic. It's not a nigger. So when you hear all these stories, it's you kind of grow up with the knowledge of, you know, the ignorance.

[00:08:17]

**Rangel** Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change your -- change you personally?

[00:08:25]

**Rios** Not personally. It was just, you know, it was like, you get caught up in this wave of involvement. And it seemed a lot of people were caught up in it. But personally, no, we still had our, you know, problems to deal with and still deal with. You know what I mean? Personal stuff that demons and this and that and everything. But no, not in any kind of life-changing way.

[00:08:55]

**Rangel** What role do you believe that Chicanos in the Movimiento?

[00:08:59]

**Rios** What was that again?

[00:09:00]

**Rangel** What role do you believe that Chicanos played in the Movimiento?

[00:09:05]

**Rios** There were the Chicanas, right?

[00:09:07]

**Rangel** Mm-hmm.

[00:09:08]

**Rios** Yeah, they were the movers and shakers. You know what I mean? The majority of the members and Maya clubs and Mecha [phonetic] were the women, you know, and they're the ones that pretty much got everything done. So and that was just an extension from what they were doing at home. You know what I mean? Depending on if they were the oldest or -- You know, they had

not only had responsibilities, I think the responsibilities they had at home helped them, made it easier for them to take on responsibilities at school and then afterwards at their jobs.

[00:09:51]

**Rangel** What do you personally initiate or help initiate in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:09:59]

**Rios** Not anything significant. I was just basically a participant into stuff that already was preexisting, you know. So they'd have food caravans to Delano. So we'd go through the community and go door to door collecting food. We'd go to Ronald Reagan's house and knock on the front door when he was governor and say I was just collecting for farmworkers. And I think they gave us something, but not the governor because he wasn't in at the time. Participating in those kind of activities and, you know, just everybody driving down with a bunch of food and dropping it off at Filipino Hall, spending the night, and coming on back the next day. Or maybe we spent a couple of nights there. I don't know. That was a eye-opener when you go on to camps, and you're picketing, and you're listening, or you see, listening to speeches by Cesar and Larry Itliong and Vera Cruz. There's a -- it was on last night at four, tonight -- Oh, no, Sunday at six o'clock it's about the Filipino contribution in the UFW. But they had actually had an organization before when they had, I think they had, if I remember right, they had made some progress with growers on wages and concessions. And then it was just they came together to fund the UFW. But initiate, no, not in --

[00:11:40]

**Rangel** Okay. What were some of the organizations you were involved in?

[00:11:46]

**Rios** The Maya Club at high school, and then the Concilio, which is a service organization downtown Sacramento. I was on the board of that, where I learned a trick on when you're voting on a certain item, you know, we take a vote. And the guy was sitting next to me, and we voted, but we were one vote short. You know what I mean? And so he told me afterward that he pretended to put his piece of paper in the hat, but he kept it and scammed [phonetic] because he wanted to see how the vote was going to be, you know, without that one vote. And he knew they were going to have to vote again, so, yeah, that was pretty interesting. And you know, sometimes it could be extremely boring, you know, hard to keep your eyes open in some of those meetings. But yeah, that was the extent of it, besides attending various functions.

[00:12:47]

**Rangel** Okay. A little while ago, you mentioned you weren't the Maya Club in high school. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

[00:12:55]

**Rios** Yeah, basically it was just us trying to get together to -- You know, thinking back, it might've been more effective if we had just formed a, you know, homework club. You know what I mean? And just invited everybody in to emphasize the importance of education, you know. And try to

maybe if they had goals that they wanted to reach, how to help them reach those goals, whether it's going to college or whatever they wanted to do. Yeah. But mainly it was social, you know. We did a lot of socializing. And I'm trying to think what else. We did a variety of things. What we did, I can't remember right now, you know, specific. Even if I had a week, you know, trying to think about what we actually did. But the main thing was Cinco de Mayo. And we -- the specific variety of things we did has just flew away. I don't know if they'll come back, but.

[00:14:07]

**Rangel** What significance did the activities or organizations created play into Movimiento Chicano?

[00:14:16]

**Rios** Just to have a gathering place for people who wanted to get involved, not only in the school, but you know, the community activities to make them more aware, get them more involved, to get them out of their -- Now, it may be harder because, you know, it's back then, you know, there were no cell phones, you know, no computers. You know, so there was no, there wasn't -- Now they're so media-driven, media involved. You know, a lot of their lives center around technology, as opposed to just getting together and spending time and talking and interacting and doing whatever.

[00:15:07]

**Rangel** Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social culture or political lines?

[00:15:14]

**Rios** Yes, and it's a steppingstone to get into other aspects of, you know, you delve a little deeper into how things work and why they work the way they do. So go, Elizabeth Warren. President Warren sounds good. Look at this guy. [Inaudible]. I haven't seen him in a long time. He's going to have to add in all kinds of stuff out of this one.

[00:15:48]

**Rangel** How did these changes impact your personal relationships with family, peers, and significant others?

[00:15:54]

**Rios** You know, I was the oldest, so instead of spending more time with my younger siblings, I didn't spend hardly any time. So that's a regret as you get older. You wish you had spent more time and done more things with them. Even though now you do things with them, but it's, yeah, it's important to if you have siblings, while they're still young, to spend some time with them and do some stuff with them.

[00:16:23]

**Rangel** Can you describe some of the impacts that your involvement with the Movimiento Chicano had on your career?

[00:16:33]

**Rios** I was -- Not a whole lot in terms of I just needed -- I didn't want really want to work in an office, per se. So I was a custodian at an elementary school for 36 years, elementary school, middle school, high school. So my -- the thought was that I wanted to stay active doing stuff. So I did that. And also, one of the, you know, it's like children first, but my thing was teachers first. So I'd help the teachers, and they have everything they need. And of course, the kids are going to get helped. You know what I mean? That just -- so you make the teachers the number one focus. That's what mine's was. And I just have so much respect for them because they're -- they could be making a whole lot of money doing a whole bunch of other stuff. But they decided to dedicate their lives to teaching kids. You know what I mean? And you know, from the first day, there's not a whole lot of teaching that you would have like in a college setting. There's a whole lot of social work and just, you know, dealing with parents and administrators. And it can be quite a load on them, you know, to just try to, you know, to -- You know, and then some days they lose. You know what I mean? They don't have the time or the resources to get to every student that needs that help. So and a little inspired by Cesar, you know, on his humbleness and his, yeah. I would say I was affected by that.

[00:18:30]

**Rangel** Looking back at your experience in the Movimiento Chicano, are there any issues that were left unresolved?

[00:18:38]

**Rios** Unresolved?

[00:18:39]

**Rangel** Mm-hmm.

[00:18:40]

**Rios** We basically have the same issues, you know, because it's a continuing fight. It never ends. It's a never-ending fight, you know, for -- And it, you know, the focus switches, you know, now it's immigration. But there are so many issues that are -- that have come into play. They're still unresolved. You know what I mean? You have even trying to get to college if that's what you want to do. You know, getting there and then being able to afford it, you know, it's set up now [inaudible] go into debt. You know what I mean? So that you can't even afford to, you know, take on maybe a -- Maybe you don't want to get married and have kids. But it sure makes it hard to do anything in the future if you have to spend a majority of your income, you know, paying down debt. You know, it's a huge problem. The United States governments, hopefully, they'll get it all straightened out so that education is an investment on the future. You know what I mean? You go ahead and put some money into people that actually want to learn and make that effort to go ahead and do that. I mean, it just, everything, everybody benefits from that kind of investment. That's not where it's at right now. But if we get Elizabeth Warren. She's there. Senator from Massachusetts.

[00:20:19]

**Rangel** Describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived.

[00:20:26]

**Rios** I don't know so much if it affected community life because that, you know, we had the -- The adults are pretty much set in their ways. And they've had their experiences when they were growing up. I'd say our parents. And this is all when I was in high school. One of the big problems was drugs, you know, back then. And from the downtown area, where I grew up, some of the parents had actually, they moved to get their kids away from their friends basically to try to get them away from what they saw was a really, you know, they saw what they were doing to their kids. You know, it just, you know, brought their lives to stand still almost, you know, because they were -- And some were lost, you know, due to drugs and either drugs or the violence associated with drugs, you know, and the people you deal with. It was -- But the -- It was more, you know, they had a job to do. And they were doing their jobs, you know, to just -- they still had a family to raise and stuff of that sort. So that natural effect on them, I'm not too sure what the -- You know, and I talk community. Of course, all the students and the younger ones were a little bit more getting a little more into them, to political and social issues and realizing that they're, you know, [inaudible] there's Black and that, and Mexican. But there were other concerns. And, you know, it's just everybody had basically the same sort of financial issues and problems. You know what I mean?

[00:22:23]

**Rangel** What do you see as current or future challenges for the Chicano community?

[00:22:34]

**Rios** It's a question you definitely have to think about that. I think it's -- Specifically, I can't think of one, but that they have to become more involved in the community as a whole. You know what I mean? They have to start joining more community organizations. And that would just be from, you know, we do have some that I think the -- I don't know if we have any Chicanos on the city council or I think, I just, you know, Padilla [phonetic] is trying to run forever, but he's [inaudible] been elected. I think become more involved in some really basic stuff. You know what I mean? It's just little boards that people ask you [inaudible]. More involved, you know, maybe run for school board, maybe. And we do have some that run for school board. But it's just that they tend to have higher aspirations, you know, beyond, they just don't want to stay there and try to fix it. You know what I mean? Or try to put some kind of that stabilize the situation. It's extremely volatile, right now, the education system. And the public education in California is under attack, you know, from muddled interest. So public education, it's, you know, it's got a future, but it doesn't look very bright. Just become more involved in their community and try to neighborhood associations and stuff and become a part of those. And there are some that are, you know, but they're, like I say, they're quiet people that you don't hear about or read about. But they attend meetings, and they try to do the best they can. So I'm kind of -- Max Mendoza, [assumed spelling] [inaudible]. So he's always involved. You know what I mean? Maybe a little bit too much with -- He's pretty good.

[00:24:40]

**Rangel** Do you see yourself as staying involved in meeting these challenges?

[00:24:46]

**Rios** Only in I'm retired now. Have more time, but you don't have more time. I was retired a month and then realized I had to hit the gym. I mean, even though it doesn't look like it. But it's just I've been there for over a year at the YMCA. So I go there Monday through Friday every morning. And then, you know, run errands after that, even though it's just me and my wife. She's still working. And before you know, the day's over. You know what I mean? So you're trying to find out where can you fit in? I fill out application for the Heart Center downtown Sacramento. It's a senior center that's run by the City of Sacramento. So I'll be volunteering there at whatever they need me for. And I volunteer at the VFW hall over on Stockton Boulevard. And it's Veterans Foreign Wars and whatever help they need setting up for dances or pretty much whatever they need me for. I'm kind of a ace in the hole. If you need me, give me a call. If I'm able to do it, I'll come and give you a hand. And that's about it because you have only so much time and you want to do the best you can with what you decided to do. And you can spread yourself real thin real quick if you get too involved.

[00:26:09]

**Rangel** So overall, how would you say was your experience, your high school experience?

[00:26:16]

**Rios** It was, you know, there's some trauma in my high school that -- And then it just overall it was -- it was just really exciting. It was a lot of fun. Yeah. You know, I didn't get the best of grades, but in fact, I graduated here from City College in '76. A four-year graduate of high school and of City College. But natural resources -- But then I got married and had a family, so I needed to get a job that had health benefits. So, and that's another story altogether how I could do this. How public agencies up and down the State of California are starting to get out of the health and welfare and the pension business so that when you get a job, you'll have to, with your pay, decide where you want to put your money in for your own pension. And you'll have to pay for your own health. So, and what that does is, and that's from school districts, city, county, state, it relieves them of that long-term financial burden because they've as a school district has limited amount of money. But they have to set so much away for retiree health fund or for CalPERS and stuff of that sort. So eventually I see it moving away from -- And even the private is moving away from that too so that you're going to have to figure out on your own how to finance your pension and your health. Not only during the periods you work but into retirement. So, but that's just a little off the subject.

[00:28:12]

**Rangel** [Inaudible]. You were talking about the bus that your mom, I think, she had to sit in the back.

[00:28:22]

**Rios** Well, she sat in the front.

[00:28:23]

**Rangel** Okay, she sat --

[00:28:24]

**Rios** Yeah, Whites sat in the front, and Blacks sat in the back of the bus.

[00:28:27]

**Rangel** Mm-hmm. So when you heard the story, how did that make you feel?

[00:28:33]

**Rios** Well, no, it just made me aware of the social reality, you know, in that part of the country. Yeah. So pretty much everywhere else, you know, sit wherever you want. But even in Sacramento, there was, I hear stories about -- There was a pool, I forgot who ran the pool, but over on the west side of Willie Myatt [phonetic] Park that Mexicans just couldn't go swim [inaudible]. So my wife's godfather said that he was -- Max Baer was a professional boxer. And so, I went there to swim. They didn't let him swim. And Max goes, saw him, he goes, what's up boys? No, come on in. I'll pay for you guys. Come on in. So they swam, but as soon as Max Baer left, the guy said, okay, now you guys got to leave too. So if you knew somebody, you can get it in. But if you didn't know anybody -- So there was a time in Sacramento where the same things exist. The State of California, Black man couldn't marry a White woman and vice versa. You know what I mean? So they had those laws on the books. They had racial laws on the book. They had -- You know, it's a long history. And that's what you get and start reading about and start learning about. It's pretty darn -- You know, as you start, once you get involved, then you start learning about all kinds of different things. So it's pretty darn interesting.

[00:30:07]

**Rangel** Okay.