

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Manuel P. Hernández

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Austin Beckwith and Noel Reynoso
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Transcription by Diana Segura and Technitype Transcripts

Reynoso Please state your full name.

[00:00:09]

Hernández Sure. It's Manuel P. Hernández. My friends all call me Manny Hernández, so that's what I'm known as.

Reynoso Please provide your birthdate.

[00:00:19]

Hernández July 17, 1949.

Reynoso And your marital status?

[00:00:23]

Hernández Married, fortunately happily married.

Reynoso Do you have any children? If yes, how many?

[00:00:33]

Hernández Three, three children.

Beckwith Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:41]

Hernández I was born in a little town in Mexico, Ziniparo, Michoacán, Central Highlands area of Mexico. I was raised, because I immigrated at nine months to California, so raised in Northern California in Sonoma County.

Beckwick What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:06]

Hernández They did farmwork initially, and then later on, a combination of he worked in a lumbermill and he also worked with a home builder, as a carpenter, so he learned the carpentry skills and he taught some of those to me.

Reynoso And what did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:28]

Hernández Initially, they did farmwork, so initially I did farmwork starting at about age five. Now, by age six, seven, my dad had left his job and he went to work in a lumbermill. I, of course, didn't have to work with him in a lumbermill, but during summers, I still did farmwork, because he did extra work and he did farmwork, until I was about twelve. That gave me an appreciation for hard, hard work.

Reynoso How many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:02:09]

Hernández I have five brothers and one sister, so I'm one of seven.

Reynoso Could you please describe your experiences as a child and youth in your family and neighborhood?

[00:02:21]

Hernández Well, the early years, it was a loving family, so that's the main thing, but it was very poor and the conditions were not good. For example, when we moved

from the little ranch where we did farmwork, to Cloverdale, where my dad took this huge risk to move, because I was then six, I hadn't gone to school, the farm was so far away, ten miles from the town, that there were no buses that went out there. He realized, "Okay, either I'm going to give my son a chance to go to school or I'm not, because he's six. He should've started kindergarten at five, but he didn't have to." But at six they said, "Okay." And they didn't have a way to transport, so he had to leave his job, make the sacrifice so that I could go to school.

That first year, the housing, it's hard to describe the house, because it was, I would say, six feet wide, maybe twelve feet long, and by that time there were five of us, my two parents and three of us, and it was a flat roof, and it was so hot you couldn't stay in there during the daytime, so it was terrible.

So at any rate, but from that, after going through a hot summer, my dad, having saved a little money, having that better job at the lumbermill, he was able to buy a plot of land. He bought an old World War II Army house, two-bedroom, one-bath-type thing, and it was much better. So we moved to Geyserville.

Reynoso So that was in Geyserville?

[00:04:01]

Hernández Geyserville, Sonoma County. Just parenthetically, after then, my dad worked with a carpenter who was nearby, learned how to add rooms. Of course, I learned how to, for a young age, help Dad fix things, add rooms, etc.

Reynoso So did you enjoy adding on to the house?

[00:04:30]

Hernández I did not, no. It was a lot of hard work. I wanted to be with my friends playing, baseball, basketball, but I had to help Dad sometimes, but not all the time.

Reynoso So now that you're older, were you glad that you had that experience?

[00:04:45]

Hernández Short answer, no. It was too hard, but it had to be done.

Reynoso So were you a Fellow or Felito?

[00:04:58]

Hernández A Fellow in what sense? Like for the assembly or what?

Reynoso For the Mexican American Education Project. Are you familiar with that? Were you involved in that?

[00:05:12]

Hernández No, I was not involved in that one, no.

Reynoso Okay. So, skip those questions. Did your knowledge of cultural issues influence your involvement and participation in the Chicano Movement?

[00:05:28]

Hernández Yes.

Reynoso Okay. And if yes, could you explain how that influenced your understanding and participation?

[00:05:36]

Hernández Well, I had, of course, always been curious, you know, heritage and all, and, in part, even as a child, you notice why certain children can have vacations, why certain children can have nicer things, so the role of economics, but also the role a little bit of race, of why, and so you ask those questions, even when you're a little

bit young. And then I realized, well, you know, Mexican people don't get much of a chance at an education, at least not yet. Now, maybe their children will, and that's why the parents pushed that for me, for those opportunities, but even at an early age, we knew that.

I was able to go from a small high school, Geyserville High, an entire class of 100 and—well, not class. The whole school was 120 students at the time. The year was 1968. I was able to go from that school to UC Berkeley, non-affirmative action, because I had 4.0 and I had pretty good grades, because I had one caring teacher in the ninth grade who taught me how to do things like write term papers, etc., etc. So it was because of that and because of my parents taking special attention to build me a room in the back where I could have a little bit of quiet, etc., that I had chances that many students don't. But I missed on big scholarships because people, years later, I found out, they said, "We didn't think you could do it. We didn't care if you had a 4.0 at a small school. We didn't think you could do it, so we did not give you those scholarships, because we thought you'd fail." Anyway, but I didn't fail, so I was able to make it.

Reynoso So what are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Chicano Movement?

[00:07:35]

Hernández Good questions. Part of it was Cesar Chavez, Cesar Chavez, of course, starting in 1964, 1965, what he was doing. By the time I went to Berkeley in 1968, fall of 1968, he was already visiting, some other people were, so I started getting

active in helping at the urban area helping United Farm Workers. So that was one aspect of the Chicano Movement.

The other was the urban side. I had read about walkouts, for example, for L.A. schools. So you know about that. I won't brief you on that. And there had also been the anti-war situation, so it was 1968, '69, '70. In 1968, I didn't know much better about the war. I didn't. I came from a small town. But a few friends started volunteering to go somewhere, drafted, and they came back pretty messed up, drugs, other psychological problems. I thought, "This is kind of weird." So at any rate, the more I checked and the more I read, it's like, "Okay, why are we there?" And so by 1970, probably late '69, I was already anti-war.

And then, of course, part of the Latino Movement, Chicano Movement was noticing that African American and Latino students, not young people, the eighteen-year-olds, were dying at four times the rate that even White soldiers were. So besides there being an *in*justice, there was even a *grosser* injustice. And, sure enough, when I talked to friends, they said, "Yeah, they put the Brown or the Black guys right in front, and the Native Americans." So it was like okay, there are reasons beyond just the unfairness of a war; there's even the racial injustice of it. So, at any rate, those things compelled me to become anti-war, but at the same time I was peaceful, because, maybe like Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, I realized that in the long run, that was the way to win. We could have, of course, bashed some heads, but it's like what good does that do? You just get arrested. [laughs] You know, I didn't work all this time to get to the university and be kicked out the next day. That was not going to happen.

Reynoso And how did other Mexican Americans or Latinos react to the term *Chicano* and the *Chicano Movement*?

[00:10:04]

Hernández Well, initially there was resistance, because even in my own family, when I'd say, "I'm Chicano," they'd say, "That's a derogatory term. Why are you using a self-deprecating term for your own self?"

It's like, "No, it's a way of—we're young people and we have a right to choose the word that we think are the best ones." So it became part of that resistance, part of that self-identification, and so I identified as Chicano, period.

Reynoso Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement at the time?

[00:10:39]

Hernández By what time?

Reynoso At the time that all of the things were occurring with the Chicano Movement.

[00:10:47]

Hernández Yes, I had. My senior speech in high school had been on the Martin Luther King speech.

Reynoso Did your involvement in the Chicano Movement change you personally?

[00:11:06]

Hernández Yes.

Reynoso Would you be able to explain in what ways?

[00:11:10]

Hernández It made me less self-centered, it made me more community-, whatever that is, -centered or, if not -centered, at least community-driven to recognize that the achievement of a person, of a family, is not enough. Unless a community can both identify, first, and, secondly, start doing things that are in its mutual interest, then it will not rise. It will not. And just as other communities of other ethnic groups, of other races, of other countries, have been able to help their own people, it was time for Latinos, Chicanos, to start doing the same thing. So it was kind of that realization. Anyone knows McCarthy might be Irish American. You realize that back east in Boston and Massachusetts, how did Irish people rise? Well, through education, but also getting public service jobs, including police departments and different things.

Similarly, Latinos have kind of a duty to do that as well, unless you just want to be poor and downtrodden your whole life. Well, you have a choice. You either make a choice to improve things for yourself and your family and your community, or you don't. For me, it was a no-brainer. It was like you need to sacrifice a little bit to help everyone, and that means time, it means money, it means sometimes helping others when it's like, "Oh, I should be helping myself or my family here all this time," but sometimes you've got to do it."

Beckwith To kind of go back, were you part of any organizations specifically that helped the United Farm Workers?

[00:13:00]

Hernández Just support groups, yeah, support groups, and I did pay dues to the United Farm Workers, so even though I was in college and especially in college I didn't have much money, but after college I did, I became a dues-paying member of

the United Farm Workers, even though, you know, I wasn't picking fruit anymore out in the fields. I had a job, I had an office job. Still, I remembered what it was like. I remembered the injustices. And sometimes we'd go out there and talk to people, we would, as kind of support groups. There was, of course, the grape boycott and there was the different boycotts to help the farmworkers start achieving a little bit of justice not just in higher pay, but better working conditions and the other things.

Reynoso Can you think of any notable Chicanas, women in the Movement?

[00:13:56]

Hernández Sure. There was Dolores Huerta was one. Another one was here locally, Juanita Ontiveros. If you know Juanita, you know she's a force of nature. She's still alive, she's still helping.

Reynoso And what did Juanita do in the Movement?

[00:14:12]

Hernández She's part of the support network. In the United Farm Workers, there are people that are full-time farmworkers and they worked directly with the union. They're just like any other union. You can be a union of carpenters, union of whatever. But then there are other people, because it has been more of a struggle, there are other people that are part of a support network. So for example, when you saw—you're too young and even I didn't participate, I was in college at the time, but when the first march took place from Delano to Sacramento, you're talking really poor people who don't have the extra money to stay at a hotel at each stop along the way, they just don't. So what would happen? That support network would find them housing with different folks who would say, "Yeah, we'll take you in for a night and

I'll feed you." So she would do that. When they would come to Sacramento, she and other people would actually house and feed farmworkers. And if there wasn't enough, then we'd dig into the wallets and pay a little money so they can buy some food. So, things like that.

And locally here, what you haven't asked, is besides Juanita Ontiveros, on the men's side, who was a leader? A guy named Joe Serna. He went through this Los Rios Community College, he then went to UC Davis for undergrad, and then he went to Sac State to teach, and that's where I met him. After going to Berkeley, I then went to Sac State. I wanted to be a community college instructor. That's what my goal was. So I went and that's where I met Joe Serna, and he was one of my professors, and later on, I asked him to be my master's thesis chairman and he did. He agreed, he and another professor, Professor Jerry McDaniel, and they became my mentors. But Joe Serna, you've heard the name, he's the one who became later a city councilmember, later on, the mayor of Sacramento, same guy.

Beckwith In terms of what was going on at the time while you were going to Berkeley, did that determine what you wanted to go into?

[00:16:41]

Hernández It helped greatly, it helped greatly. I, however, knew that I wanted to teach, I did, and I was influenced by some great teachers at UC Berkeley, including—I could throw out names like Raymond Wolfinger and others. While they were full professors at Berkeley, they had also served as staff people in the U.S. Congress and they were able to describe what it was like and what they could do, and that's when I realized "*That's* what I want to do. I want to be able to bring to the students

information about the practical part, what it takes to get policy made, as well as to be able to teach it.” And I thought, “Who are the most needy among all the students who are ready to receive this information?” When you’re in eighth grade, you’re not ready to receive this information. When you’re in ninth grade, you’re not ready. But by the time you come out of high school, usually you are. And I also started looking at my friends and what was happening in my own class, and there would be lots and lots of students who would go to community college but they would drop out like flies [snaps fingers] right away, and I thought, “Gosh, these students need some, whatever, push, urging, counseling, whatever.” So that’s what I wanted to do. So the combination of those two factors kind of pushed me into “I want to become a community college instructor.”

Beckwith And did you ever?

[00:18:14]

Hernández I was hoping one of you would ask that question. The answer is I only did it as a visiting lecturer. I never got to do it full-time, because here’s what happened. So it’s getting close to my graduation from the master’s. So the fifth year at Sac State, you can actually get a master’s in one year. You have to work like heck, but you can do it. So it was wintertime, and I had checked with some friends who graduated the year earlier, and they told me, “We’re not getting jobs. There’s no jobs available.” I thought, “Uh-oh. They’re as sharp as I am, they’re probably as hardworking as I am. That’s going to happen to me.”

So what did I do? In December, when everybody else is vacationing, I decided, “No, I’m going to spend my entire time writing letters of request,” basically

interest letters and applications to all the community colleges from the Oregon border to the Tehachapi Mountains, right after Bakersfield, before you get to L.A. I wrote to all of them, and I spent my entire time doing that work. And guess what. Over the next few months, they all said, “Thank you. You have a 4.0 average, you have great writing styles, you have great recommendations. Sorry, zero jobs.”

At that point, I realized, “Okay, I’m in the wrong cohort age-wise.” I was a baby boomer. That meant there were no jobs because I was a political science major. Had I been, who knows, a science major, a math major, might have been different, but I can tell you, in the government majors, political science, those jobs had been filled just because of how population booms move.

So I realized, “Okay, I’m not going to waste my time again for the next year. What I will do is I will now search. Now I’ll get *really* aggressive.” Because I had applied for sixty-two community colleges. They all said no. Community college systems like this one here, Los Rios Community College, it’s not just one college. It has like five colleges. So, at any rate, they all said no. So I realized, “I have to become aggressive.” I became organized, a three-ringed binder, government jobs, private-sector jobs, you name it, and that way, by the time I was coming out of school, I had two job offers in late May, so I was not going to take “No.” I had been a farmworker. I knew what it took to do the job. So, at any rate, that’s my story.

Beckwith What did you end up—

[00:20:43]

Hernández Doing? Thank you for asking. When I was at Sac State as a graduate student, I was an intern. That means a free guy who spends time working for a

senator, a famous senator, if you know your history, a guy named George Moscone, who later on became mayor of San Francisco. In his office, I would go in once a week, like three, four hours. Actually, I'd go twice a week because I was putting in eight to ten hours per week. I got my taste of what I had told you earlier, about it's important to get this practical along with the theoretical. So I was able to do that internship.

Then I applied—one of the things that I applied for was an Assembly Fellows Program, which is a paid program, very competitive. At the time, it used to be 500 students statewide who would apply for eight slots, and I was picked as one of those eight. So that's what I was going to do, but then I looked at the salary level that they were offering, kind of low. And that same week, I had said, "Give me one week." I told them, "Give me one week to give you an answer." Because I knew they had back-up people, stacked-up. I mean, there were a lot of if you can't take it, then somebody else will take it. And that same week, another job came through the state assembly, a research office, where they paid a little bit more and it had the chance to be a permanent job, so I took that. So that's what I did.

Beckwith Excellent, excellent. If you could go into what you did in the state, so you obviously worked in the Capitol.

[00:22:24]

Hernández I did, I worked in the Capitol. I worked on mostly employment-related issues, but they include everything from how to find jobs, but also how to create jobs on the business side, and even the—well, Unemployment Insurance Program, for example. Many people have heard of it. If you become unemployed and you work in

a covered job, meaning it's covered through that unemployment insurance, then you can receive that. Well, that's a specialized program. So I did that for a while and I responded to a research requests. Remember I told you I'd gone to grad school. While at Berkeley, I took a very useful class called Bibliography. That class and some advanced writing classes took me from when I was in high school, small high school, I was getting perfect As, never even a B. I go to UC Berkeley, I suddenly start getting Cs and Bs, and I'm, "What the heck?"

So I asked my friends. "This is not right. I don't want this. I'm working too hard."

And they said, "Well, have you taken the research methods class, Bibliography, or have you taken some advanced writing?"

I said, "No, nobody advised me."

They said, "Take them, then quit complaining."

So I took those classes, and, sure enough, I went from again, like I said, C-pluses to As, just by taking those two classes. At any rate, I took those. Those helped me greatly. It allowed me in the legislature to find information. Before there were all these computers and Google and ways to search, I was one of the guys that was paid, kind of like they do at the federal level, Library of Congress, state assembly members and state senators would need information. What are the laws covering child abuse? What are the laws covering unemployment insurance? What are the laws covering whatever? I and a team of other people would find that information, write a report, give it to them, so they could, hopefully, make a little bit better laws. So that's what I did, and I did it well. That's why they kept me around.

Later on, of course, I did different things, I did a one-year training and development assignment at the Employment Development Department. EDD is a big agency. They run unemployment insurance office, employment service offices, disability insurance offices. There's about, throughout the state, I don't know, a hundred offices or so, and I was able to travel to about forty of them, to see what they did. It's part of a monitoring team to help farmworkers, ironically. It was called the Monitor Advocate Office to help farmworkers get the same services that everybody else in the urban areas receive, because before there was a federal court order on this in 1975, farmworkers could not even go and receive services at the main EDD offices. How do you like that?

Beckwith Did you participate in any marches?

[00:25:37]

Hernández Yes, yes, every march I could, yes.

Reynoso That's awesome.

[00:25:43]

Hernández Yeah, it was good. Marches, protests, sometimes writing letters, trying to raise a little money. One time, just as a parenthetical, one time when Cesar Chavez came to Sac State, I was part of his security team. When I was about your guys' age, they said, "We don't have enough people that do this for money. Will you be one of the security guys?"

I said, "Well, yeah. I'm not licensed or anything."

"That's okay. We just need people that will be spotters, people to keep their eyes and ears open. If you see something, you've got to notify these other folks."

Luckily, nothing happened at Sac State, so we did our job. But we did searches. We went into attics, went all over to make sure when he was going to be speaking at a major hall, there wouldn't be somebody from a vantage point that would kill him.

Reynoso So were you a part of any other organizations that participated in the Chicano Movement?

[00:26:37]

Hernández Yes, but, see, the Chicano Movement has what I call mainline organizations and then there are kind of off-the-grid Chicano organizations, okay? So on the grid are ones that you've probably heard, student ones, MEChA, the MEChA group. Google it and you'll get the whole name. Certainly the United Farm Workers. I'm trying to think of the other ones that are just mainline.

But then there are ones that are not so mainline, they're not. For example, as a legislative employee, I noticed and so did another person that were three Latinos that had positions that were above janitor or food worker, okay? Three. And there were about 1,200 employees in the legislature. So it's like "There's something wrong with this picture." So what did we do? We can't just pull people off the street. We started going to the campuses, to UC Davis, to Sac State, and saying, "Hey, there are jobs here from time to time, but you have to apply, and they're not just going to give you the job because you look good or you smile nice or you send in a résumé. They won't. They need to see that you will do something." So either you become a free intern like I was, so that they kind of measure you and see a guy comes in on time, does his work, etc., etc., or apply for one of these fellowships programs, which means you're already either a senior in college or you become a graduate student. Then you

can get some experience there, because, otherwise, you won't get—at any rate, we sent the word out, and little by little, more students.

It was a part of a group that we formed, a Chicano group called the Chicano Capitol Staff, and that's something that is self-empowering, but it's also helpful. That group also helped other groups. For example, in California there's still something called the Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project. You say, "What the heck is that?" What it is, it helps about 120 students statewide, from all parts of California, they're high school students and they're usually juniors and they're going to be seniors the following year, and it teaches them, both men and women, young men and women, teaches them how to participate in their school, how to run for office, and maybe, later on, run for other offices, like school board, city council, you name it. It gives them campaign workshops, it gives them other exposure that otherwise I would have never had and other people would not have either.

Beckwith Did the Chicano Movement raise your consciousness? What was going on at the time with social, political, economic lines?

[00:29:51]

Hernández The main thing was the war. Well, the news coverage, of course, because that was life and death, so that was the war. But on the economic side, it was also the economic justice of the grape boycott, because nothing demonstrated the starkness of the situation for people as when you do farmwork and you are totally relegated to—when you don't have water that's provided to you, clean water, when you don't have bathrooms out there, when children are being kept from school, I mean, that's near-slavery, that's near-slavery.

So, to me, those were the most stark things. But think of the places where I had been, small town in Sonoma County, not too much activism there. It was time for the family and for us to kind of rise on an individual family basis, so I wasn't that active. It wasn't until I went to college, to Berkeley, and started reading more and talking more to people, so there's that. Sac State, of course, was a hotbed of activism as well. But by that time, the Vietnam War was nearly over, it was nearly wound down.

So the Chicano Movement, for me, it was important from—I call it a right to life, not in the sense of being unborn, but it was a right to life for young people. Are you going to live or die based on some powerful people making decisions sometimes based on false facts or manufactured facts, or are we going to compel a review of this situation so that we stop some gross injustices? There was some gross injustices, including when there were four or five Black students killed at a Black college in the South, and the following week, there were four students killed in Ohio in a college called Kent State—that was during the Vietnam War—and just because they were protesting.

So when it got that out of hand, all students, Chicano Movement, White students, Black students, everybody, even the professors said, “Hey, we are stopping. We're going to force the federal government to look at themselves.” And, sure enough, we closed every campus, every campus. Everybody just walked out and said, “No, for this I'm willing to.” Because once students start getting killed for their beliefs, it's time to force the so-called big actors to look at themselves, and we did. We shut everything down. So, besides the big marches that would be taking place

from time to time for different good reasons, just anti-war in general, or because you're killing too many Latino students, or because of, you know, this and that, when that happened, it's like, "Okay, the gloves are off. There's no taking prisoners anymore. Now it's time that we're stopping everything until that policy gets changed." And it did. It changed that policy.

The bombing of Cambodia and the shooting of students stopped. They did not do that anymore. They pulled all the National Guard. I was at Berkeley; I saw this happen. They would bring in National Guard, and they weren't so bad. The Berkeley police, they weren't so bad. The Oakland Police, they weren't so bad. There was one set of police that, at the time, they were thugs. The bad things you hear about some police, they were the Alameda County sheriffs. These guys, either because of bad leadership or bad culture, there was something bad about them. They would come in and beat students up just because they wanted to. I mean, I literally saw there would be some tear-gassing going on over there, because some high school kids or somebody had thrown a rock or something. So they'd go over there. There would be students walking to class, and Alameda County sheriff-type guys, big suits and everything, would take a baton and just beat students just because they were going to class. "What the heck? At the time, I wish we would've had all these cell phones and everything. That would've put a quick stop to it. But how many students carry a camera? And they're not going to believe students. They'd say, "No, no, no, you're making this up." I saw it happen. So we saw some injustice.

Beckwith You mentioned that you had a huge impact seeing your friends come back from war. How did this affect your family, your peers from where you grew up?

[00:34:44]

Hernández Well, it affected our family in saying, “Stay in college, go to school, don’t volunteer for the service. If you get drafted, maybe go, but don’t rush into this.” Luckily, my family always supported. They knew that I studied things. As long as we did it peacefully, the family was very supportive.

Beckwith What was your thought the more militant—

[00:35:21]

Hernández The more militant part of demonstrators?

Beckwith Yeah.

[00:35:24]

Hernández I thought two things. I thought some of them are just acting out of passion, you know, out of what I call ignorance. And others I thought were deliberately, deliberately set in there to because bigger problems so it would subvert the purpose of the marches. That’s why even when I was in college, there would be—we called them proctors, the people that would keep the peace, and if somebody was starting to do crazy things, we told them, “Get out of here. You’re not part of our march, because we’re not going to have somebody who starts a big riot and then destroys the whole purpose of this thing. No, it’s not going to be that easy.”

Beckwith [unclear].

[00:36:05]

Hernández Yeah, exactly.

Beckwith Did you keep in contact with the friends that you made during your time at Berkeley?

[00:36:20]

Hernández A few, a few, yes. Not all of them, of course, but a few, yes.

Beckwith Did that kind of decide what you were going to go into? Did they share the same—

[00:36:34]

Hernández They did. Some of them did. However, when I was at Berkeley, there weren't that many Latino students. There weren't. So, 28,000-student campus, there were 300 Latinos in 1968. Three hundred. You can do the math. Three hundred out of 28,000. Three hundred.

Reynoso You mentioned you had some friends you knew personally that actually were sent off to the war, and they came back and you noticed the toll that it had on them.

[00:37:07]

Hernández Yes.

Reynoso Do you still currently talk to those friends?

[00:37:12]

Hernández A few. Not too many, but a few. Some have died already.

Reynoso Do you see any lasting effects that the war experience had on them, that has made them different—

[00:37:28]

Hernández Different than the other students and different from when they went there, yes.

Reynoso And how do you think that they were affected that it could carry on into today?

[00:37:42]

Hernández Well, it just made them mentally troubled. You could see the torment. You could see they weren't what I call high-functioning anymore. They weren't, okay, have a family and have a chance at life. You could just see the effects, bad effects.

Beckwith I'm guessing you didn't get drafted because you were at the university.

[00:38:10]

Hernández Yeah, that's it. I was not drafted. Now, everyone has a story. Mine's kind of interesting or protected. So I'm at Berkeley. I have a student deferment while I'm an undergrad. Now I'm a grad student, right? What you may or may not remember is that during that time, because of the draft, they had numbers. So the first year, if your number was, I want to say, smaller than 160—there are, of course, 365 days in a year, right? Or maybe it was 175. So if you were already not protected and you were out in the market, and you were a man or a male, then you were eligible to be drafted if you were 175 or lower.

My number was 96, and so I thought, "Well, if I were out, I would've been drafted." That was my first year.

Second year, it dropped to, like, 160, then, like, 125, then it was like, I don't know, 110 or something. By the time I was a grad student getting ready to come out, they said, "Okay, for this next year, every person who has 100 or less is going in."

So in that week when they had announced that, it's like, okay, I told my parents, "I guess I have to report to Oakland." In that week, because I could have resisted and gone to Canada or something like that, but I thought, "No, I'm not. My parents have worked too hard. I'll just tough it out and hope I get lucky. I'm not going to volunteer for things. I'm going to try to be smart." At any rate, I figured, "I'm a college graduate. They won't put me in the front of the line right away. They'll wait a week."

At any rate, during that time period, in that week that I was due to report, they filled the quota and they said, "Only now if you're 95 or lower." My number was 96, so I didn't have to go. So that's my story. You can check it out. [laughs] It's called skating by the skin of your teeth.

Beckwith And right now, can you see how the Chicano Movement has impacted your community life here in Sacramento and where you live today?

[00:40:31]

Hernández Yes, short answer, yes, on to two three grounds, and mostly it was that man that I had mentioned to you earlier, Joe Serna. Joe Serna, when he was a professor at Sac State, he wasn't just a laid-back professor, stay at home and either write books or read books and give lectures. Nuh-uh. This guy did a fourth thing: he was active in the community. He would help candidates get elected to different offices, to city council or to county board of supervisors' positions, or to school boards, etc. He would help them both through organizing techniques he had learned. He had volunteered for the United Farm Workers, so he had picked up these techniques. Like our President Obama, he had become an organizer.

At any rate, finally in 1981—I remember the year—he decided, “You know what? I think I’m going to run for city council.”

So I said, “Great! I’ll help you to the best of my ability.”

So he ran in 1981 for the Sacramento City Council, he was elected, and I said, “Okay, Joe, you get elected, it’s an eight-member council and a mayor. What good is it to be one vote out of nine? I mean, you’re going to be in the minority.” He was at the time the only Latino. It’s like, “What good is that?”

He said, “Well, this is how politics works. Part of it is you put together coalitions, you work with the other councilmembers, and you find out what they’re interested in, you find out what’s important to their community. You basically become a colleague and you don’t confront, you don’t alienate, unless they’re attacking you every day. That’s different. But you work to find common interest areas.”

And I said, “Well, in our community,” I told him, because I was a Chicano young student at the time, I said, “the biggest problem that I see now, besides education, I know you’re on that already, Joe, I know you’re working on that, but the biggest problem I see is the police situation here in Sacramento.” This is the year 1981. I said, “I notice that a lot of Latinos, Chicanos, especially students that are, like, low-riders, they’re getting hassled. I’ll drive by and they’ve always got arms on the thing, and in my view, they’re being overly, overly policed, and that’s causing resistance.”

He said, “I’ve noticed. I’ve noticed.”

I said, “I’m going to do a lot of work for you, free, of course, because you’ve done so much for our community, you will, but how will you do it?”

And he said, “That’s the job of a politician: find a way.” And he did. Among other things, he found ways to work with his colleagues.

Later on when he became mayor—he became mayor in, I want to say—was it 1992? I believe it was in 1992. In that year, guess what. One of the things he did, he appointed—besides working on that, and I noticed that the number of frisks and the number of shakedowns went down as he became a city councilmember, but when he became mayor, he knew he needed to accelerate it more, and so what he did is he appointed the chief of police a Latino, a Mexican American guy, he did. So that’s what elected office can do. It can change things on the education side, it can change it even on the police side, on different sides. So that’s why being active is important. It’s not just for your own well-being; it’s for the community’s well-being. I figure if I can make a difference in California, Sacramento and California, that’s not bad. So that was my decision.

Reynoso Going back to the question that you’ve noticed the police situations still need reform here in Sacramento, or if you’ve noticed a—

[00:44:44]

Hernández It did, yes. Well, ironically, ironically, so Joe Serna is mayor from, I want to say, the year 1992 until 1999. I know he passed away in 1999. So he was mayor for about seven years. He passes away. During those years, there had been a Latina city councilwoman, her name was Deborah Ortiz, and she served for a time, but she was elected to the assembly. So then the Sacramento City Council, in the year

2000 and following for the last sixteen years, there had been zero Latinos on the Sacramento City Council. So, hmm, hmm, so what to do? Well, one of the things to do is find a good candidate for the Sacramento City Council that might be Latino, who might be sensitive to this issue. Guess who that—happens to be a young man. The young man is Eric Guerra. He had worked at the Capitol, he had been out at Sac State, he had been a farmworker. And lo and behold, because he's sharp, he's an engineer, but he works at the Capitol, some of us got together, kind of people my age and said, "You know, it's been too many years, and there are some things that are starting to break down again. We need a Latino or Latina on that city council to start watching over our interest like everybody else's interest." And lo and behold, got him elected.

So in a special election, he was elected, when he was supposed to lose because a couple reasons, usually the special elections have a very low turnout, traditionally Latinos don't show up very well for special elections. It's like many of the other communities, turnout is higher during presidential elections. It wasn't a presidential. But, lo and behold, he got elected. A lot of hard work, raised some decent money. He was able to be elected, so he's on there and he's sensitive to that issue.

Reynoso Do you feel that there are any other issues that were left unresolved still from the Chicano Movement?

[00:46:49]

Hernández Oh, sure, there are always unresolved issues, but the thing is, is that things are a little bit better. For example, take education. Twenty, thirty, forty years ago, besides what happened in L.A. and even in Sacramento and others, it used to be

an accepted practice that Latino students would make it to about the tenth grade. That was it. They'd drop out, it's either to go to work, like some parents were pushing for, or because they would run into problems with police, or because they had to go to work, or because they had gotten too far behind in their credits. So, lo and behold, that used to be an acceptable practice that I'd say five out of ten Latino students, boys and girls, but especially boys, would just drop out in the tenth grade.

Well, because Joe Serna was really key on education, when he was mayor, he got together a blue-ribbon commission, pushed for those folks to find some candidates that would be good on the education issues, if necessary to fight the teachers' unions, if necessary, to take on the key issues. So they did this *big* community search. I remember, because I went through that process. If you could imagine a room about the size of this room, with a table, a single table bigger than either of these tables here, with about thirty-five people, some of them very wealthy, some very powerful, so they represented both business, labor, different interests, including the owner of the KCRA-TV station, and the mayor, and all these other folks, and they're interviewing one person at a time.

I thought when they told us we had to submit some writing material, a series of other things, but I thought when the interview would take place, it would be three or four people, like a committee of those. No, no, no. You met with the entire group. That was a little intimidating. At the same time, it was important to go through the process, find out who the four toughies who would be independent enough and, hopefully, smart enough to take on these key issues, because in 1992, I can tell you—you're too young, thank God, to remember this—the schools in the Sacramento

Unified School District had four big problems, four big ones. There were many other ones, but I'll only tell you the four ones.

Number one, when it rained hard, the roofs were in disrepair. When it rained hard, many schools would be closed. When it rained some, they would just close some rooms. So that's a big problem. When the roofs are leaking badly, they would have big buckets down around. So that was one problem.

Secondly, books. See how you have kind of notebooks right now? Well, imagine you're in seventh grade or eighth grade or in high school and you need a textbook, not just for class time, but imagine you need that textbook to do homework. Imagine that. Guess what. Sac City Unified, you could not do that. You could not take the books home. There weren't enough. So a textbook shortage, a textbook problem, okay.

The third problem, teacher hiring, because a school, I don't know if it was the culture, it was the thinking, most of the hires would not take place in February like the surrounding and the more wealthy districts were doing. They were doing the hiring in July and August, right before school started. That's a *big*, big problem for many reasons, including the fact that the brightest and the most attractive ones that had done work, had done student teaching, had done all the work, they would have already been picked up by other school districts, whereas Sac City would wait so long that all you got were leftovers. So that was the third problem.

The fourth problem was that there was—I call it a mis-expenditure problem. There was mis-spending. The school district would be buying huge—including a building downtown on the Capitol Mall for millions. It was like \$8 million at the

time, at the same time that all these schools had their roofs in disrepair. So the money expenditures were wrong. And those were just four big problems. There are other ones as well.

At any rate, the mayor really wanted some topnotch people. Well, they did the search, and twenty-eight people filed for election. Many others considered it, but then after going through this process and everything else, “This is just too much work.”

So at any rate, they selected four people, and those four were elected. It was in 1996, and I was fortunate enough to be one of those. I was. So as part of that reform group, we had to tackle those problems and more, and we found ways. You might ask us, “How did you find money for the roofs?” You know what we did? You know what a mortgage is? You know what a mortgage is? Okay. You all know. Okay. We mortgaged the school buildings, so we could find the millions of dollars it would take to fix the roofs. That’s what we did.

We also, in the next year or two, we also realized we have to get some bonds passed. All the other big districts, Davis, San Juan, all these other areas, they’re passing bonds, meaning their voters are approving money to fix their school buildings. Sac City, the voters didn’t pass them. One, the school board was usually too afraid, and then when they did, the voters would say, “No, we don’t trust you. You guys are mis-spending money.” So at any rate, we changed that, so we were able to pass some bonds and not just replace roofs, but were able to put— most years by May and by June, like the last month of school, it would get so hot in some of these flat-roof buildings that I’d go in there and you could not learn, you couldn’t teach. So it’s like “No, we’ve got to get air conditioners.” This is Sacramento. This is the

Valley. This is not some coastal city where you don't need air conditioning. So we put air conditioning units. We did a bunch of things. We bought the textbooks.

Then you say, "Well, where'd you find the money?" Guess what. We canceled contracts. We had death threats against us, death threats, because we had to tell some administrators, "You're not doing your job. Sorry, you're going to have to back to teaching or doing something else, but you're not going to be the vice principal or the principal at this school, because you're not doing your job." And it would be performance-based.

They'd say, "Well, we'll sue you."

We'd say, "Fine, sue us, but you're not going to be ruining these kids' lives. You're not."

So we had death threats against us, and we said, "Well, if we've got to die, at least this is something good to die for, die for some kids."

So, at any rate, so things did get better, though, you know, the textbooks, the hiring. And guess what. Three things happened. Student attendance improved because we monitored it month to month, student attendance. That's how many students come to school every day. Secondly, dropout rates dropped. How about that? So went from what had been like a 40 percent dropout rate here in Sacramento, went to like a 15 percent dropout rate, which is *huge*. I mean, that's a huge advance. I'd rather have zero, but we didn't get to zero, but at least we made huge advances. And, of course, we also had more students that were taking the challenging classes, because one of the problems—and I'd seen that happen to my own kids—when they went to high school, very few students got the college-track classes. Everybody else got the

General Ed. Well, what does that mean? That means nothing. I mean, it means a future of nothing. So we said, “No. We’re going to change it so that the default are the college-level classes. If you can’t handle it after protracted efforts, okay, fine. I mean, there’s students who can’t do it. We understand that. But we’re not going to relegate you to poverty as a structural situation. We’re just not going to do that.” So we had to do those things.

Beckwith The Chicano Movement is still happening, but there’s activists that have passed on. Could you identify any individuals that really had huge impacts?

[00:55:47]

Hernández Yes. Joe Serna and Isabel, absolutely. Joe, of course, both as mayor and professor. Also his wife, Isabel Serna, she was a mentor of many students at Sac State through different programs, that CAMP program, and different programs.

Here locally, for example, José Montoya, Chicano to the core, a poet. He became poet laureate under Mayor Serna’s tenure. He’s a leader in his own artistic way. And guess what. His children are now—one of his sons, for example, Richard Montoya, Culture Clash—you may know this—they act in Hollywood movies. He’s now directing movies. So it’s like another level of development.

And there are others in the Chicano Movement who do different things, some in politics, some in the art world, some in the music world, some in the business world. In their own ways, the next generation is starting to rise.

Reynoso Do you see any future challenges for the Chicano community here in Sacramento?

[00:57:06]

Hernández Sure. Yes, of course. It's both yes. Short answer is the challenges to the Latino community, Chicano community, they're multiple, and they're pretty much the three things that are so important in our lives: the health area, the education area, and kind of the employment area. Everything else, if you've got your health, if you've got some education, and you've got a good prospect for a job or good jobs, the rest, the housing, the transportation, everything else is almost a derivative. Even the community organizing, if you could do those first three. So the challenges are continuous.

In the health area, think of it. In some regards, we are advancing, we are as a society. In other regards, I sometimes think we're retrograde, we're regressing because of things like more pesticides, because of the poisons that are out there, and even the amount of chemicals we use. So if people—and I don't mean just Chicanos. Obviously, that's the topic here and that's certainly my interest. But you have to take care of health, and, secondly, you have to take care of the educational side. The challenges there are great. How do you keep the pressure up? How do you keep the quality?

I served for three terms, twelve years, so did some of the others, but people get tired. My wife said, "Hey, I love you, but I'm going to divorce you at some point. You're not going to be doing a full-time job and fifty hours a week plus thirty hours a week on the school board. That's not going to happen for fourteen to sixteen years. I will leave you, because I know it's either going to kill you or I'm going to have leave you. I don't want to see this." So, I mean, you just have to move on.

Beckwith This concludes our interview. Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

Reynoso Thank you very much for your participation.

[00:59:03]

Hernández Well, thank you. Thank you both.

[End of interview]