

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Luz María Gama

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Ana Morales and Ruby Rodríguez
May 20, 2015

Transcription by Dominique Duque and Technitype Transcripts

Q Please state your full name.

[00:00:09]

Gama Luz Maria Gama. Also Maria de la Luz Gama.

Q Please provide your birthdate.

[00:00:17]

Gama *Veintinueve de noviembre*, 1950.

Q Please provide your marital status.

[00:00:26]

Gama I'm divorced.

Q Do you have children? If yes, how many do you have?

[00:00:30]

Gama Happily divorced. I have two children, two daughters, thirty-seven and thirty-six, something like that. When kids are that age, sometimes they keep their age to themselves, so I have to figure out their age nowadays. Carrie-Anne is the oldest, and Gloria is the youngest.

Q Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:56]

Gama I was born in Teocuitatlán de Corona, Jalisco, Mexico, and I was raised in Walnut, California.

Q What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:07]

Gama Can I tell you how I got here?

Q Sure.

[00:01:09]

Gama My mother is a single mom and wasn't happy in the town, so my uncle, Jesus Gama, and she and I, there wasn't any money, but there was a need and a want to be in the States, so they jumped a cargo train with me and brought me all the way up to Mexicali. We were there a while, then Tijuana a while, working hard. My mom met and married someone in Tijuana, California, and that's how we ended up in Sacramento, California.

Q Thank you. So what did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:53]

Gama My mom worked in Mexico and here. She was a waitress. She worked in the canneries. Sacramento then had many canneries. She worked at Frozen Fruit, Del Monte, Heinz, and she would run the seasons and work at all of them in one season. My mom was an interesting woman, because back in the beginning, only the men were allowed to work in the warehouses, and the first year that they actually opened up the warehouse to women, she was among the first to sign up. They had to have

special training to be able to work there, because they had to run machinery and everything. So I'm really impressed and proud of that.

When they closed down the canneries, she just walked in—my mom does not speak fluent English, does not drive, so she walked into a school where I was working and got a job as a bus attendant, and then she walked into a school and became a cafeteria assistant and was there a long time. So she'd just walk in and get jobs, because she believes in working. She would have several jobs at one time. She was a hardworking person. So that's what she did.

When she retired, was almost retiring, she watched my children, she was my childcare person, and she did that for a long, long time. She did that till she got ill, like maybe five years ago or so, and we didn't allow her to watch the great-grandchildren anymore, because she was watching them. Doesn't know how to say no. She loves to help, a very energetic, happy person.

My stepfather, he worked in the cannery, the same cannery that she worked in, but she was in the warehouse, so he had work all year. When they closed the cannery, he went to work in Modesto. I believe that's where the cannery moved to. So he worked there till he retired. So that was their jobs.

Q How many brothers and sisters do you have?

[00:04:12]

Gama I have one brother and no sisters.

Q Please describe your experiences as a child and youth in your family and neighborhood.

[00:04:22]

Gama Well, I stayed home a lot. My mom worked and I stayed home. I wasn't allowed to—maybe my next-door neighbor, we were able to visit, I was. They had the double standard. When I was a teen, my brother could ride his bike to Orangevale and Carmichael and anywhere he wanted to, come home when he wanted to, but I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. I was supposed to stay home.

When I got a little older, I was allowed to go to the library downtown. I would catch the bus and go to the library and be there all day, most of the day, just to get away from the house. That's why I was there. So I was home or I was there or church. We went to church on Sundays, always, without fail. We'd go shopping and we'd go home. Then Tuesday nights, they went to the movies, we went to the movies. I don't know why Tuesday nights. My stepfather said because it wasn't that crowded. He didn't like people. So we went there on Tuesdays. We went to the auction, Roseville auction, on the weekends regularly.

There wasn't a lot of family contact. My family was in Mexico, a little bit in San Diego and a little bit in L.A, but mainly they were in Mexico. In his family, he had a brother and a sister and his mom were in Sacramento and we didn't go see them a lot. They didn't come over and we didn't go a lot either. So they were all kind of never really happy with each other. So it was that kind of upbringing. We went to church and catechism and all of that, but that was all pretty much that I did.

Q How about the neighborhood, do you remember like—

[00:06:23]

Gama Well, until I was ten, I was raised in the downtown South Side neighborhood. It was a really interesting neighborhood. There was Portuguese people and Chinese

and Mexican, very few white, some African American. I didn't know then, like East Indian, I didn't know, but that's who they were. Because at school, we all played together in big huge groups. I loved, loved my school there, and all languages was spoken outside. I didn't know about gangs and stuff then. There wasn't talk wasn't about that. We would all play together, so that's probably where I was happiest, in that neighborhood. They would call that downtown today.

Then my mom bought a house and then we went south, southern Sacramento. I have poetry about that. But it was real confusing to see people that looked like me but didn't speak Spanish. I didn't understand that. It was real confusing and odd to me, so I guess I went through some kind of a crisis with that because I didn't understand. I realized then that I didn't dress like other people. They didn't dress like me. They wore tennis shoes and they wore clothes you would buy at the store. I was wearing clothes that my mom would make for me. If I didn't dress like them, they didn't dress like me, they didn't talk like me, I didn't talk like them, and I felt odd. I didn't belong with anybody there. That was an odd—that was in South Sac.

I played an instrument. But I think it was then that I realized that I liked school. I couldn't tell you who was—and I was in middle school, back then junior high, I ran into my second-grade teacher in math class and it was wonderful to see her, and she knew me and I knew her, and that was really fun.

I learned to sew, I love to sew, I learned to sew in middle school, cook in middle school. My mom would toss things into the pan. I didn't know how to cook like that. She could make a dress but couldn't teach me how because she didn't measure or anything, and so I learned to do those things in school and I liked that.

So that was, like, South Sacramento. We stayed down there the rest of my life. She bought another house further south, and I didn't visit, like, friends in downtown. You'd have to drive here. I didn't ride a bike, so I wasn't allowed to go very far, so I lost contact with those that I knew. But I was pretty young. So that was my neighborhood.

When they began to do all of that Chicano festivities and Cinco de Mayo, that was at the park where I was—it was my playground, my young—when I was a kid, we went there. None of that was happening then. That happened later, so it was funny that we still go there to the festivities, and that was the park that I went to when I was a kid. They've upgraded it, it's a much nicer place, but where they have their *las danzas* and all of that is, that was already there. It wasn't painted yet because they had murals and stuff, very beautiful. But that was my neighborhood when I was a kid. That was really interesting.

Am I talking too much? [laughs]

Q So, next question is, were you a Fellow, Felito, or were you actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project? If not, were you aware of the project and its mission?

[00:10:18]

Gama No.

Q Unaware completely?

[00:10:22]

Gama I guess unaware. Does it go by another name?

Q Not that I know of, but it had to do with, like, a master's program.

[00:10:37]

Gama No.

Q Did your study of cultural anthropology or your 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 in the Movimiento Chicano.

[00:10:57]

Gama Well, when I went to City College, because I went to this college, I took a history class, and I found that very, very intriguing and interesting. My mom was really busy working and supporting us, and she didn't speak about the land. She hadn't gone to school very much, and so she didn't teach me about people in Mexico and what they had done. So when I went to City College and I took the history class, I learned about the pyramids and about history, it was really eye-opening. I was shocked that I didn't know any of that.

I also joined MAYA, the Mexican American Youth Association. That's what it was called back then. I joined them and I really liked it. They all looked like me. I remember there was a festivity, there was going to be a parade and they wanted volunteers. Somebody named me, so I got to be on the float, and I dressed like a Mexican and I was pretty. Somebody had lent me a dress because I didn't any of that at home, and I got to be on there, and I felt wonderful. [laughs]

So they were really, really active. That's probably when I began to know about Cesar Chavez and about that there was going to be a march. They were the ones who I learned from, the ones that were part of this group, this youth group. The

connections start, and there's somebody here, Graciela Ramírez, who I still know, who was attending this college then. But that was where I learned about my history.

When I went to Sac State, the connection just remained to be a part of MEChA then. It just brought me information that I didn't know about myself, about my own people, and I wanted to do more. It was really exciting to be around that sort of movement, that sort of activity, Cesar Chavez or the different sort of either manifestations or marches were happening. I was in a lot of them, and it was really exciting, it felt really good to be there. We did lots and lots of different things, but I think learning about that history class really made a big difference. MAYA and how they included me to be a part of them was really exciting to me.

When I left Sac City and I went to Sac State, I remained very active with them. I didn't do a lot of big things, I did a lot of little things, but I was real excited to be with them. Is that enough?

Q Just out of curiosity, what kind of things did you do with the organization?

[00:13:54]

Gama Activities? Like with MAYA?

Q Yeah.

[00:13:58]

Gama Or with MEChA?

Q With either one.

[00:14:00]

Gama Well, with MEChA, there was something called El Concilio in Sacramento. It was sort of like a social—it was El Concilio in Sacramento, and I was the MEChA

rep for MEChA with El Concilio. I remember I didn't drive, and my mom and my brother would drop me off at this meeting and then we'd all come out. Richard Favela, who was really well known, one of the Chicanos, heavy, heavy Chicano guy, and others who were attending, they'd all come down and I'd come down, and my mom would say, "What are you doing with these guys?" They looked scary to her, and she couldn't figure out what I was doing there, because it was over at 10:00 p.m. When it was over, they'd take me home.

So I was a member. I was a rep for a long time, and I learned about all the things that were happening in Sacramento that had to do with El Concilio, had to do with activities that were coming up, because around the corner from El Concilio was where the RCAF had their art studio. We were doing a lot of art stuff, because they were the ones that would make the posters for the marches or for the things that were coming up. So that was probably the most consistent.

When they had the events at D-QU by Davis, we were there. They had the pyramids and they had dancers and they had dancing. It was beautiful. It was hot. There was no shade. A lot of people would get together, and we were there. My mom and my brother would come. We would all go. So we did stuff like that, a lot of marches and a lot of attending different things as they were coming along. I guess I was already politically involved when I was being the rep for the MEChA students, and I really enjoyed that.

Q What was the focus of those organizations?

[00:16:13]

Gama Which organizations?

Q The two that you mentioned.

[00:16:20]

Gama I mentioned MAYA.

Q The MEChA and MAYA.

[00:16:22]

Gama MAYA was here at Sac City. That was a long time ago. That was in 1970, '71, '72, so it was a long time ago. I think the focus was there was information given on, like, history of Mexico, and they would give us information on what was happening around, like, in the town, in the city. They would help celebrate some of those important Mexican days, and so they were part of, like, that parade that they got a float in for the representing our group. I remember people modeled clothes from Mexico, and that was interesting, and I remember being a part of that. It was just fun, it was interesting, and I learned a lot.

I think they encouraged students to stay in school and feel a part of "You're welcome here. This is who we are and you can come be a part of that." I liked that because I hadn't felt a part of for a long time, and I felt a part of them, and that was exciting. They always made sure they invited me. I couldn't always go because of the rules at home, but it was neat they were always inviting me and didn't forget me. Sometimes I could go. So that was interesting.

MEChA was more political. MEChA was more like all of that protesting at Safeway and "Don't shop there," and walking around with banners and walking around with the farmworker flags. "We're going to be protesting this Saturday, this time. Show up." We'd show up and were a part of that, so much that when the *huelga*

was finally over, I had a hard, hard time buying grapes because I had eaten them for so long, lettuce, and now we could, and I had a hard time shopping and eating them and enjoying them, because for the longest time we weren't allowed to, weren't supposed to. It was odd. [laughter]

Q Makes sense. The next question is, what are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:18:46]

Gama It wasn't until I was at Sac City, because there wasn't any of that happening around me. Nobody that I knew talked about any of that or did activities, so it wasn't until I was here.

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

[00:19:10]

Gama Oh, I think most of my life, after I heard the term and I understood what it meant for me, most people that I knew were confused. They didn't like it. I grew up with terms like *pocho* or *pocha*. So they didn't like it. They didn't approve of it. They didn't know why people were—so most people that I knew, like family, I didn't use it around them, and they didn't know what it meant. I remember explaining it to many people over and over again. Growing up, I didn't hear it. There was nobody around that used it, and it wasn't till I was here and at Sac State that I heard more, that I heard more of it, and that I understood it more.

Q Would you say that your family was more traditional?

[00:20:08]

Gama Very, very traditional.

Q Would you say that the family was more traditional than the students, the *hijos*? That's when the term *Chicano* came because of the students?

[00:20:25]

Gama Like where did *Chicano* come from?

Q Yeah.

[00:20:28]

Gama Well, it came—like, for example, how does it fit me? I wasn't Mexican and I wasn't American, and I wasn't a Mexican American and I wasn't Spanish American, and I wasn't any of those things. And when I understood what Chicano meant or Chicana meant, that fit for me.

Q Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement at that time?

[00:21:08]

Gama No. At which time?

Q Like during the 1960s.

[00:21:14]

Gama I think I was beginning to hear about it.

Q When you were in Sac State?

[00:21:19]

Gama Sac State, yes.

Q Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

Please explain.

[00:21:30]

Gama I should read my poem now so you know I feel about that. It explains it in there. Can I?

Q Yeah.

[00:21:41]

Gama I think it fits.

Q Feel free. Whenever you're ready.

[00:21:50]

Gama I wrote this for José Montoya, *en paz descanse*, when he was the poet laureate, but I had met him at Sac State a long time ago when I first arrived. First time I read this, I cried the whole time. I don't cry the whole time anymore. I just love him to death.

So I have two things. This is a little longer. I'll start. And I have it in Spanish, and in Spanish it has a different sound altogether, but I'll read it to you in English.

“*Nuestro José de Aztlán*, I didn't come to your school confused. The mirror I looked at showed me, my striking *moreno* color. *Los mexicanos* said I wasn't Mexican. They sent me off to be with *los pochos*, like sending me off to *la chingada*. I couldn't ever identify *los pochos*, so how was I to belong to them anyway?

“Then I came to Sac State and met you, *el capitán, mi comandante del RCAF*. You never said I was a Mexican or wasn't. You never said I was a *pocha* or wasn't. You just talked and talked. You just smiled and smiled. You just painted and painted. You spoke about *Chicanismo y la huelga y Cesar Chavez y el Washington Neighborhood Center y de la MEChA, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos y Aztlán*. Yes, Aztlán. You spoke of Aztlán, *y de todo eso*. You didn't know it, but you gave

me back my family, my home. I had a home again. Born in Mexico, an unwanted Mexican, sent to *pochismo*, but could never find it. You said, “Aztlán, we’re standing on it. This is our home.”

“And I smiled deep inside, and unpacked *mis maletas* and moved to your, my, Aztlán, and I signed Maria de la Luz, *la mujer Chicana* on the dotted line, and it felt good and my heart sung with joy because I had finally found my people, bronze like the copper found in the bosom of *mi madre tierra Tonantzin*, scholars like you, José Montoya, *vato listo*, sharer of information, my elder, my teacher, maybe the father I never had.

“I see you today, now and then, and you look good, *mi viejito*, and you got that cool stroll that only belonged to you, and your eyes, how they twinkle. But what moves me, *mi corazón*, is the size of your *corazón* that reaches throughout Aztlán and more, and the echo of your poetic verse stirs me out of *pendejismo* into a new Chicanismo awakening. For this I am grateful to you, *Mr. José de los RCAF del barrio, comandante de la raza, nuestro José de Aztlán.*”

This is another one. The South Side is where I was raised until I was ten, and that’s where they have all of the Chicano stuff in Sacramento.

“*Los murales del South Side, every color under the rainbow was there, plas moreno, alma, y corazon. La música llegó a despertar los muertos. La tardeada se puso buena, y los tamales también. Éramos amigos, todos, casi hermanos, compadres, coroneles de la revolución. Los indios danzaron como reyes y reinas de Tenochtitlán. No malos volcanes y las piramides faltaban, y esas, las habian pintado los artistas Chicanos. En los murales de South Side de Aztlán.*”

Thank you.

Q Thank you. Those are wonderful. What role do you believe that Chicanas played in the Movimiento?

[00:26:10]

Gama I think that I'm still part of the Movimiento, and I think that when I show up today I'm active in that. I did not have a voice growing up, and along my way, I have had my voice returned. When I was a Chicana in the Movimiento and I was a MEChA representative for Concilio, I was expressing a voice. Just to be present into a mass *movimiento*, a mass protest, to be present is to show that you're there and that your presence counts.

I vote, my daughters vote, my mother votes, and I assist her with the voting. Now we just do it at home, but in my family, all the women vote, and I know it started with me. I'm a U.S. citizen. I became a U.S. citizen when I married. My mother is a U.S. citizen, because she was afraid of that bill where they didn't want to allow Spanish to be spoken and that thing that started a while ago. So she became a citizen because she was afraid she might get kicked out one day, like when they threw all of Mexicans home, back home in the trains years ago. She was afraid that could happen again, so she became a U.S. citizen for that reason.

So my mom isn't a Chicana. She would never consider herself that. My daughters aren't either. I don't know what they think they are. I should ask them. But my mom, today she is happy and proud of who I am. And I think that whenever I speak, I read my poetry, wherever I'm at, I think that being a Chicana is important. I didn't dress this way accidentally. Wherever you are, I need to present myself in the

way that I do because somebody's watching and somebody's noticing. I'm not a dumb person, and I know it and I express it. And when I see women who think they are and they talk that way, I mean, I'll be shopping and I see men talking to women in a certain way, and I want to go up there. I hold myself back, but that's hard for me, because I want everybody to be awakened, to have the right to say, "Stop. That's not who I am. Don't talk to me like that."

And it sounds like back when the women were trying to be liberated, and to me, it's not the same. I don't put down *mexicanos*, *mexicanas*. I don't put down the country. It's something that's internal. I have found where I belong, and you have the right to be where you belong. I don't have to say mine is better, mine is different. No, mine is mine, and I'm happy and content with that. If I'm not, I have to find out why. I have to figure it out. So I have a lot of pride for who I am as a woman, and I know it began when I found where I fit, where I belonged. A lot of things happened after that.

Did I answer your question?

Q Yeah, of Chicanas today, but—

[00:29:48]

Gama Like I have a cousin who just finished with two master's degrees in the University of the Holy Name in Oakland, and I just think it's amazing. We went. How could you not go? Very smart woman, very humble. She's not big-headed. We all go be a part of that, because it's who we are. We're not all at home washing dishes and doing laundry. If that's what you want to do and you're happy with that, then, hey, do that, but not all of us are that way. I still believe if that's what makes you happy, then you need to stay and do that, but if not, then find what makes you happy

and do that too. My mom doesn't work, but she's very active. She's never hardly at home. But she finds what makes her happy and she does that. To me, that's important. I see that, and she might be dead if she didn't do what she loves to do.

Q How is that different to the time during the Movimiento, like women do what they love, but not being able to because most of them had to stay home?

[00:31:00]

Gama Well, I think that it isn't easy to follow your own dream. I don't think that being in the Movimiento or being a Chicana or a Chicano means you have a liberated mind, for men or women, because you might still be traditional in your head. It isn't easy when you're raised a certain way, music tells you certain things, and it isn't easy to break off from that. I wasn't a happy child. I was looking for something all the time, and when I found my own happiness, it didn't happen overnight. It's where I want to stay. I think to myself, to die and to not be happy because you don't do what you want to do, you do what others say or think, you know, that would be so sad. What a waste of life.

Q What did you personally initiate or help initiate in this Movimiento Chicano?

[00:32:15]

Gama I don't think I helped initiate anything. I think I was just a part of the whole thing. I was a part of the activities that somebody else was planning and doing. I don't think I was an initiator. I was a joiner, participant. Maybe if I gave that lots of thought I might remember, but I don't think so.

Q So what were some of the organizations that you were involved in?

[00:32:43]

Gama When?

Q During the Movimiento Chicano.

[00:32:47]

Gama Well, I've always been a Democrat and they were, too, and so I would help when it was time for the politics and the voting, go in and call people up so they would, hopefully, go and vote, and drop off things in people's homes around election time. So I was supporting candidates that were supporting, like, Cesar Chavez, because I'd always check and see who they were supporting and that's where I would go. So I did that when I was in college and I did that later.

I was a part of Concilio. I was part of Concilio as a student and a part of Concilio when I was done being a student. I've always been a part of some political, some social or local group. I worked for Head Start all my life. I just retired last year. I wasn't political too much when I was working, because I know that could be a problem. We couldn't put stickers on our cars because they would complain, political-type stuff. They just had those kinds of rules. So I'd watch. What I believed in was outside; it wasn't part of my job.

Once I was in college, I was real active. I was active on campus. But when I finished college, I went got married and then I was a wife, and then I worked and I wasn't too busy then. He was somebody who didn't approve. He couldn't believe that I had been involved in marches and stuff. He couldn't believe the things that I had done, and he didn't approve of it. He was traditional, you know, women stay home, they cook and clean and have kids, and men do stuff, women don't do stuff. That was his thinking. So I stopped. I wasn't a part of much after that.

I find that that happened to many people, because when I divorced and I was looking around to where is everybody, where's the Chicanos at, what are they doing, where are they, *las Chicanas*, they weren't around. They had done the same thing. They had finished college and they had moved on to other things and they weren't political anymore. I found that to be really sad, because they were so busy and so active. It isn't till recently that some of that is beginning to come up, but not much. You know, I don't see marches and I don't see people—I don't see that. I don't see that today. Actually, people have gone and done other things.

Q What significance did the organizations or activities that were created play in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:35:46]

Gama Well, sometimes they helped support. Like when Cesar Chavez came, all his people, they would help support, like feed them and house them, because they would come in masses, and they didn't have anywhere to stay and food, and they did a lot of that. That was like a regular support. They made the flags and they made posters, so letting the neighborhood, the people in Sacramento, know they were coming. So they would create the posters, they would create flyers, so we'd all know that they were on their way. So they did a lot of that. So it was financial. It was financial. That's what I can tell you. Then we would be a part of that. As they would come, we would join them.

Q Going back to the question before, could you briefly explain what Concilio is?

[00:36:45]

Gama It isn't around anymore. El Concilio was downtown. It was on 19th and F. You could go there and look, and they would help you maybe get a job. They would help you if you had a need. They'd get you a resource, where do you go get maybe food or where you could go get—if you're eligible. They were like a link. They would help women if maybe there was violence at home and they needed to get some support. So it was really busy in the community. It was local, and there was, like, public funds that ran it. It was really sad that it closed up, because it was really busy. So it was also a place where groups could meet, because we met there. I was a little sad when it closed because it was there was a long time and it did a lot of help for lots of people, somebody somewhere, something, it just closed up.

Q Thank you. Moving on to the next question, did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, cultural, political lines?

[00:37:58]

Gama Yes.

Q Please describe how.

[00:37:59]

Gama Well, I don't know if I was political before. I don't think that I was. I think that it began, we talked about the war and what the war was like, and there was an action. We were a part of the action. We wanted peace, and there was all the manifestations and we were involved. So it helped me be aware. Like at the Concilio we spoke about a lot of things, right and wrong. We didn't discuss like, "The *mexicanos*, this—." We didn't talk like that. It helped me get an opinion on different issues. You mentioned before was I aware of back when Martin Luther King and all

the things he was doing and wanting to do, so I knew there were others that were being a part of the same thing. Racism and the dropout rate in schools, those were all topics that were really heavy and important, and how to stop that. How do you change that? So we had talks and discussions. It also helped me that I wanted to learn more, so then I picked classes at Sac State where I would learn more about like what are Chicana, so classes that I maybe not have looked at, but I wanted to know more about this, so then I selected classes where I knew I'd see other Chicanos and that I could learn more about us, me.

Q Thank you. How did these changes impact your personal relationships with family, peers, and significant others?

[00:39:55]

Gama Well, I think even when I was married to someone who didn't approve of all this, and even though I couldn't really talk to them, I know that they wouldn't have understood, deep inside I had an opinion, and deep inside I had an identity, and deep inside without you having to approve or disapprove or convince you or not, I knew who I was, not where I was going, that I had a right to be here and I had a right to think. I learned all that then. It gave me a personal right and a personal strength that was real important to me, that I don't think I got that at home. I didn't see other people around me expressing that, but I felt that. And I watched certain things on TV because they were of interest to me, I'd read certain things because they were of interest to me, and they were like feeding the need to identify with others that were also thinking and doing like I was.

I noticed that *los Chicanos*, a lot of them were really quiet. They didn't always talk. They'd be at this table and it'd be full of people. There might be one or two who would talk, and the rest just listened. They were absorbing. And I would listen. There wasn't like who has a question, who wants to say. There was always a couple who had more to say, and they led the conversation. But in classes like La Mujer Chicana, it was very, very enlightening and very, very powerful, and then things that they suggested that you read, like *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and all those amazing books, they just feed that. They fed my soul.

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

[00:41:55]

Gama Well, I was going to be a nurse. My mom wanted me to be a nurse. I discovered that I didn't want to be a nurse, and so I switched to social work. What I know now, when I switched over, is it gave me more time, because the other was really consuming. It's a very intense career. And I could be around more Chicanos and do more things like that. So I was more available to have contact with them, to do things outside of school.

I'm a social worker. My degree is social work, but I worked in Head Start preschool, so I know that the person that was presenting herself there every day was a Chicana, so I made sure that we did those festivities, the cultural things, that we did *loteria* in the classroom. I actually went to the first four years of my preschool career, it was a bilingual, multicultural Head Start center. So we did all those Mexican songs

that I wasn't raised with, that kids learn in Mexico. They were beautiful. They were on video and they were beautiful.

I also had training in bilingual/bicultural CDA trainer, and that was in San Francisco, was part of my job. So I really, really encouraged and focused the bilingualism in the classroom. Not everybody understood why. Parents say, "Teach my kids English, and the Spanish we'll teach them at home." That's what they wanted, but that wasn't what *I* wanted. So I made sure that I spoke Spanish to those that needed the Spanish, and when the English came, then that's where they went, but I've always supported the language in the classroom for me. It doesn't keep them behind like people think. I went to training in San Francisco and I learned how language happens by those that have all that background, they confirmed. They taught me that. You teach them in their language first, they will catch the other later. So that was an amazing training. I've had lots and lots of experiences, and it supports the cultural and the language for children.

The moms that stick with the guy who's going to beat them until whenever, I don't support that, so I bring in WEAVE. I just believe in women being empowered, not being more than and being bigger than him, but just to be free and to be happy and have free and happy children. I think the *Chicanismo* in me is what does that, is where that comes from.

Q Looking back at your experience in the Movimiento Chicano, are there any issues that were left unsolved?

[00:45:05]

Gama Well, that's a hard question. I wish there was more activity in that area, and maybe that means I need to, now that I'm retired, I need to go back and read the current things that are being written out there by Chicanos. A lot of it is poetry. That's where I'm connected to. A lot of it is not as directly as my stuff is because mine is more direct, I think, but it still talks about the topic. So I think for me I need to go back and read again, read more about what are we saying today, because there's a lot of unjust things going on still and those things haven't all gone away. I see a lot of people talking poetry about that, but is that making a change? Can there more be done? Like all the women that are disappearing in Mexico and all the people that are being sent back to Mexico and all the deportations. What happens to the kids when they're left here and the parents have been thrown out? There's a lot new stuff going on and different new stuff going on, and so I think there's still a lot of work to be done.

Q Yeah. Thank you. Could you describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived?

[00:46:47]

Gama Well, when I was really active in that, I was still single and I followed it, so if there was something going on, then I followed it there, whether it was in this town or other towns, but I can't tell you if it impacted my community.

Q Did it unify the community? Did you see unification?

[00:47:21]

Gama No, because I lived in a community where it was split. The traditionals were traditional and the Chicanos were Chicanos. There wasn't that communication, "Let's

talk together and let's understand each other." I don't think I saw that, not where I was living.

Q Many Movimiento Chicano activists have passed on. Identify any individual or individuals that you feel had an impact on the Chicano Movement and please explain the significance.

[00:47:59]

Gama Well, Cesar Chavez has passed on, and he was huge. I marched with him. I didn't know him personally, but I marched with him. But many others that knew him very well I know well.

José Montoya, he's passed on, and I was his student and I was just a fellow poet, and we read together many times and were in many marches together. He was subtle and he wasn't, but his message was very powerful and strong and is still being heard today. And all the RCA people I knew. I didn't know them like a good friend, but I knew them, I could come up and say hello. I knew their activities and I knew what they were doing, what they had done, what they had written. So a lot of them were poets and artists. Richard Favela, Armando Cid, and I know his sister, I used to work with her, very beautiful people. Lot of them were artists and poets and professors. Juanishi [Orozco], beautiful. Lot of their murals and stuff are in Sacramento. Some are being torn down because of the renovation. So a lot of them were artists, a lot of them were poets, and they were in Sacramento.

Juanita Polendo, who was real close to Cesar Chavez, and her husband, very active. She was like *las Adelitas*. She was very verbal. She wasn't one of those quiet Chicanas. She was very verbal and very strong. She's tough. The other day she

presented with that group that I belong to. She came to present her services, what they do at her job, to our group in case perhaps we could use her. She's still active in her job, but she still has that message, "I'm strong, I have help, I have assistants, and if you need it, here we are." So it's a different message than "I have a job and here's my brochure. Read it. Here's my number." She has heart in her presentation. She's different. I think that's where the Chicanos have their soul there. There's a different message when they come forward.

Q What was her name?

[00:50:29]

Gama Juanita Polendo. She's in Sacramento.

Q So they were passionate.

[00:50:41]

Gama There's heart, there's heart, there's heart. There's more than just "This is my job." There's heart about it. It's different.

Q Thank you. So the last two questions. What do you see as current or future challenges for the Chicano community?

[00:50:56]

Gama Well, I think that we need to tell the youth about us, because I don't think the youth know who we are. They don't know what things we were involved with and have done. I don't think they know why it's important to be a Chicano, what it is to be a Chicano, and help them be involved. I don't think their identity is there for the youth. It wasn't for me, and I don't think it is today, and that takes work. They don't mention Chicanos in middle school, in high school. There isn't mention of that, so

who's going to tell them? There isn't identity. Who are you? "I'm from the south."
"I'm a gang member." They don't have the identity, and I think that needs to come forward.

So we need to talk to them. They have the big parties, the big *fiestas* downtown and it's sad that the beer trucks are back. It's a place to go booze and drink and all that. It's too bad. There's more to life than just drinking. Getting a DUI, getting killed, killing somebody, and all the gangs are busy. Now they make sure that they know where they are and who they are and help you identify with them if you need that identification. I think that that's really big. That's a real big need and needs to happen right away because many of us are dying, being locked up again, still, dropping out of school, still. That stuff hasn't changed.

Q Last question. Do you see yourself as staying involved in meeting these challenges?

[00:52:47]

Gama Well, I think talking about it like I am is waking me up. Like, "You have time now. Yes, you have kids you're watching, but I have work to do." I think it definitely means I have to focus some time on this and maybe get others involved in us going back to the schools and going back to the community and bringing this up.

Q Thank you. That concludes—

[00:53:15]

Gama We're done? We're right on time!

Q Yay!

Gama Thank you for having me.

Q Of course.

[00:53:21]

Gama I was going to introduce this, but that's okay. Are you ready?

“*Estrella*, star, for my mother Aurelia.” I learned from José Montoya if you love somebody, tell them now, not the flowers on their grave when they're gone and you're crying and you're saying, “I love you.” So I wrote this to her. I have several times.

“*Estrella. E, eres la Estrella que ilumina mi camino. S, sonries y el canto de los pajaritos te saludan. T, tú corazón esta lleno de miles bendiciones. R, reina de la en la tierra bendita por ser mi madre, la más querida. E, quiero abrazarte entre mis brazos felicitarte en este tú dia. L, naciste lejos de aquí, en ese querido Teocuitatlán. L, de Chiquita usabas listones en tu pelo. Niñita frentona, pero bonita. A, de nombre te pusieron Aurelia, en este día de tú santo.*”

I have it in English.

“E, you are the star that lights up my path. S, you smile and the songs of the birds greet you. T, your heart is full of many blessings. R, queen among the earth, blessed for being my mother, the most beloved. E, I want to embrace you in my arms, congratulate you on this your day. L, you were born far away from here in the beloved Teocuitatlán. L, you wore ribbons in your hair, a big foreheaded little girl, but cute. A, Aurelia was your given name, on this your holy day.”

Thank you.

[End of interview]