

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Aurelio Ramón Díaz

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Jesús G. Rodríguez
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Transcription by Gizel Reyes and Technitype Transcripts

Rodríguez Please state your full name.

[00:00:10]

Díaz Aurelio Ramón Díaz.

Rodríguez Can you please provide your birthdate?

[00:00:16]

Díaz May 7th, 1957.

Rodríguez What is your marital status?

[00:00:25]

Díaz Divorced for five years now.

Rodríguez Do you have any children?

[00:00:30]

Díaz Two girls.

Rodríguez Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:36]

Díaz Here in Sacramento, California.

Rodríguez What did your parents do for a living?

[00:00:46]

Díaz First of all, my mother was a homemaker. She had a little background as a cannery worker in her early years. She was involved in PTA. And my father retired as a carman from Southern Pacific Railroad here in Sacramento yard. He worked there for thirty-eight years.

Rodríguez How was your experience with the railroad? I know it was a very important part of history for Sacramento.

[00:01:23]

Díaz How was the—

Rodríguez Like being the child of a worker of a railroad.

[00:01:29]

Díaz He provided at least a home, and we had fun riding on the train for free. That was a plus. And that's basically it.

Rodríguez How many brothers and sisters did you have or do you have?

[00:01:53]

Díaz I have three sisters and four brothers.

Rodríguez Can you please describe your experiences as a child and youth?

[00:02:05]

Díaz Sure. As a child and youth, I went to Washington Elementary, which is in downtown Sacramento, from first to sixth grade. Seventh to ninth grade, I went to Sutter Junior High, and from tenth to twelfth grade I went to Sacramento Senior High. During my fifth and sixth grade, I was exposed to the "Viva Kennedy!" campaign

office. It was a place to hang out and help out. It was the first Anglo volunteer influence for me, being my first experience with Anglos that were a part of the campaign for “Viva Kennedy!” in their office here in Sacramento. I have a lot to elaborate on that. It was a big brother philosophy that I experienced from them, a big brother, big sister philosophy. And I have two years of Chicanito Science Project with Mr. Freeze [phonetic] at Sutter Junior High.

Rodríguez Can you expand on the Chicanitos Project?

[00:04:09]

Díaz It was an after-school program that invited Chicanos and *mexicanos* into the science lab class to explore more into science and hopefully motivate and gear Chicanitos into a science career. Also there were university, college Anglo mentors that influenced us too. It was students from Sac State.

Also during that year at Sutter Junior High, we had Dr. Serafina Creer [phonetic] and Arturo Aviña, Tanis Ybarra. Also had a after-school workshop that reached out to us as mentors from Sac State University, and Sacramento High experience with Chicano Studies, and those were titled —

Rodríguez You guys had the opportunity to study—

[00:05:45]

Díaz Yes, there was Chicano Studies at Sacramento High School, Senior High.

Rodríguez That’s nice.

[00:05:52]

Díaz It was. First class was Intro Chicano Studies, La Raza de Aztlán, second class was Chicano Literature, third class or third semester was Advanced Chicano Literature, and then number four was Ethnic Art Studies. It was basically a rap session. There was no books to read, but it was given by Dave and Javier Tapolla [phonetic]. Those were the teachers. Basically it was a rap session.

Mayan Aztec History, Mexican Political Science, Mexican Customs and Culture, Mexican Religion, Curandero and Music Folklore, U.S. Occupation and Conquest of the Southwest, Treaty of Guadalupe. These are the materials that was covered with us, the Mexican Deportation Era, the Pachuco Era, the Chicano Movement Era, Martin Luther King and Civil Rights, Cesar Chavez and the Huelga Crusade, Chicano Leaders and Brown Beret on La Causa, Aztlán Theory and its Nation, La Causa Crusade, Malcolm X and Black Leadership, Huey Newton and the Black Panther Movement, University War Protests, Student Uproar, Peace Movement, Free Speech and Anti-Vietnam, Peace Movement. That's where the title comes in for Peace Movement, Free Speech and Anti-Vietnam Era, and, of course, Chicano War Moratorium. That's what covers very much what was offered at Sacramento Senior High. Continue, please.

Rodríguez Were you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Education Program?

[00:08:10]

Díaz No. Can we backtrack on number two—

Rodríguez Yes.

[00:08:19]

Díaz —describing my experiences as a child and youth. I just want to contribute also there was a Washington Teen Center involving Cub Scouts summer program, Cub Scout and Boy Scout summer programs like day camp and three-day camps. I was into basketball. They had basketball there, pool table, ping-pong. There was a Parks and Recreation that Sacramento offered here at Muir Park, McKinney Park and the school grounds. The sports were, I already mentioned, were basketball, baseball, football, and swimming. Then there was after-school homework programs. I had a tutor. I was tutored in math at the elementary level. So my experience as a child and youth.

Okay, in my family, my mother south-of-the-border influence, there was the annual train trips to Ciudad Juarez and the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, trips to Delicias five hours south of the border and to a small ranch town in La Cruz, Chihuahua. My mother took clothes to sell to help out the poor and provided inexpensive clothing for the poor.

All these train trips were possible by free train pass, one of the benefits my father had working with the railroad. My father, he was a man of very few words. He was with the Southern Pacific Railroad for thirty-eight years, and after retirement, he took us to Mexico to meet Díaz Ordaz—he was a second cousin or first cousin of my dad, presidente Díaz Ordaz—during the late 1960s. Saw bits and pieces of Aztec archeology. I think that basically covered the early life, my early life.

Rodríguez Did your neighborhood influence you, or any experiences as a child?

[00:11:36]

Díaz Let me see. I have that written down. Basically, demographically, it was a neighborhood of cannery workers and railroad workers where the *mexicanos* came from, and there was the lower middle class and some middle-class friends and families in the neighborhood. Like 12th Street was the very lower. It demographically divided also from 12th Street, 16th Street and the tracks on 19th Street across 20th Street. Across 20th Street, after the tracks, it was the upper middle-class *mexicanos* that settled in that neighborhood. That's basically it.

Rodríguez What are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:13:07]

Díaz The first march and protest was with United Farm Workers and Cesar Chavez, and probably was in Modesto. I don't remember where it was because it happened when I was in seventh grade. Between the year of '69 and '70, my oldest sister, Maria, took us to this UFW protest and march.

The Peace Movement, Brown Berets, the Cinco de Mayo show during my eighth and ninth grade I went to Sac High. I was at Sutter Junior High and I went to Sac High to go see that Cinco de Mayo. It was a talent show that the students at Sac High did for Cinco de Mayo. The Brown Berets were there at that time, and when I entered in '70, the Brown Berets dismantled, but I was able to get that experience in junior high by going to their Cinco de Mayo event. There was Royal Chicano poetry, arts, and events.

Rodríguez Were you a part of the Royal Chicano?

[00:14:49]

Díaz We just got to hang out at their studio and help out at whatever event they had, so we got to experience with them and their events.

Reframe that. Can you ask me that question again?

Rodríguez Were you part of the Royal?

[00:15:14]

Díaz Oh, was I part of it? Not as an initiated member, but as a follower, I guess you could say.

Rodríguez So you would still participate in some way, but you were not directly a member?

[00:15:37]

Díaz Exactly. Yes, exactly. Let me just continue to elaborate on that very same question, the very earliest. Between '76 and '77, it was United Farm Workers, Yes on 14 Initiative, guarantee free election for farm workers. Back then, I was a MEChA member here at Sac City, and a UFW representative from Delano came here to our MEChA, and we did some human billboarding in East Sacramento for Yes on 14. So that was our contact with United Farm Workers, them coming to us and we worked with them on Yes on 14. I would say *Progreso* media, the program *Progreso*.

Rodríguez What was *Progreso* media? Can you expand on that?

[00:16:54]

Díaz It was *mexicano/Chicano* media coverage in all aspects in the community. I vaguely remember. You probably have somebody that's going to come in and can speak about that television network, that can elaborate very well on that.

Of course, there was Sac High Chicano Studies, MEChA involvement.

Rodríguez Was there MEChA involvement in your high school, and then when you came over to the community college was there also a MEChA here established?

[00:17:49]

Díaz During my high school years, it was MAYA Club, more of a social club than a progressive club. MAYA, Mexican American Youth Association, that's what MAYA meant.

And then MEChA, I didn't get involved with MEChA until I started coming here to Sac City between '75 and '77, so I attended MEChA one semester only at Sacramento State. And then when I was there at Sacramento State, I took that course, Chicanitos Science Project. That was part of my background and now it was my turn to contribute to Chicanitos Science Project as a student and as a mentor. I only did one semester at Sac State, then I did a few semesters at UT El Paso, and UT El Paso also had MEChA there, so I was involved with MEChA at UT El Paso. So I got to experience a border-town community or city right across from Ciudad Juarez.

Rodríguez Was it a different experience?

[00:19:39]

Díaz Totally.

Rodríguez We're talking about two different places.

[00:19:45]

Díaz Yes, yes. Very enrichment experience. First of all, for me, I was living in Ciudad Juarez, so I learned Spanish and I picked up on the culture, many aspects of the culture. *Mechistas* in El Paso, a very friendly town, it was real easy to get along with those *mechistas* that were El Paso natives, also a few from the state of

Chihuahua. There were semi-progressive and then very progressive individuals, but it was also Chicano philosophy that had the same philosophy or worked in the same network of what I experienced here in Northern California.

Rodríguez So was it was still intertwined, but your experience was a little bit more—it was different.

[00:21:19]

Díaz Yes, different with individual border-town atmosphere, culturalistically, pretty much the same philosophy too. I remember some individuals that were into socialism.

Rodríguez Anything you would like to add?

[00:22:02]

Díaz Let me see.

Rodríguez Any other events that attracted you?

[00:22:09]

Díaz Are we on number six or number seven now? Are you still in earliest memories of the Chicano Movement?

Rodríguez Yes.

[00:22:17]

Díaz I'll probably add on that later. Okay. No, I can add to that. I can probably contribute to the other questions that are in upcoming questions.

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

[00:22:43]

Díaz Oh, that question I wasn't ready for. Ask me that question again.

Rodríguez It says how did the Mexican or Mexican Americans, Latinos react to the term *Chicano* or *Movimiento Chicano*? So how was the reaction? It was a thing that was just developing.

[00:23:07]

Díaz For my parents, the word *Chicano* wasn't very accepted. It was like a total denial of your indigenous background where if you had Indian blood, it was better to be blond and blue-eyed than to be brown and brown hair, so their denial even for indigenous background was denied with that, with them. But only on my mother side did she acknowledge that her father had that Indian blood, but with my father, the Indian blood didn't exist within our family tree.

So the word *Chicano*, they finally adapted to *Chicano* because they saw some education, higher education, so they started accepting that the Chicano influence was positive. So with *mexicanos*, I remember my elementary years, *mexicano* is *mexicano*, but to be Chicano or Mexican American, I remember *puro mexicano*, it was in the blood, it was part of them. Not until, I would say, into junior high or high school did they start also accepting *Chicano*. Now, for me being exposed to that word *Chicano*, the title was first *Chicano mexicano*, it just wasn't *Chicano* by itself. So *mexicano* was in there with for *mexicanismo*, for grassroots back to Mexico.

So, like, with my older family, my older brother and sister, they were ideology and politically different. Any Chicano material, it was not to be discussed with them because it was sensitive material that they didn't accept because they were Mexican, they were from Mexico, they were born in Mexico, but when they became anglicized

or—what’s that other word? For them to be blond was a higher status, so they married blonds. So within my family, we’re now interracially mixed with Anglo, French, Indian, and Spanish. So it was a very hot topic not to be discussed with the elder brothers and sister, which we were about twenty years apart and ten years apart. So that’s within the family.

Rodríguez What was their reaction to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:27:31]

Díaz What was their reaction? With open arms, I would say. We had Cinco de Mayo event here, my parents came. Back then, I was president. No, I became president afterwards. They came. And one of my older sisters was very much into the Chicano Movement that influenced us, Maria, which took us to my first UFW Cesar Chavez march in Modesto. So my family was okay.

I noticed with the Anglos it was accepted too. I remember McKinney Park, McKinney Pool when I was on the dive team, when I was experience with these Anglo lifeguards. “You Chicano hippie.” Because we had long hair. They identified that hippie era with that, at the same time accepting the word *Chicano*. So with the Anglos young, it was okay, younger people, while we were teenagers. They were older than us. But for outside influence, that was part of my experience.

Rodríguez So at the time, had you heard about the Civil Rights Movement?

[00:29:22]

Díaz Yes, Chicano Studies, Chicano Studies. We were spoken to about the civil rights. Civil rights first come with Martin Luther King and civil rights with Cesar Chavez.

Rodríguez So you were familiar with the Movement.

[00:29:47]

Díaz Yes, we were.

Rodríguez So now we're going to move on to question number seven. So did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:30:10]

Díaz That first part, number-one key word for change in my personality is conscientious and career oriented. That follows with I became philosophical, culturalistic, progressive, enrichment ethnic identity, ideologist, self-determination, biculturalistic. I think that pretty much covers from that conscientious personality.

Rodríguez And what role do you believe that Chicanas paved in the Movimiento?

[00:31:30]

Díaz *Hermanisma*, Chicana Power, Women Liberation, and part of the ERA.

Rodríguez What's the ERA?

[00:31:52]

Díaz Equal Rights Amendment.

Rodríguez So you didn't see a difference between the Chicano Movimiento having included the Chicanas? Do you think overall it was pretty equal?

[00:32:13]

Díaz Yes. Whatever our Chicana sisters has to contribute, great.

Rodríguez So what did you personally initiate or help initiate in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:32:40]

Díaz Personal initiative. I would say unionism and volunteerism, and part of that was, like, petitioning, leafleting, passing out leaflets, phone banking, petitioning.

Rodríguez What's phone banking?

[00:33:22]

Díaz Phone banking, pick up a phone, call a person to vote for this person or to speak and clarify or to get the vote from them on an initiative, why should they support or not support. So that's the first-part question. I mean, that's quite a bit. I mean, that's what I had for that one question.

Rodríguez So what were some of the other organizations you were involved in?

[00:34:10]

Díaz Of course, there was MEChA, Chicano Consortium.

Rodríguez What was that about?

[00:34:31]

Díaz It varied. On the top of my mind, I really couldn't elaborate, but it was anything that was affecting the Chicano and the community. SEIU, immigration reforms, ACT. With the Catholics, it's ACT. PICO immigration reform. LACLA Sacramento. UFW. The last UFW initiative I helped out with, with the petitioning or leafleting, was SB Bill 104. I joined LACLA for social justice protest for Luis Gutierrez of Yolo County, a young *mexicano* who was shot by anti-gang task force. Ebaristo Ramirez, he was killed by his cellmate at the county sheriff's department here in Sacramento.

There's my volunteerism for security, also Landeros Production, the Tejano Conjunto with Ramona Landeros, volunteered, I volunteered there. Teatro Espejo with Manuel Pickett. The annual Mechica New Year in San Jose, volunteered there. With my local church, La Guadalupe, I help out with security also in their processions, their annual processions, from one to two different processions a year. Festival de la Familia, volunteer with them. Whatever organization has asked me to help out, whether being precinct walking, phone banking, protesting, leafleting, passing out leaflets, I'm there.

Rodríguez You are there to support.

[00:38:32]

Díaz Yes.

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

[00:38:58]

Díaz With my previous marriage, married to a *mexicana* from Ciudad Juarez, had two girls. My relationship was vital and positive impact. My girls graduated from Hiram Johnson West, one of the smartest schools here in Sacramento. My oldest daughter graduated from American River College and then she attended Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, majoring in architecture with Ethnic Studies as a minor. She became a positive youth mentor with the university there in San Luis Obispo, Cal Poly, and with the community and in the central coast area. She's now a *mechica* performance dancer, the Aztec dancers, so she's involved in that, with the *mechistas*.

My second daughter graduated from here, Sacramento City College. She graduated in 2011, if I have my year right, from Sacramento State with a B.A. and then continued her education at CSUS for her master's degree, and majored in education. She's today a positive youth mentor. She's worked at elementary schools with ELA, English Language Academy, working with children that's—

Rodríguez English language learners?

[00:41:24]

Díaz Yes. She works now at La Familia Counseling Center as a tenured. They both speak Spanish. They're following my steps that Chicano philosophy enrichment guided me to or basically just enrichment—

Rodríguez Influence?

[00:41:56]

Díaz Influence right. They're both continuing with their Mexican identity and heritage, because their mother is from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and they both are bilingual. My oldest daughter, her first language was Spanish, so English became the second language for her. Then my youngest daughter, her first language was English and her second language was Spanish. And they speak much better Spanish than I do. And that's basically it.

How did these changes impact my personal relationship with significant others? My involvement with community outreach, with local businesses and resources, and I shared my reports with them, so leafletting I did with these local businesses and resources. They're just glad for me to come back to their businesses and share a report with them. I have that material here also. Okay, that's basically it.

Rodríguez So describe how Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived.

[00:43:44]

Díaz I wasn't very much able to elaborate on that very question.

Rodríguez Well, you kind of mentioned that already, how it was here in Sacramento you didn't have the ability as having the—were involved with all these organizations. So it's just from your viewpoint, how did how did the Movimiento Chicano impact Sacramento as a whole?

[00:44:29]

Díaz Culturalistically, philosophically, provided Chicano material with books, because there was La Raza Bookstore, so there was an outreach. There was a bookstore, the very first bookstore with Chicano material, so I'd say La Raza Bookstore provided material for the community and higher education students. La Familia Counseling Center helps out. So I would say helping out the community life, they are very contributing. And then there's LACLA for unionism and higher-wage payment for middle-class workers or open up for the middle class. That's basically it for that question.

Rodríguez So is there anything else you would like to add?

[00:46:10]

Díaz Oh, wait. Well, how about we follow up on number eleven?

Rodríguez Okay.

[00:46:16]

Díaz Future challenges for the Chicano community. What do I see as current or future challenges for the Chicano community? Now I'll elaborate on the last question. Is that okay with you?

Rodríguez Sure.

Díaz So what I have there, let me see on that one. What do I see as a current or future challenge for the Chicano community? Returning Chicano Ethnic Studies to high schools and revise or update material for youth identity and enrichment, so that would be like a long-term challenge, and the second with short-term challenge is continue pressure for change in the Obama administration on immigration reform. Just those two.

Did you did you have a last question?

Rodríguez No, you basically answered it through your whole interview.

[00:47:46]

Díaz Yes, yes, I probably have. Let me see what else I've got to contribute on that one there. I will mention SB Bill 104 with the UFW. That happened in summer of 2011, the Fair Treatment of Farm Workers Act. I think I already mentioned that. I helped out petitioning and helped out with their march and demonstration here in Sacramento.

[End of interview]