The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education Oral History Project

Margarita Colmenares

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Jaime Jiménez and David Órtiz-Alejandre
May 29, 2015

Transcription by Cyndy López and Technitype Transcripts

Órtiz-Alejandre Could you please state your full name?

[00:00:09]

Colmenares Margarita H. Colmenares. The *H* stands for Hortencia.

Jiménez Could you also please provide your birthdate and marital status?

[00:00:17]

Colmenares Sure. That's private. [laughs] It's July 20th, 1957, and I'm married to Manuel Guillot, a former VP from MALDEF.

Jiménez Do you have any children?

[00:00:29]

Colmenares Yes, a beautiful daughter, age fourteen. Her name is Katarina Guillot, and she's just as good at dancing as she is at math.

Jiménez Very good. So we're just going to talk about your early life, so if you could just state where you were born and raised.

[00:00:47]

Colmenares I was born in Sacramento. I grew up initially in Alkali Flats, which is the oldest historical neighborhood in Sacramento, and we initially grew up on E Street between Twelfth and Thirteenth. The exact address was 1315 E Street. Then we moved around the corner to Thirteenth Street, because my parents were able to purchase a home, 516 Thirteenth Street, so that was my home as I was growing up.

Jiménez So what did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:23]

Colmenares My father initially came to the U.S. as a part of the Bracero Program in the 1940s, and my mother, who was his sweetheart, came later. My parents were the inspiration for a lot of what we have done as children, as their children. They were always available to the neighborhood as counselors, as leaders, as trying to change whatever the situation was.

My dad, even when he started as a farmworker, felt that the conditions at the time were pretty lousy, so he and another fellow decided to organize the farmworkers. By the way, I think he started in Yuba City. He shared with me once a story that as he was coming into the country, that this is something he'll never forget, there was a train that used to go to Mexico and pick up workers who wanted to come to the U.S., and they would recruit workers to this train, but then as the train traveled throughout the U.S., it would drop off cars along the way. So it was totally random where you were going to end up, depending on what car you were in. He ended up in Yuba City initially.

But he says the memory that he remembers vividly is coming into the train station that there was a high school marching band greeting the workers and young

girls holding out purple flowers, and he contrasted that years later with the treatment that immigrants and still get today. He just thought it was such a turn, a 180-degree turn, from what he had initially experienced.

But all that to say that my parents definitely came with a vibe and an intent to make things better, and so we saw them constantly volunteering their time in the neighborhood, at church, and at school.

Jiménez How many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:03:23]

Colmenares So I'm the oldest of five, and the other ones include my sister Maria Luisa, Arturo, Luis, and Ruben.

Jiménez So please describe your experiences as a child and youth in your family and neighborhood.

[00:03:38]

Colmenares So I would describe my neighborhood as an ever-transitioning neighborhood, transitional neighborhood, because every summer we would have different kids to play with. It was the neighborhood where all of the migrant workers were coming to live in temporarily during that season, so we never had necessarily the same group of kids to play with from one year to another.

Our playground was the ally and the streets. In those days, you could do that safely. There wasn't any issues with that. I do remember that the park we used most frequent no longer exists. It's now all paved over by the Channel 3 parking lot. But there was a little park there. Then a few blocks away from that, there was another park on Sixteenth and C Street, which is still there and it is considered one of the

oldest parks in Sacramento. As a matter of fact, there's a soccer field named after my dad, Luis Colmenares, in that park, in the Neely Park, I think it's called. John Neely is the oldest park in Sacramento. So those were our hangouts, so to speak.

I have vivid memories of walking to school in the morning to Washington Elementary School, because that was my kindergarten, and I remember even more going to Roma Bakery across the street to get a doughnut if I was good. But it was a childhood filled with a lot of love, with the general struggles that you can imagine with a working-class family. I remember my father fixing everything that needed to be fixed, becoming a jack-of-all-trades, learning to lathe wood, to repair electrical, to put up wallpaper. I mean, from that standpoint, my dad was a genius. He just taught himself how to do things and did them. I don't recall ever having a repairman from the outside coming in.

My mother was also a go-getter. When she was in Mexico, she had dreams of becoming a doctor. She didn't quite achieve that, but she did become a teacher. She went back to school to get her bachelor's degree as an older student, and she did teach in Sacramento City Unified for many years.

Jiménez That's great. So were you ever a Fellow, Felito, or were you actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:06:20]

Colmenares I don't remember hearing about it being described that way, but I do feel I was part of contributing to that effort because of what our family did in the area of *folklórico*. I was also one of the early tutors, I think through the SEDA Program, where they hired high school students to tutor younger students in our

neighborhood. So as a teenager, I worked both flipping hamburgers at Sixteenth and C Street—it's now a taco place, but it used to be a hamburger place—and then across the street from that, I was a tutor in English and math for younger kids from the neighborhood, which was great because teenagers need opportunities to work, and I feel that those have altogether disappeared pretty much. They're good stepping-stones for your development as future leaders.

Jiménez Absolutely. So we're just going to go into it and say how did your participation in the Mexican American Education Project influence your thinking and involvement in the Chicano Movement?

[00:07:28]

Colmenares So when I was growing up, I want to say that I grew up very *mexicana* because my parents were from Oaxaca, Mexico. I don't think they really, at the earliest stages, understood what a Chicano was. I remember going back to Mexico for visits and my cousins there would call us—god, what is the word? Starts with a *P*. *Pochos*. That's what it was, *pochos*. So we always grew up with this feeling of neither belonging there nor fully belonging here.

But that said, my parents wanted to make sure that we appreciated our heritage and our culture, so at a very early age we were performing Mexican folk dancing at our elementary school, and we learned from, I believe, the earliest teachers in Sacramento. They were called the Menchaca sisters, Gloria and Linda, I believe, was the older sister. They also happened to be our babysitters, so I don't quite remember where we learned the dances from them, but we kind of learned everything that they knew. By that time, I want to say it was around 1965 when my sister and I

were performing at our school, whether it was St. Joseph's or St. Francis, that's what I don't remember, but we were in elementary school. My sister and I were performing as a couple because there were no boys, so I was the boy and she was the girl.

So that was the beginning of our involvement in Ballet Folklórico, which then led to—well, as I said earlier, since we kind of ran out of material with the Menchaca sisters, there was a decision made by my parents that I was going to go to Mexico to study with Amalia Hernández, who at that time was considered the guru of Ballet Folklórico, and also there was another academy that I was enrolled in in Mexico DF. I believe I was fifteen or sixteen when I went. I was young. I think about it today, that my parents actually let me go. I was staying with some aunts, but they were elderly aunts and they really didn't have time to take me from where they were living to where my classes were, and so at that young age I had to learn how to navigate Mexico on buses and the Metro.

I'm sharing this all with you because I do think that that experience of being away from home in a huge city, finding your way around town and dealing with risky business, which there were some incidents like that, that it helped to the formation of who I would become later and the—not toughness, but once you've walked streets of Mexico DF and my neighborhood, it's like there are no threats; there's only people.

Jiménez So how do you believe your participation in the Mexican American Education Project influenced your career or life's work?

[00:10:50]

Colmenares I believe that Ballet Folklórico, the skills of organizing a young person's group—let me back up for a moment, because I mentioned to you that we

started with the Menchaca sisters. Then I went off to Mexico City to gain more knowledge. I came back with about twenty-five new dances to add to our repertoire, and by then I had already met and was being influenced by another group of people who were leading walkouts at Norte del Rio in the early days of high school students wanting Chicano history to be taught at their schools. And I was very impressed with that, because up until then, I would consider myself to have been very quiet and not really speaking out, but I remember a thought passed through my head that went something like this: If they can lead walkouts, then I can organize a Mexican American youth organization at my school, so I founded the MAYA Club, which stood for Mexican American Youth Association, at Bishop Manogue, which was an all-girls Catholic school.

In the course of that, we wanted to really celebrate Cinco de Mayo, but the administration didn't want us to celebrate it. They really put all kinds of excuses of why we couldn't do it, everything from we were too young to organize it, to—anyway, it was a bunch of things. We eventually won them over because I had like 100 girls in the club the first year that we organized, and we used to meet at 7:00 in the morning, because I worked after school and that was the only time we could really meet. So it was an after-school that was before school. It was an after-school club. It was a rallying point, I think, for the girls who went to school, and between all of us, we convinced the administration that we needed to celebrate Cinco de Mayo.

So that was kind of the genesis of forming the teen group, although I believe that my sister and I approached another group that had started, Ballet de Sol, if we could join them, because we were ready to move on to the next level, and they turned

us down. From what I recall, they said they only wanted college students, I think was the deal. I think that's what it boiled down to. Maybe that happened before I went off to Mexico City. So it was kind of like we had no other place to learn more material, so the next step was to go to the *prima*, the source, right, and learn it yourself.

So then when I came back, we did start the teen group in preparation for the Cinco de Mayo performance at Bishop Manogue. As far as I can remember, that was our first performance other than my sister and I. Remember I said my sister and I used to perform in and about town. Actually, I always remember feeling—I like to say that we were at the leading edge of *folklórico* when it was embarrassing to do it, because kids, your classmates, they thought it was kind of funny that we would dress up in those costumes and present the material. I remember being made fun of and not getting support from the peers. So we were in *folklórico* before it was cool and before it was popular.

Jiménez So now we're going to get into your cultural, anthropological perspectives. So did your study of cultural anthropology or knowledge of cultural issues influence your involvement and participation in the Movimiento Chicano? If yes, please explain how this perspective influenced your understanding and participation.

[00:14:46]

Colmenares Let me add one more important piece to the other piece, because I just remembered that. So I mentioned to you that we started the high school group mainly because we were rejected by the college group and because we had exhausted all sources of material. So right about that time, Ballet de Sacramento

Infantil started also, and a couple of my brothers joined that group, my younger brothers, because it was a kids' group. We were the teenage group. But they shortly left because the director was requiring two things: a hundred-dollar fee to participate, and he wanted parents to sign a corporal punishment permission to discipline the kids if they got out of line. And those were the two main factors why my brothers ended up leaving the group, but then we realized that there was a void, a big void for children who couldn't afford to pay the hundred dollars.

So my sister and I, as teenagers, decided to make an announcement on the Spanish radio that we were going to start a dance group, and we told everybody show up at such-and-such place on such-and-such a date. And this is when Dr. Lopez comes into the picture, because he got the space for us. I don't remember right now Dr. Lopez's full name, but we believe that he was the director of Bilingual Programs at Sacramento City Unified School District.

So we made the announcement, not realizing that we were unleashing, like, this beast. And why do I say that? Because when we got to the school, there were *hundreds* of kids there, and it was just my sister and I. We looked at each other and we were like, "Oops!" We really didn't expect that kind of overwhelming response, but obviously we had touched a nerve, right, a need, a need.

So we quickly organized auditions, and we ended up, I believe, initially with a group of about sixty kids. Remember it's just two teenagers. One of our criteria I remember that we told parents on the spot was that the kids needed to keep up their GPA. We felt that education and learning was just as important as picking up these skills.

So that's how we started with Ballet Folklórico Missok [phonetic], which derives its name from a dance school in Mexico City. One of Amalia Hernández's great instructors was a gentleman named Missok, and he is from one of the indigenous tribes. He's a wonderful person who was my teacher both at Amalia Hernández's academy and at his own academy, so with his permission, we took his name Missok and turned it into Ballet Folklórico Missok.

During that time, going back to how it influenced me personally, when you co-found something as a teenager and you're the director, the teacher, the costume designer, choreographer, media, the business manager, all that stuff, it really helps to develop your—I didn't know it at the time, but your leadership skills. That's not why I did it, but that's what ended up happening, was it just tapped into that ability to do that.

So that's how my sister and I co-founded the Ballet Folklórico group, which then, in turn, some of the students from that group, one of them in particular, her name is Gloria Rodriguez, she went on to found or become the director of the Ballet Folklórico de Woodland. My sister totally dedicated her life to *folklórico* and she became a big influencer. She was the first director of the UC Davis *folklórico* group, way back when on your campus. She also went and influenced a whole group of groups in Solano County, Fairfield, Vacaville, I forget all of them, but there's several. Even later, she went on to become the leader in Danzantes Unidos, DUF, Danzantes Unidos Folklórico. No, I'm not saying that right. But anyways, DUF, and they host ANGF, the Asociacion Nacional de Grupos Folklóricos. They host annual

conferences that bring together all the *folklóristas* in the United States and in Mexico together. So she's still very active in that.

I, on the other hand, after I did *folklórico* here in Sacramento, when I went away to school in Palo Alto—I ended up going to Stanford—two things happened. I took over the Ballet Folklórico de Stanford with another student because the teacher that year left. She went to Chile or Peru, I can't remember which. So, again, as a college student I had an opportunity to lead a *folklórico* group at Stanford, the Ballet Folklórico de Stanford.

Later when I moved to El Paso, Texas, I joined the dance group there. When I was in Houston, I joined Ballet Azteca in Houston. When I went to Salt Lake City, I joined the group there that was of the Americas. When I went to Washington D.C, I helped to start another group called Ballet de Colores in Washington D.C. So my point is that the experience in Sacramento went far beyond Sacramento for both my sister and I. It went both to the national and international level. So what started in Sacramento as just two kids learning dances from the Menchaca sisters mushroomed into something much larger.

Jiménez So what are your earliest memories of events that attracted you the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:20:54]

Colmenares So I would have to say that the *folklórico* was always a venue to express your admiration and your pride, right, in your roots. I want to say that my first awareness of the Chicano Movement came through this group that was leading the walkouts at Norte de Rio because they wanted Chicano history. Remember I went

to a Catholic school, very sheltered, yes? But because we formed this *folklórico* group, all the girls were from Bishop Manogue and all the boys were from Norte de Rio, so that was kind of interesting. It was not a culture clash, but it was a bringing together of two different worlds into this unit, and that's where we got our initial education, if you will, on what the Chicano Movement was doing. I think they formed shortly after the killing of Ruben Salazar, the newspaperperson in Los Angeles, so they were influenced, too, by other history that was going on. But that was my first awareness of this larger movement that we were a part of.

Jiménez You mentioned earlier that your father didn't know what the word *Chicano* meant.

[00:22:18]

Colmenares And my mom. Both.

Jiménez So how did other Mexican Americans or Latinos react to the term *Chicano* or *Movimiento Chicano*?

[00:22:25]

Colmenares I think at first they didn't really understand it. They didn't really see themselves as part of that. I know that my mom now fully understands what it is. But I kind of remember at an early age that there was an incident that happened in my neighborhood where the police were harassing a young Chicano who lived on the corner. I forget what he did, or maybe it was someone that we knew. But my mom, actually, she just stepped into that harassment of the policeman to the young person and said, "Stop doing that." And then she said, "He's my son," which wasn't true, but that's what she told the police officer, and so he kind of finally left.

But this other person represented more of the Chicano Movement than we did, because, again, we went to Catholic schools, and I've got to say that that whole group was kind of untouched by the Chicano Movement. Our exposure was through the *folklórico* group, to the guys who came and helped us launch it.

Jiménez Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement?

[00:23:42]

Colmenares Well, again, only through—I mean, I thought that was like, "Oh, my god, they're actually closing down the school?" I mean, I couldn't get that through my—I was trying to wrap my brain around that, that there was actually a group of young leaders willing to get expelled. For a Catholic school girl, that was like the ultimate, you know, because we were goody-two-shoes over here. I just can't emphasize enough how much that influenced my personal coming out, breaking out, whatever you want to call it, to start doing the things that I did and embracing that. So, yeah, it was a key moment. And guess what. A lot that started here at Sac City. Once we went beyond our teen years, most of us came to school here at Sac City. So Sac City became kind of the next hub for the group as we got older.

Jiménez So did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:24:44]

Colmenares Yes. I had an opportunity later in life. Let me back up just a moment. So I was a dancer. Oh, I forgot, I also danced with another group in San Jose, one of the most famous *folklórico* groups in the U.S., Los Lupeños. They were probably the closest to a professional group in the States and anywhere else. That's

while I was going to Stanford. Then I continued with them after I left Stanford and was working as a professional engineer. So I continued to dance.

Right around that time, I was also getting involved with SHIP, which is the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers. You're kind of shaking your head, so I think you know a little bit about them. They're a national organization that promotes Latinos and women to think about careers in engineering and science. Long story short, I became the first female to lead that organization, back in 1989, I think. The group was exactly fifteen years old when I stepped in. So we were saying, "Oh, this is the quinceñera" for SHIP.

But in any case, near that time when I was at Stanford, there was a very interesting dichotomy. The students who were pursuing degrees in Chicano history or social sciences always looked with a jaded eye towards the engineers, because they thought what are we going to contribute to society? There was always a separation, I felt, on campus between the two groups. That was somewhat reconciled through the Chicano Center that was on campus, because we all held our meetings there. I used to try to impress my social colleagues that, in fact, SHIP did a lot. We actually spent a lot of our time tutoring young people in East Palo Alto. We tried to raise scholarship money for kids to go to college. So I always felt that we put our actions where our mouth was.

I was very pleased, maybe ten years later after I'd graduated from Stanford, I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the statewide MEChA conference at Stanford. I said, "This is cool." I remember sharing at that MEChA conference how when we as engineers always felt sidelined as part of the MEChA Movement, but I

was very pleased that there was at least some recognition that there was some contribution by our group to the Movimiento, because out of that group there have been a lot of leaders that have now grown up, and not all of them became engineers. Some of them went off and have done other things as well. But anyway, we all have the same goal in mind, right, was to create a more educated, informed, active community.

Jiménez So I know you mentioned this a lot, but what role do you believe that Chicanas played in the Movimiento?

[00:27:50]

Colmenares Well, obviously access to education I would say was one of the products, also the change in *what* was going to be taught, right? If it hadn't been for the Movimiento, I would not have taken a class in Chicano history in Stanford. When you start teaching that kind of course at that kind of institution, you've reached some sort of tipping point. But how many years did it take, right, to get to that point?

I also was in Teatro Chicano at Stanford, again kind of an unlikely place where you would expect to find that kind of history evolving. The fact that there was a Chicano history or Chicano Center on campus and it wasn't located, like, in the boonies of campus, it was located right smack next to the main Administrative Building, and I thought that was very symbolic as well. So how did it contribute? Repeat your question again.

Jiménez How do you believe Chicanas played in the Movimiento? Like what role did they play?

[00:28:58]

Colmenares Chicanas?

Jiménez Yeah.

[00:28:58]

Colmenares Oh, Chicanas. Okay. I misheard you. Well, let's see. When I think of Chicanas, Dolores Huerta is the first person that comes to mind, and I was on a panel with Dolores Huerta at UT Austin. The topic was Women in Leadership. Dolores and I had never actually personally met up to that point, even though my dad marched in the Delano march with Cesar Chavez. My dad had driving skills, so he drove the first-aid bus in that march.

So I had always had a connection with the farmworkers, but had never really met a leader like Dolores, and we were on this panel together, Women in Leadership at UT Austin in the nineties. And after we were done, she turned to me and she said, "You know, I never really appreciated all the stuff that engineers do or can do." Like look at our pesticides. The pesticides, the science part of it that we were being exposed to in the fields.

Later on, too, as an engineer, I met Luis Valdez. He was a speaker at one of our conferences, and he said to the group, "Do you know what my favorite class was at school?"

We're like, "No. What?"

He said, "Physics."

We were all like, "Physics?"

He goes, "Yeah, the angles, when you're shooting with the camera." That came in very handy for him.

So when I meet leaders like that, that find a connection back to the engineering and science part of it, I find it personally satisfying, because we are all connected, and the bottom line is we need leaders in every single field if we're going to really progress as a community.

But some of the other Chicanas or people that identified themselves as Chicanas, I would have to say that probably Gloria Melina in L.A., who became a supervisor, we never really had a discussion about this, but I would consider her one of the early Chicana leaders. There was another woman that I met in New Mexico who was a poetress, and she used to write a lot about the Chicana Movement. Those are the ones that immediately come to mind.

Jiménez So we're going to talk back about the organizations that you were part of. We just wanted to know what was the significance that the organizations or activities that were created played in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:31:32]

Colmenares Let's start with Washington Neighborhood Center, because a lot of the, I felt, Movimiento that happened in my neighborhood, everybody was there. The La Raza Galleria was half a block away from where I lived. The Washington Neighborhood was three blocks away. Our dance practices were either at Washington Neighborhood Center, maybe the school, but they were all kind of in the neighborhood.

The neighborhood, as I said earlier, was always a working-class immigrants/Chicano/Latino neighborhood. So being in that space or that place, I think, helped to nurture the birthing of these groups. The fact that Washington

Neighborhood served as the hub for employing teenagers, and I want to go back to that for a minute, because if there was a way to reintroduce that idea that our teens need meaningful employment, and if you could tie it back to whatever else needs to be done in the Movement, I think that would be a good combination of resources, because I felt that being a tutor, helping our younger Latinos, Chicanos come up, get better at school was a big contribution. Just being a tutor, I felt was important.

But I do remember Washington Neighborhood being the hub for writing, making posters. If there was a march or something that was going to happen, that's the place where everyone got together as a community, got ready for whatever it was we were doing.

My parents were very active in a *consul* [phonetic]. I don't remember the exact name of it, but I do believe that they used to meet at Washington Neighborhood as well.

When I was at Zapata, again jumping forward, we had a big mural of Zapata. Actually, the place I lived in was called Zapata, Casa Zapata. So, again, I have to laugh sometimes when I think about Stanford and all the stuff that was going on, but I thought it was pretty cool. I've got to say that I got more involved in the Chicano Movement when I was at Stanford because the venues were there. They were regularly accessible to me.

Jiménez So did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, cultural, political lines?

[00:34:07]

Colmenares Absolutely. Again, later on, I learned about who Ruben Salazar was. Of course I knew about Cesar Chavez. But to know that there were people out there that were willing to risk their life for what they believed in had a great influence, and even these high school students who were willing to get expelled, to me it was like, "Jeez, if they're willing to do that, then certainly I can do something." So there was definitely a trickle-down approach.

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

[00:34:41]

Colmenares I think all my brothers and sisters ended up getting involved. My mom and dad were very instrumental to the *folklórico* group that we performed. My dad built a portable stage for us and he used to transport it in the car. My mother would help with the costumes. It was defiantly a family affair, that whole *folklórico* effort, and maybe even at the beginning we weren't necessarily considered part of the Chicano Movement, but we were very much a part of it because we performed at many of the activities, Southside Park. We were on Channel 13 when Armando Botello was the interviewer, and there's actually footage. If you guys wanted to look for early footage of Ballet Folklórico, we would have to track down Armando Botello and find out what channel he was with. This was before Univision was here in town. Because we performed several times at the studio, I remember. And I remember performing at senior centers, senior housing centers, schools.

Oh, my sister reminded me that we used to have to lie about getting off at school. We used to say, "Oh, yeah, we're going to the dentist," when really we were

going to go give a performance. And Cinco de Mayo was, like, our busiest time, that and Dieciséis de Septiembre, and whoever else wanted to invite us. [laughter]

Jiménez Please describe some of the impacts that your involvement with the Movimiento Chicano had on your career.

[00:36:13]

Colmenares So, again, because I was very aware, I've always have been appreciative of my heritage as a Mexicana, as a Chicana. Every time I moved—and I moved like nine different times, okay, over my lifetime, maybe more, but I always sought out the cultural, the heritage of whoever was there, and even if I was just visiting. Like say, for example, I was going to San Antonio. I would look for the Chicano, Latino Cultural Center. So I always tried to touch base with those centers, whatever city I was working in.

So I always got involved locally as soon as the plane landed. I didn't wait like until I could figure out like, "Okay, what am I going to do after I find a house?" As soon as I found a place to live, my next step was getting involved in that local community. So it led to my involvement in Southwest voter registration in the early days in Texas when Willy Velasquez was still alive. I did voter registration in Texas at supermarkets, as well as in L.A., so it led to my political involvement, if you will, at a grassroots level when I decided that I was seeking out this cultural element as I moved around from city to city.

Jiménez Looking back at your experiences in the Movimiento Chicano, are there any issues that you think were left unresolved?

[00:37:45]

Colmenares Not unresolved, but I kind of hinted at how there was a separation at the beginning of the students who were studying the sciences and the ones who were studying the social sciences. I'd like to know if it's resolved, actually. Is everyone sort of working together now, do you think?

Jiménez I'm not sure about that, actually. I'd say yes, because everybody has kind of the same idea now.

[00:38:11]

Colmenares Yeah, but there probably maybe should be more effort to bring everybody together on campus under a bigger umbrella, because you can get more done. The more you understand about each other and, quite frankly, the whole idea, I believe, of going to college is because you're going to assume some position of leadership wherever you land. So our leaders should know each other across all disciplines, because there is synergy that can come out of that. So, to me, that would be maybe a recommendation that even today, wherever the Movement is now, we need to make sure to be more inclusive and not to make groups feel like they're kind of on the edges, but rather have meaningful contributions.

Jiménez So could you please describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived?

[00:39:07]

Colmenares Impacted here in Sacramento? Well, my daughter, who I mentioned to you is fourteen, she's participated in a *folklórico* and in theatre related to Chicano Latino Movement, but she had to go to San Jose to do that, because in Sacramento there really isn't a Teatro Movement for kids. So she for the past couple

of summers has gone to Opera Cultura, Cultura Opera, I can't remember now, but they did *La Llorona*, they did *Bless Me, Ultima*, and they've done different vignettes. They also did a Chicano version of *West Side Story*. In any case, their whole goal over there was to reach out to Chicano students in San Jose and to bring them into theatre and the arts. So because she has cousins over there, she was able to join.

She also attended a summer program at Stanford that was for Chicano/Latino students who were interested in math and science, and it was a pilot program at Stanford for middle-school students. So she's also growing up with an awareness of who she is and what her heritage is.

Jiménez Many Movimiento Chicano activists have passed on, so identify an individual or individuals that you feel had an impact on the Movimiento Chicano and please explain their significance.

[00:40:36]

Colmenares So that would be Ralph Torres. He is the young man that I mentioned—well, he was young at the time when I had met him—who was involved in leading the walkouts at El Norte de Rio because they wanted more Chicano-centric courses being taught there. Later on, the same person also introduced me to engineering. It turned out that this big Chicano leader went into engineering, and he introduced me to the field of engineering, and I eventually switched my major over to engineering. He grew up to become the second person in charge of the State Water Project. The State Water Project is what delivers water from Northern California to Southern California, the canal pumping, the dams, that whole system. But while he was at Department of Water Resources, I believe that today a lot more

Latino/Chicanos work there because of his visibility and some of the practices that he put in place.

Jiménez One final question. What do you see as current or future challenges of the Chicano Movement on the Chicano community?

[00:42:00]

Colmenares The Chicano community. I don't feel like we're doing enough politically. I feel like other communities, like the African American community, are eating our lunch, so to speak, because with the election of President Obama, I saw two things happen. One was a huge introduction of new African American leaders into very visible positions, whether it was in the cabinet, attorney general. The head of the L.A. Metro now is African American. It's just endless, Tavis Smiley on TV, in the media. And I do not see any Chicanos or Latinos in similar positions. It's like we are still invisible. Even our elected representatives to Congress, when there's an issue being debated or what have you, I don't necessarily see them as spokespersons on CNN or MSNBC or even the talk shows if you're into the political stuff, right? Even this guy here locally who does the talk show, whose name I don't remember but who is also African American.

In other words, I feel that Obama opened the gates to a whole new cadre of African American leaders that are taking positions in the larger society. At the same time, though, he unleashed a lot of hatred and racism against the common Black man, the everyday person. I'm talking about the stuff that we heard on the tapes at Ferguson, the disrespect that was expressed for both the president and other races. I feel that it unleashed all that racism that has been caught up, that has been kind of like

talked about privately is now being talked about publicly. But again, I don't see a similar Chicano or Latino leader helping for the Latino community to become more visible and more vocal in what needs to be done.

Jiménez Do you see yourself as staying involved in meeting these changes?

[00:44:34]

Colmenares Oh, yeah, absolutely. My husband, I should mention him briefly. His name is Manuel Guillot. He's a former vice president from MALDEF, the only nonlawyer that worked there. He was the former chief of staff to the first Latino elected to the State Senate in Illinois. He grew up in Chicago in the same neighborhoods that Obama, the South Side of Chicago. He is getting a doctorate now in education.

He was born in Chicago, but he left, he went back to Guatemala as a baby, as an infant, then came back to the States when he was in his teens. He got very involved politically, you might say. He was also involved in an effort to increase access for Chicanos and Latinos in Illinois before it was popular, because the way they used to keep Chicanos and Latinos out of universities was they would set very high standards, but then they wouldn't do anything to help you get to those standards. So he helped to collect the initial data that brought it to the legislature's attention.

So he's an example, too, of someone else that would be a leader in the Movement, or what have you, that was influential. Let me finish by saying this. His doctorate work is now taking him to kind of a new area that has to do with the global perspective in education. And what do I mean by that? Some of us have had the

opportunity to leave the U.S. and get exposed to other cultures and other ways of doing things, and it can change your life when you've left your immediate surroundings to experience other ways of doing or accomplishing things, because then it helps to feed your ideas on what can be done here.

Oh, I have to mention this other outstanding Chicana/Latina. Her name is María Antonietta Berriozábal. She's from San Antonio, Texas, and she was one of my early mentors. She ran for mayor of San Antonio, but with a name like María Antonietta Berriozábal, can you imagine that on a placard? Her slogan was "María for Mayor." She didn't win, but I believe that she, again, opened up a pathway for more Latinas and Chicanos to come down the road. That is where Julian [Castro] and—I forget the brother's name [Joaquaín Castro], but now they're congresspeople. One is a congressman and one is a cabinet secretary in Washington D.C., the Castro brothers. So she was also, I feel, a very influential Chicana. She was one of the few people that exercised the idea of mentoring others.

That's the other, I guess, criticism that I have about our community, that very few of our leaders actually take time to go back and mentor protégés or have people lined up to fill in their shoes when they're gone. So I think we could do a better job at that, of leadership development trickle-down all the way, and people just opening up doors for others, our networks. I don't feel we do enough of that either.

Jiménez That was the end of our questions. Is there anything else you want to elaborate on?

[00:48:26]

Colmenares Well, let's see.

Jiménez Any final thoughts?

[00:48:31]

Colmenares I would like to see our community be more visible in positions of leadership everywhere, all medias, university heads, newspapers, talk shows, cultural centers, school districts, but to be able to do it knowing that you have the community's back, or the back has your community, I meant, the other way around, that you have support, so that if you say something that's unpopular, that others will come to your aid, rather than—you know, here in Sacramento, for example, we have a couple of Latino board members at Sacramento City Unified School District, but even so, there's only six administrators out of 142 that work at the district center that are Latino, Hispanic, or have a Spanish-sounding last name. You know, that is unacceptable. The superintendent is Latino/Chicano, but he's already been here almost a year, and it doesn't seem like he's really paid attention to that detail.

I was at a forum just the day before yesterday hosted by the labor union here in Sacramento, the SEIU, and they had three other Latino superintendents there, and this issue did come up because one of them said, "Unless the kids in the classroom see someone like themselves at the front of the classrooms, you send messages many different ways." So then extrapolate that, yeah, not just the teachers, but also the principal and then the person who's in charge of the principals. It kind of goes all the way up.

Our kids need to see people of color in those positions, as well as I've always hoped and wished that somehow we can make education more accessible, more affordable, because I feel we've gone in a totally opposite direction of what the intent

was. I went to a documentary that the first Governor Brown, his niece put together, and I didn't know that it was that Governor Brown that introduced this concept or this idea of free university education. I mean, that was the original goal. Other countries have it. Why can't we? It's gone totally the opposite direction. So if we were all to work on something together, I would suggest that.

Jiménez I think that concludes the interview.

[00:51:17]

Colmenares Thank you.

[End of interview]