

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Laura Llano

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Janelly Navarette
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Transcription by Teresa Moya and Technitype Transcripts

Navarette Will you please state your full name and your date of birth?

[00:00:11]

Llano My name is Laura Llano, July 17th, 1946.

Navarette And then would you please provide your marital status and if you have any children?

[00:00:21]

Llano I was married. My husband died in 1992, and I have one daughter and she'll be thirty-four this year.

Navarette So we're going to start with your early life—

[00:00:34]

Llano Oh!

Navarette Would you like to add something?

[00:00:36]

Llano And I have a daughter who has adopted me, a former student. Her name is Lan Lee, and she was a student in my class. She calls me her American

mother. And my real daughter—well, they're both real, but Luz Alicia is my daughter, Luz Alicia Sigman.

[00:00:59]

Navarette So now going to your early life, where were you born and raised?

[00:01:02]

Llano I was born in Sacramento, but I was raised in Isleton, which is about 36 miles in the Delta near Rio Vista, so it's down by the Sacramento River. So I did that till I was in eighth grade, and then my mother didn't want me to go to the high school in Rio Vista because her family was here in Sacramento. So I came to live with my grandmother, and then I stayed for two years and went to St. Joseph's Academy for Girls. Then I went to Clarksburg, because by that time my parents moved up to Clarksburg, and I stayed with them and graduated from Clarksburg High School in 1964.

Navarette And what did your parents do for a living?

[00:02:01]

Llano My mother was a homemaker. My father was various things. He was a farmer, he was a labor contractor, and then he did farming again in his life.

Navarette And then how many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:02:21]

Llano I am the oldest of five children. So I have two brothers. One of them has passed, my brother Clem. It's myself, Rebecca, Clem, Steven, and Cynthia.

Navarette And then would you please describe your experience as a child and youth in your family and neighborhood?

[00:02:48]

Llano Well, as the oldest, then I was responsible for helping my mother. I was the perfect little mother's helper. So I raised my mother's last three kids. She'd say, "Bathe this one and make sure the boys take a shower." I even had to teach them how to tie a tie. First, my father showed *me* how to tie a tie, and then I had to show my brothers how to tie a tie. So I was very involved with my family.

In the little town, I was part of a Girl—not Girl Scouts. What do they call it? Campfire Girls or whatever. And did that as a group, so I had friends and normal kind of thing.

We did go to Mexico to visit my grandmother, because my father was a farmer and we had Christmas off, so we would go to Mexico and visit my grandmother in Sonora, in Caborca, Sonora. So then we would go and then come back.

So it was good. It was a perfect childhood, really, lots of responsibility on me helping my mother with cooking. She always said, "Chop this and stir that," but she was the one who added the ingredients, the special love ingredients.

Navarette So were you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:04:41]

Llano No, and the reason is because I was still an undergraduate, and it's my understanding the Felitos, the first group, I presume, they already were teachers and they were recruiting them to do a master's. So, no.

Navarette We're going to move on to the earliest memories of the Chicano Movement you have. So what are your earliest memories of the events that attracted you to the Chicano Movimiento?

[00:05:11]

Llano Well, at Sac State—we called it Sac State—there was a club that was called MAYA Club. Villa Geary [phonetic] and Manuela Serna were kind of the head of that. Manuela was a friend and that kind of stuff. See, when we were there, there weren't a lot of brown faces. I was sometimes the only brown face in a classroom. So if you saw another brown face, you go, "Hey, what's your name? Let's get together. We're going to have a meeting and have fun and whatever and talk about issues." So through the MAYA Club, eventually it became the MEChA Club.

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

[00:06:18]

Llano At that time?

Navarette Yes.

[00:06:18]

Llano Well, there was an issue. Some people didn't like it, for whatever reason. But Chicano Movement was really a political movement. So if you were involved in the politics of picketing and doing all that, well, then you adopted that. You said, "I'm a Chicano. Chicano Power," and all that. Those who weren't very political, "Oh, *Chicano* is a bad word," or, "My parents say this—," or whatever. It wasn't a bad word; it was just different.

I was a part of the group that said, “Yeah, we need change. We need to picket and we need to make coalitions.” The Black Student Union was there, and then there was an Asian group, and I can’t remember what they called themselves at that time. So we knew that we were only like 100 people in a 20,000 campus, you know, people. So we had to work together. We had to make coalitions.

Navarette At the time, had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement?

[00:07:44]

Llano Oh, yes. My father was political as well, and through him, he always watched the news. At first when I was a kid, I didn’t like watching the news; it was boring. All those talking heads, it didn’t make sense. But as I grew older, then hearing people’s opinions and blah, blah, blah.

So I do remember watching the dogs and the fire hoses and all that stuff happening on television, because it came on it. It was the talk of everybody. So, yes. And I watched Martin Luther King march on Selma. Because then I began to pay more attention to what was happening, and I still watch the news all the time. I watch the news in English and in Spanish [laughs], so even now, you know. So I watched all of that and I watched live when Martin Luther King did the speech on the Capitol Mall.

Navarette Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change your personality? If so, please explain.

[00:09:20]

Llano Did it change it? Well, I was always kind of a shy person, so it made me open up. I was never a person to be the president or the vice president, no, no, no.

Because everybody liked to have talking and controversy and—no. Just tell me what to do and I'll be there. My friend Manuela, she was, like, the president or the vice president, I can't remember, of the MEChA Club. So I would tell her, "Just call me up if you need a body. I'll be there. You tell me what to do, I'll do it." I just can't stand all the—because it reminded me of, like, my childhood when I had to separate my brothers and sisters from bickering and fighting. I just didn't want to hear that "Tell me what to do when you got a plan. I'll be there."

Later on, I guess it did change me to be more proactive in terms of also joining the teachers' union and stuff like that, and also going on a strike one time.

Navarette What role do you believe that Chicanas played in the Movimiento?
[00:10:53]

Llano Well, I think they did a lot, really. They were the backbone, really, because whenever there was some event or something happening, they were the ones that were doing that. Now, the men kind of—okay, I'm going to tell this story. There was a meeting of the MEChA Club and there were all kinds of people there and they were all talking, and they were going to decide on what to do. They were asking for suggestions and that kind of thing. And I remember Isabel Hernandez, who was in my Spanish class—fabulous woman; I'm sorry she's gone—she made a motion, a motion that we—blah, blah, blah blah.

And a bunch of guys say, "That's stupid!" Blah, blah, blah.

And I thought, "Why are they doing that?" It was a motion. Either you say yes or no. But it was like "That's stupid!" And I thought, "God, they're pretty immature," and obviously they weren't following *Robert's Rules of Order*. [laughs]

So about twenty minutes later, Joe Serna made the same motion, and all the women, including myself, said, “Hey! Isabel said that.” And then that motion carried, and some women walked out. I did not, because I wanted to see what was going to happen next.

So, yes, they were part of it, but there was some rejection by the men who wanted to control everything. But as I say, I remember Manuela was, like, vice president or something. Also I remember that if there was a picketing, the women would get together and make food or help in that way.

I did go one time down to—I guess it was Guadalupe, when the RCAF was printing posters and doing stuff, and I could tell they didn’t want—well, they delegated the women to, “Go get me this,” and, “Go get me that.” As an artist, I wanted to get my hands dirty, and I could see I wasn’t going to get there.

So then I just said, “Okay, fine,” and I stuck around and helped. But I never went back to that because I knew that they didn’t want women participating other than “Go get me a beer” or, “I’m hungry,” “You have clean hands. Go do this,” you know, that kind of thing. But I’m friends with all those guys. [laughs]

Navarette So now moving on to your role and contribution to the Movement, what did you personally initiate or help initiate in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:14:13]

Llano Well, as I say, I was never one to initiate all that stuff. I was a joiner, so I can’t say that I started this or I started that. However, I do remember Irma Lerma Barboza calling me up and saying, “Hey, we’re going to do a Breakfast for Niños

Program, and we want you to participate in. We're cooking for all these kids," at a certain—whatever.

And I said to her, "I'm sorry. I have classes in the morning and I know that I'm going to be a teacher and I'm going to dedicate my life to teaching, so I can't participate," because I had classes in the morning until about noon or whatever, and then I worked in the library or on campus at Move Up Program. I mean, I had to earn a living, even though my father did—when I was at City College, my mother was the one that said, "Hey, give her money to buy books," and he even bought me an old used little car or whatever, and that's how I got to school. But after that, I had to do it by myself. I didn't want to ask my father for money. That was the issue. So I had to earn my way. So I didn't initiate anything, but I participated in whatever needed to happen.

Navarette What were some of the organizations you were involved in? I know you've mentioned the MAYA and MEChA Club, but are there any other ones?

[00:16:02]

Llano Yes, I joined the International Club, and that was a student body club of people from all over. There were Russians, there were people from Africa, there were people from China. I used to go to their functions because everybody brought something to eat, and so I just loved—and then they would dress in their native costume. So for me, it was like, "Wow!" It was like I knew I couldn't travel the world, but in small ways I could experience that. So, yes, I participated. I didn't really, like, pay dues or any of that stuff.

One of the fellows in one of our Spanish classes, he was a prince of one of the Asian countries. I can't remember whether it was Cambodia or something like that, but he was a prince, and he's the one that said, "Come on! We'll have fun," and whatever. Unfortunately, I can't remember his name now. So that's how I got to enjoy that club and participate in it and go to their little functions and stuff like that, their socials.

I have always wanted to travel and I've always thought people were interesting in different cultures. I thought I wanted to be an anthropologist and study different cultures. I always liked ancient things, because I had gone to Mexico and climbed the pyramid and stuff like that when I was sixteen. My uncle lived there, and now I have two cousins who are outside of Mexico City. Claudia is an archaeologist married to an archaeologist. Gabriela is an anthropologist married to an archaeologist. So in that way, I've always been fascinated with different cultures and how they do things and how the cavemen, like, did things. I mean, that's just fascinating to me.

Navarette Backing up a little bit, do you want to elaborate more on the MEChA Club? It sounds like you were really involved with it.

[00:18:50]

Llano Yes, I did whatever people said let's go and do and picket and that kind of stuff. I wrote here that we would decide on what we were going to do and that kind of stuff. And then they also did things like meet as a group at the Reno Club, and we would go there and socialize and have a drink and that kind of stuff.

One of the people in the club, Frank Godinez, he was a trumpeter, I believe, in the band. He would say, "Hey, why don't you come over here and hang out?" And

then during intermission, I heard José Montoya read poetry and Olivia Castellano read poetry. So that was kind of before there was any other venue like La Raza Galeria, people went to the Reno Club. I do remember just meeting the friends that I have now, like David [Rasul] and his wife Melinda [Rasul], and Isabel Hernandez and Carmen Almadovar and just a bunch of people who are friends that I have kept in touch with.

Navarette What significance did the activities or organizations created play in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:20:47]

Llano Well, I think that the students in the MEChA Clubs were the engine that helped Cesar Chavez and others in advancing social justice. I don't think that that would have happened without it. That's my feeling.

Navarette Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, cultural, political lines?

[00:21:21]

Llano Yes. I vote every time there's an election. I vote even when it's not the major election; in other words, it's not the presidential elections. I vote all the time because most people don't, and I want my voice to be heard. So I vote all the time.

As a social thing, I do art that some of it is socially relevant. Most of it is historical or something like that or just whatever pleases me. I use art as an escape. You could read a book, which I like to read too.

And then the Movimiento also led to La Raza Galeria functioning, because that was an activist group, came out of the MEChA Movement. I've always

participated in going to see the shows or going to the poetry group that formed. I've belong to the poetry group Escritores de Nuevo Sol for twenty years, and then I've been with the Comadre Artistas for twenty years. Last year was our twentieth year. There's currently a show here at City College on the third floor. So in that way, it's influenced me. I keep in touch with people, like-minded. And I go to every kind of poetry there is, not that I'm really a poet. I'm really more of a storyteller or memoir writer.

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

[00:23:42]

Llano Well, as I say, the friends that I have, long-term friends that I have, male and female, have come from being in the MEChA Club or being on campus here. I'm still friends and had lunch with Estella Serrano, who used to be a teacher of mine, and I participated in two plays that were on campus that she initiated. That's how I got to meet some more people that were involved, community people as well. I was never the lead or anything, and I didn't really want to. I just wanted to participate.

One time I was a maid in a—I guess it was the first one, and it escapes me what the name of it was. I want to say that it was *Los Olvidados* or something like that, but it's not that. I don't know what it is. But because I had a very small part and the professor of that was in the Media Center, the director of the Media Center contacted Serrano and said, "Hey, can you come into the studio and we will record?" And he just asked for a volunteer, who would like that to go in and help him, see who

was coming in and exits and how long and who he should focus, camera one, camera two, that kind of thing, and since I was fascinated with cameras—my father was a photographer, really—I said, “I will, because I have a very small part.” I was the maid and I only had like one or two entrances. So I would say “Oh, yeah, this person has—and then then he’s going to cross the stage and then they’re going to fight—not fight, but they’re going to argue.” So he would do that. I don’t know if it’s still around, but I did that.

And I always participated when there was any kind of—like at La Raza Galeria that had that *canto* series, where they brought in different writers. I remember seeing Villaseñor. What’s the guy’s name, the first name [Victor]? He wrote *The Rain of Gold*. So anytime there was any artist or any musicians that came to La Raza, I always participated in that way.

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

[00:26:28]

Llano Well, as a teacher, I always went to those functions because I always told the students, “I’ll give you twenty-five points if you go.” And then, of course, I always took pictures and brought them back to the students. I also involved them, whether they were in my Spanish class or in my art classes, to go to Día de los Muertos in St. Mary’s as a cultural experience. I’d say, “I’m not trying to convert you. This is not about religion. It’s about looking at how different cultures view death and participate.” The Asian students really got that, because they have altars in their house and they’re there all the time. It’s a little corner somewhere where they have

fruit and that kind of stuff to honor their ancestors. So they knew exactly what that was all about.

So in that way, we talked about what different cultures were, what about different foods. I once asked my students what their most interesting or weird or whatever food that they ever ate, and it was really interesting. Each person had a different thing. One student said that they had deer meat, and I asked how many people had had deer meat and shrimp or octopus or whatever. And then one little—I think he was Hmong. He said, “The most interesting or different thing that I’ve ever ate was a Sloppy Joe.” And we all kind of laughed, and I said, “Hey, it’s true! How do you eat it? With a fork or do you pick it up or what?” And that’s a cultural thing, right?

So then I said that the most interesting thing that I ever ate was a sea urchin. I had a roommate in college, she was from Algeria, but her parents were really Italian and French and they spoke French and Italian at home. So my father was a farmer and he was a fisherman in Monterey. So I used to spend once a month or whatever, we’d go visit her family. So he said, “We’re going to go to the tidepools over by Santa Cruz,” I think. So we got up at like 3:00 o’clock in the morning and we had to drive for an hour, and we were there and he gave us each a bucket. He told us, “Pick up the little periwinkles,” these little shells that you’d see all over. So we picked them all up, and then mussels, and then he went in and grabbed the sea urchin, which is this purply thing that has little spikes on it.

Then when we got home, we took them in a bucket and saltwater and all that and took them home, and then he takes one in his bare hands—but’s still moving

around—and he gets a little spoon. There’s a little *piquito*, there’s a little mouth there. And he goes “Whack!” Then he puts lemon in there, and I knew that lemon was like ceviche, right? So then I said, “Oh, I got this. I can do this.” So it was like little wedges. And somebody else said that they had eaten that. It’s now a delicacy. Like if you go to have sushi or something, they will put little bit of that on the top.

So I always tried to include that cultural component, like we’re all different but there’s some things that make us the same. We all laugh the same and cry and we all have those common things. That’s what anthropology teaches us, that we’re all the same.

Navarette Looking back at your experience with the Movimiento Chicano, are there any issues that were left unresolved?

[00:31:02]

Llano Probably lots. But we are—how shall I say—we have kind of let our children—and I don’t know how to resolve that. Like, we haven’t really given enough attention. Now, families, they love their children and they want everything for their kids and they will feed them extra because in Mexico they didn’t have that much food or whatever, and so now they’re *más gorditos*. Now we have to educate people “Don’t eat that much. Exercise more,” and stuff like that. So there’s issues about that. Yes, there’s plenty of issues out there that are unresolved.

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

[00:32:02]

Llano Well, I don't know how to answer that. I think that it did impact in some ways for the people who were part of that, you know, and I tried to impact my students by offering them to look at another culture or get involved and see the similarities and the differences. So that is how I tried to include them in going to La Raza Galeria when they had Day of the Dead, they did mask-making. I always went to that, because I helped—Armando Cid did that. Of course, that's what I did with my art class, but here they got a chance in my Spanish class to go and have their mask done. Then I would always take pictures so that next year I could say, "Look, this is what you can do." Only one or two kids would do that, but it was offered, and it was something there that I had them do. So, in that way.

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

[00:33:32]

Llano I think we need to reengage in our children, in the children's education, and try to be more organized about issues that concern any school or school lunches. Definitely getting more involved in politics. And I know that's hard. If you're trying to raise your kids and have a job and you're exhausted, where do you have the time? But, yeah, I think it's still needs to be done and there's a lot. Well, there's racism in this world still. So we still need to address a bunch of stuff.

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

[00:34:28]

Llano Well, I always vote. For the last six years, I have been kind of out of it because my mother was very ill and frail and falling. Because I was single and

available, I went to live with my parents. Then last year, my dad died June 7th. So now I feel like, okay, now I can reengage and do more things. I just had a responsibility that I had to do.

Navarette Is there anything you would like to add or you would like people to know about you or the Movement or anything?

[00:35:18]

Llano Well, I mentioned that I am a member of Los Escritores, and I have had one story published in the journal that was done ten years ago, and that I have been part of the Comadres Artistas for twenty years.

I continue being a lifelong learner. Currently, every Friday I go to another group of people at City College here. A man by the name of Bob Leach, I took two classes from him. He is a printmaker. After he retired after about three years, he kind of like missed the camaraderie of talking about art, so then he opened up his home. He has a studio, and so every Friday I go to engage and talk and meet new friends. Now I have a whole new group of friends, including Sue Roper, who is a chemistry teacher at City College here. So I'm engaged. I'm not officially enrolled, but I get to go and listen to the lectures of art and chemistry. She has shown us in the lab how to make our own pastels and watercolors and inks, and recently we did cyanotype printing, photographs. So I'm always learning, I'm always reading, I'm always engaged in learning and contacting and making new friends.

Navarette I want to thank you so much for doing this interview.

[00:37:14]

Llano Thank you. It was a pleasure.

[End of interview]