

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Gabriel Cruz Vivas López

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by David Rasul

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Transcription by Karold Gabriela Rodríguez and Technitype Transcripts

Rasul Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for our Chicano Movement Oral History Project.

[00:00:03]

López Well, it's my pleasure, my honor.

Rasul I'd like to start off with you giving us your full name.

[00:00:07]

López Gabriel Cruz Vivas López.

Rasul And what's your birthdate?

[00:00:14]

López May 3rd, 1953.

Rasul And your marital status?

[00:00:18]

López *Casado*, married since 1979, formally.

Rasul *Cuántos hijos tienes?*

[00:00:26]

López Two sons, Alejandro Clavio Vivas and Adrian Miguel Vivas.

Rasul Where were you born and raised, Gabriel?

[00:00:33]

López I was born in Tijuana, Mexico, Tijuana Baja California, lived there for as a baby from May of '53 to September '54, and then my parents brought me to Sacramento, where we lived a couple places, and then returned to Tijuana in 1962, where I lived with them until after I had finished sixth grade, which was, I think, 1966. My parents left me in Tijuana and returned to Sacramento, and I stayed in Tijuana, but I got to the point where I couldn't stay in school or I just couldn't do anything on my own anymore, because I was only thirteen and no place to live. So I took a Greyhound bus and migrated back to Sacramento, and stayed here in Sacramento through the rest of my education, high school, and graduated from McClatchy High School.

Rasul What did your dad do?

[00:01:57]

López My dad, here in Sacramento he worked at a couple of different places, mostly in lumberyard-type places, started at State Box Company in West Sacramento. He and a lot of his buddies worked there, where Raley Field is nowadays. Then he worked for Setzer Forest Products that is located on Broadway still. He was what they called a machine operator. What that was, was he operated this machine that actually nailed boxes. I was always kind of a little bit proud of him because he and his little group of friends, who were like two or three of them, his little team, could produce thousands and thousands of those things, and no matter what they did with them, no

matter how badly they messed up, because they did mess up every so often, they could never fire them because they were more productive than anybody else.

Rasul *Y tu mamá*, what did she do?

[00:03:06]

López She worked at Campbell's 1956 through '62, and then when they returned to Sacramento on their own, she first went to work in the fields. She worked in Clarksburg in the tomato fields. As a matter of fact, that's what I did when first I came back to Sacramento at thirteen, is I came here and I started working in the fields, started going with her to work in the fields. Then she went to work at various canneries. I don't remember which ones anymore, Richards and Libby's

Rasul Libby's, Del Monte, Bercut Richards, yeah.

López Yeah, and she worked in some canneries for a while. Then she found what was supposed to be a good job, which was providing care for the elderly, for some elderly people, and I remember because she thought it was such a good job because she was indoors, and all she had to do was spend all day long taking care of these old people, which, I was like, "Okay, that's a good job." [laughter] So that's what she did for quite a while, and then ultimately, she became a bus driver for the schools, and she drove a bus until she was about fifty-eight, fifty-nine, when she couldn't anymore.

Rasul Do you have any brothers and sisters that you grew up with?

[00:04:41]

López I do. I have a brother, José, and a sister, Silvia. They're both substantially younger. José is thirteen years younger than me, and my sister's almost seventeen years younger than me.

Rasul Can you describe your youth, your growing up, your experience in the neighborhood that you grew up in, your education experience

[00:05:08]

López Wow. My neighborhood was rather diverse ethnically. I lived in Oak Park, so it was primarily Black at that time. When I first went to school, I went to school at Oak Ridge Elementary School, and almost everyone in my class was Black. There was an Asian kid or two, one White kid, and a handful of Mexicans, and me. I say "and me" because nobody in those days—well, that's something that's affected my life a lot, is being light-skinned. Light-skinned Mexicans are not well liked by our contemporaries, so that had a lot of an effect, because everybody thought I was White, and there was a certain deal of resentment which I experienced throughout the course of my life.

I can talk about that more later, but it really taught me about skin color and prejudice very, very early on, interestingly, not because White people were being racist toward me, which they were toward my parents, but because my own people were prejudiced against me. Everywhere I went, people would say, "*Ay, no pareces Mexicano. Mira ese güerito.*" And I would have to speak Spanish in order to prove.

As a matter of fact, I became known among my parents' friends—and I remember this. They would call me over. Of course, they'd get together and they'd

start drinking. They'd call me over and it's like, "*Ay, el güerito.*" And then they'd ask me on purpose, "*Eres Mexicano?*"

For some reason, I came up with this "*Yo soy más mexicano que el tequila Cuervo.*" It was my pride, you know, that, "Yes, I'm Mexican." And I had a *charro* outfit that I wore with a great deal of pride. I resented the notion that somehow I was less than the rest of the people because they were dark-skinned. I was like, "Come on, now."

So anyway, that had an influence on my life in many, many instances over the course of my life. In my youth later on when I was involved with MEChA or when I was involved with community organizations, being light-skinned and speaking without an accent made people distrust me, and I found that Chicanos are just as racist as everybody else, except that we have a hard time looking beyond appearance. I could see that if I had been a dark-skinned guy with a little bit of an accent or something, I could've more easily been accepted by the community people, but they always looked at me with distrust as if somehow I'm not quite as committed because I'm not quite as dark-skinned.

I don't even know how I got onto this topic.

Rasul It's common too.

López Well, you know, it's something I've been wanting to put into this interview, I wanted to talk about it a little bit because I think it's important for us to recognize that we have our own biases. It's like in the Black community there are—what do they call them? Light yellows?

Rasul High yellows.

López High yellows. Excuse me. High yellow. In the Black community they have their—you know, it's the same thing, darker, lighter. I think we all sort of reflect racism in one way or another, and I think it's important that we understand our own biases in order for us to step ahead, you know, that we come in all colors. Mexico has Black people, White people, redheaded people, Asian people, and so we come here with the color that we came to the world in. [laughs] And I think it affects people for some reason.

Now, my childhood, my neighborhood, we lived next door to the Najjar family, Emilio, Lola, Tommy, Johnny, Robert, Ricky, Tony, and Eleanor. They were like, I don't know, third-generation Mexican folk, and they didn't really speak Spanish, so to me, at first it was difficult because I didn't speak English. So that was a little bit of a thing but there was a bond between my dad and Marcelino, their dad, because they were both alcoholics and they both got together every day after work to drink. They would share their bottle of Tokay, Tokay wine, and they'd just get drunk.

The difference was that Marcelino would go home and eat, and that would be that. *My* dad would come home and beat the crap out of me, because he was a very angry man. He was very angry toward me. I realize that in retrospect. He was a very, very, very angry man.

Time out. Do you want me to talk about why he was angry or what was going on with him?

Rasul It's up to you. It's up to you, Gabriel. I do know, but it's up to you.

[00:11:27]

López I mean, do you think that's relevant for this? Do you want that in this discussion? I'm perfectly willing to share it.

Rasul It's your interview.

[00:11:33]

López Okay. I happen to be the natural son of a man who was not my mother's husband. My biological father lived close to my parents in Tijuana, almost next door, before they emigrated. My mother and her neighbor had an affair, and I'm the byproduct of that affair.

So after I was born, it became very, very evident, because I'm born with light skin, straight hair, and identical in appearance, practically, to the neighbor that turns out to have been my biological father. My dad, my stepdad at that point, reacted pretty angrily, took my mother back to her parents, but then they gave her back to him. There was a big mess.

For whatever reason, Enrique, my stepdad, decided to stay with my mother and raise me as his own. In contrast to me, he had very, very curly hair. My dad looked like an Arab. I mean, he looked straight out of Egypt or someplace, straight out of the Middle East somewhere. He didn't even look Indian like most Chicanos. He didn't have that indigenous appearance. He had more like a Moorish appearance. But it was very, very evident that I had nothing in common with him physically.

So my mother worked nights, and I was at home alone with my dad for those four, five years, whatever they were, and every single day of those four, five years, he would get drunk, and every single day, he would take out his frustrations on me.

It created a lot of issues for me that would ultimately find their way into my life in expression. They would express themselves in my life. I was a very fearful child. By the age of four or five, I used to pee in my pants anytime an adult raised their voices or showed displeasure. I couldn't sleep at night a lot because of my fear. I was always afraid. I was just afraid of anything and everything. And then came the name-calling, which didn't help, calling me a piece of snot, a piece of crap, a piece of this and a piece of that. It just erodes your sense of belonging.

Eventually, it got to the point where my mother's prayers, after I learned to say my prayers, at night I added my own, asking God to just take me. "I don't want to be here anymore. Just take me, please, God." Every night I would I would pray to God to not wake up, and that followed me. I didn't know it, but those feelings followed me throughout the rest of my life. I live with them today still.

So life was very difficult, and then there was a lot of fighting on the street, even for little children. And I was alone. I was the only one who didn't have a brother, didn't have anybody. The neighborhood kids learned also that if they told my dad that I did this or I did that, you know, he would right away beat me as soon as he got home, because all they had to do was say "Hey, Gabriel threw a rock," and my dad would come over and beat me in front of them and put on a show for them to watch. And then they would all laugh while he beat me. Then later on, they'd laugh at me because he beat me. He would do all sorts of crazy things. All those things had an *enormous* impact on the way that I saw myself and felt about myself. So over the years, it eroded my self-confidence, and I probably made up for it by being a little bit more vocal than most people. [laughs]

Rasul I have known you to be vocal, yes. [laughter]

[00:17:00]

López But that was here. In Sacramento at that time, it was very different. My mother's friends were cannery workers, and I remember we used to hang out with them sometimes on weekends. But my dad was such a drunk that his alcoholism wouldn't allow us to have very much social interaction without him getting drunk, so it limited the kinds of people that would hang out with us,. For instance, we were friends with this family, they were from my dad's work. Richard Aguilera and his family were close. Somehow, they had a boat and they would go to Folsom, and so they invited us.

Of course, Richard had a drinking issue too. So he and my dad would get drunk, and everything that we ever did was centered around getting drunk, you know, alcohol. And in my case, with the alcohol came violence. It was always followed by violence, so everything that we did that was supposed to be fun ended up being a beating for me, or two or three, or other humiliating experiences, like my dad would get drunk and then there was, like, a birthday party in West Sac or Bryte, and I remember we were at the Hernandez's house in Bryte one time, and the ice cream truck goes by, and all the kids run to their parents, "Oh! I want a penny! Give me some money for an ice cream!"

My dad said, "Everybody, come on, you guys." You know, he's going to give everybody money. So all the kids line up and they're already there and my dad's giving out money to everybody. Then I finally get to the front of the line after being at the end, and when I get to the front of the line he, "Get outta here. You can have

ice cream at home.” So all the kids get ice cream, and I’m sitting there watching. So those kinds of things all had a huge effect on me over the years.

But in terms of Sacra, I remember we had friends in different places, different little pockets. Sacramento never had a *barrio*. I mean, people always talk about the *barrio*, the *barrio* as if there was one *barrio*. There wasn’t one *barrio*. We had pockets of people. It wasn’t like in East L.A., that that’s where you went, or certain other areas in California like in San Diego for instance, Logan Heights, you know. It isn’t like that. It wasn’t like that in Sacramento. We had Del Paso. There were people in Del Paso Heights, there were a lot of people in Bryte, Broderick and Bryte. My family had friends there and then other people in Oak Park, like we were, although fewer of us lived in Oak Park.

The one thing I remember—and I think it’s important for me in those days—is I went to school at Oak Ridge. I skipped kindergarten for reasons that we don’t need to get into here, but I skipped kindergarten and went to first grade. I don’t remember which day it was, but I remember the teacher getting up in front of the class, and I heard her say something about “Mrs. Morphy.” So I said, “Mrs. Morphy,” and all the kids said it. So I figured out that I was supposed to say it, too, so I did. I said “Miss Morphy.” And she kept saying it several times and they kept repeating it, and then she started slowly walking toward me. She said it again, and I said it again, “Miss Morphy, Miss Morphy.”

Well, before I know it, she picks me up from my arm and leads me to the corner, and I had to go to the corner. And it’s like, “Why am I in the corner?” I later figured it out.

Then she took me to the principal because I wouldn't say her name. Her name was Mrs. Murphy. [laughter] I was punished because I couldn't say "Murphy." So that's the way we were treated. I think it's sort of emblematic of what we were for them. I was a nuisance, I suppose.

Rasul Let's jump forward a little bit, Gabriel, to the Felitos Project, the Fellows Project over at Sac State. Were you aware of the project? Did you know of anybody in the project?

[00:22:02]

López Which project?

Rasul The Fellows Project, where the teachers were brought in to be retrained to go back out and teach again.

[00:22:09]

López No, I wasn't. No, I wasn't a part of that at all.

Rasul In your education, I know you're an attorney for the Department of Education, right?

[00:22:17]

López I used to be.

Rasul Used to be, yes. How did cultural anthropology play a part in your personality or persona, what you did, understanding more about your own culture and the impact it had on your life?

[00:22:34]

López You know, to me, I was a little bit different from most Chicanos because I had lived in Tijuana, and because I lived in Tijuana, I went to school there.

By the time I graduated from sixth grade, I had learned all about pre-Hispanic cultures, I had learned about Mexican history. I knew I was Mexican, felt very comfortable with my identity as a Mexican, which started from the time I was a very little boy, right? I told you that I started with, “*Soy más Mexicano.*” That never changed. Being in Mexico and learning my history made me feel really good.

Then I had a really unique experience, because in Tijuana I had a job. From the time I was ten, I started working. I’d go to work at 4:00 in the morning every day and all that. But on weekends I used to shine shoes and sell tamales. On the streets of Tijuana, I would sell tamales to the tourists who were all *gringos* that would come over. White folk generally were the tourists, and so I was always able to sell them whatever I was selling at a higher price. So in my eleven-year-old mind and twelve-year-old mind, thirteen-year-old, I got to thinking that, “These people are dumb. We’re a lot smarter than they are because we can outsmart them. Every time they come down here, we outsmart them.” I would negotiate with them on the street over the price of a shoeshine or some tamales, and every time I negotiated, I got what I wanted, or more. So I had a very different attitude.

So coming into school, when they started to look down on me and talk down to me, I was indignant when my counselor said—they came to enroll me here in school and my counselor said, “No, here in the United States your name is Gabriel [American pronunciation], not Gabriel [Spanish pronunciation].” And I was indignant over that. I was angry about that, but couldn’t say anything because it was disrespectful.

But as soon as I got out of high school, I changed back to being Gabriel [Spanish pronunciation], which is who I am. That, to me, was a reflection of my understanding. That was a reflection that I was not going to allow them to do this. As I see things today, the awareness of culture, of my own identity, what I started noticing even then was there was a lot of ambiguity for people born and raised here, who were what we called in Mexico *pochos*, who I got to know here as Chicanos. You develop this fraternal feeling about your own people, and I started seeing that, in particular, when I went to City College and I started understanding better that people really didn't know about themselves, they didn't know what I knew about them, about us.

I was very, very fortunate because I found an outlet for me. I found *La Voz de Atzlán*, who at the time were a group of students from Sac State who were getting together and wanted to be broadcasters, but were actually programing bilingual and bicultural radio program. I became a part of that group. That affected me a great deal, because that, to me, was my opportunity to use the radio waves as a means of sharing knowledge, sharing information, sharing cultural information for people, in the hope that we all found a reason to be proud, because I had a reason to be proud. I knew that we had a history, that we didn't have to feel inferior, but I could see it in the eyes of many that they did. It was in the eyes that you could see the dissonance that is created by this notion that we're all equal, but yet we're not. Your eyes are telling you "I'm not being treated equal, my parents aren't being treated as equal, but yet they tell me that we're all equal."

I think down inside there's a dissonance that's created culturally and collectively with people that our history, our cultural, our awareness—I remember when people first started learning about the Aztecas, the Aztecs. That was the only civilization that people ever talked about, which I knew, “Well, wait a minute. You guys are forgetting about *los Olmecas*, *los Chichimecas*. You guys are forgetting about all this other stuff.” Then it was like, “Well, okay, I understand.”

In ninth grade, it was 1968, when we had a Special Ed teacher, because there were about half a dozen of our students in Special Ed. There was nothing wrong with them, except that they had language issues. But there was a teacher, Doris Richardson, who helped us, started working with us on organizing a day to celebrate our culture. Nobody had ever done that before, but for whatever reason, this Anglo lady teacher felt that she was going to help us, and we talked about it.

I remember how we picked Cinco de Mayo. That's a big debate nowadays is, “Well, that's not our Independence Day,” and all that. It was a very simple decision. We wanted to dedicate a day, and it was all about doing an assembly. We wanted to dedicate a day to celebrate *Chicanismo*. I remember we talked about it, said, “Well, we can't do it in September because we won't have enough time to organize it, because school starts at the beginning, September 16th is right in the middle. Two weeks isn't going to be enough time.”

Then came Veinte de Noviembre. Well, Veinte de Noviembre is the day of the Constitution in Mexico, and yes, we could celebrate that, but that's right next to Thanksgiving, so we couldn't.

Then what's the next one? February, Día de la Bandera. Then in March, Día de Benito Juárez. I kind of liked that, but nobody else did because nobody knew who Benito Juárez was. I would talk to people, I would talk to Chicanos about Benito Juárez, and I'd say, "He's Benemérito de las Américas, *el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz*," and I'd get this blank look. And I was like "Ah, okay."

So then came Cinco de Mayo. I knew by then, I knew Cinco de La Batalla de Puebla and I knew all about it.

Rasul But no one else did? [laughter]

[00:29:43]

López But no one else did. But it made sense, because we won a battle and it was a small group of Mexicans against a big army, which was us. At the time, you know, nobody ever thought of Chicanos as ever being who we are today, you know. The idea that we would be the largest minority wasn't even a dream. It was like there White people, there were a lot of Black people, and then there were us. Somewhere there was a small group of us down here, but we didn't ever seem to matter to anybody.

So we came up with the idea that we should do it on Cinco de Mayo. We had plenty of time to organize it. And that's how, at least in my recollection, that's how Cinco de Mayo was born in school. That was at California Junior High School.

Then the next year we went to McClatchy. I don't remember if it was the first or the second year, but '69 was when we started Cinco de Mayo there, and I remember because I was the emcee of the show. [laughs]

Rasul One of the questions we have here is what are the earliest events that attracted you to the Movimiento Chicano—

[00:30:59]

López There were two things.

Rasul —and decided to participate as an activist.

[00:31:04]

López That was the first thing. There were two things that did it, sort of a combination. That was the one where I was visible because I was the emcee. In ninth grade, I was the emcee to that first assembly, and I felt really good about putting out some music and dancing and all that. Then in tenth grade, I believe it was, I—well, no. Then I also put together a book drive for Vietnam vets that were returning, because I had read about and saw the news somewhere that vets were having a really hard time in hospitals. So I thought, “Well, at least let’s get some books for them to read so they have something to do during the day.”

So this buddy of mine and I—well, I put together a book drive, and we collected a bunch of books for the Vietnam vets and I started learning about Vietnam. I wanted to go to an anti-war march, anti-war demonstration, but coincidentally, as my mother and I were driving one day by Twelfth Avenue and Franklin Boulevard, there was a Safeway there, and there was a small group picketing in front of that Safeway, and that’s the first time I ever saw the *huelga*, eagle, the farmworkers’ eagle. I said, “Ma, ma, ma! Let me go see over there.”

Rasul That’s where you ran into my sister. [laughs]

[00:32:57]

López I may have. I don't know who I ran into. I don't know who was there. All I remember is I went over there and I asked them, "What are you guys doing?" I started asking.

My mother was like, "*No seas metiche, Gabriel.*" The whole thing was I was just a *metiche*, which was another one of the criticisms. It's like, "Yeah, *voy a ir a ver.*"

I started learning about that, and that was my introduction to the UFW. Then that became my introduction to the *Chicanismo* as a concept, and Chicanos, and it's the first time I heard of Cesar Chavez. It started waking up a whole 'nother side in my head. It's like, "Oh, I'm not alone. There are other people who think like me or at least sort of like me." I felt welcomed.

Rasul You used the term *Chicano*. How did people react to the term *Chicano* back then?

[00:33:57]

López With disdain.

Rasul Different people.

[00:33:58]

López A lot of people, I knew that when I took it home—well, first of all, let me back up a little bit to that answer, because I remember the term being used. My dad and his friends would use the term. "*Son puros chिकासpatas.*" "*Nah, pura pinche chicas, pura pinche raza*" or "*puros chिकासpatas,*" or things like that in Chicano. I heard the term, as, you know, people would say it was derogatory. It was sort of like derogatory but in jest, you know.

Then as I started using the term more, because I felt *mexicano*, but because I lived here, I identified with Chicanos. I identified with the notion that we have a right to be ourselves, because I was really offended by the notion that they tried to take away my name, that they tried to change my name, and that I felt myself being absorbed in becoming somebody I really wasn't. So, for me, that resentment found its home in these people calling themselves Chicanos. I said, "Right on! Yeah, yeah! I'm not White. I am who I am. Okay, I'm here now. I'm one of you guys. I may not have been born here like you guys, but I am one of you guys."

In my heart, I identified with the concept that we were entitled to our own identity, and I thought it was beautiful that Chicanos would say, "*No, no somos—*." In my head, it meant, "*Yo no soy pocho, y chinga tu madre.*" The definition of *Chicano*, to me, was that. "*Yo no soy pocho, y chinga tu madre* if you don't like it. I'm not White. *Chinga tu madre y que?*"

You know, that to me, that defiance really appealed, to me, a lot, and I started contrasting that with the people that said, "Oh, no, we're Mexican Americans. Let's not anger them. We're putting ourselves down." Because there were a lot of people who said that we were putting ourselves down by calling ourselves Chicanos.

My answer was, "In the eyes of who? Who thinks that this is a putdown?" We've always called ourselves *chicaspatas* to begin with. We've always used that word and we laugh at it and we joke about it. Now how in the world did it turn around all of a sudden and become this slur? I rejected the notion that it was a slur, and I always defended the notion and advocated for a separate identity for our people. We weren't Black, we weren't White, and we weren't Mexicans. I knew that I was aware

of my own nationality, my own history. I understood my emigration. I understood we left that part of us behind. We were now here, and I realized that my future is in the United States. I am here.

As a matter of fact, even though that was my conflict, because I felt that I owed the United States a duty because I had benefitted from being here already. My parents were benefitting because they had jobs. I felt I had a duty to serve in Vietnam, and yet I thought the Vietnam War was wrong. I started learning about it and seeing it as more of an invasion of Vietnam by the United States rather than the United States defending democracy. My experience is different from most people.

Rasul Well, you know, I'm one of those people who was born and raised here. I'm fourth generation.

[00:37:55]

López Wow!

Rasul My *bisabuela* came in 1896—

[00:37:58]

López Oh, my.

Rasul —from Michoacán. So when you talk about knowing *La Voz*, I remember *Voz de Atzlán*. I wanted to hear it. You alluded to it and you are talking about it. How did this perspective change you personally?

[00:38:19]

López Wow. Well, frankly, it gave me more reason for conflict at home, because when I went home and spoke up about the farmworkers, for instance, the UFW battle and that I thought that we should support them—interestingly enough,

my mother, who had been working in the fields, was organizing in the fields without the union. It was totally outside of the union. When I worked in the fields, when I first came to the United States at thirteen, we were handpicking tomatoes. There weren't any machines yet. The following year, they started when I was fourteen. But we also did some work with hoes, and I remember they were little short hoes. And all those experiences were really, really, really good for me, because I thought to myself, "No way I want to spend the rest of my life doing this."

But those were all conflicts, because my dad would get pissed off because my mother was organizing. When the tomato machines were first introduced into the fields, they would park the tomato machine on one side of the field, and then the bathrooms would be—if there was a bathroom, but there weren't any bathrooms, first of all, and the only thing that they had for bathrooms were these canals, or guys would just go and turn their back and take a leak somewhere, but for the women, there were no bathrooms. So that was the first thing; that was the first issue.

Then the other issue was proximity. "If you're going to put me—at least put me somewhere close where we can bring some water. Do *something* for us."

I remember it very distinctly because my mother and her a couple of her cohorts were being threatened by the growers. They'd start bringing goons over to threaten us. My crazy mother, for some reason, thought that we should fight back. So my dad would scold her, and there were fights over that. You know, my parents were always fighting, but that was definitely a huge fight.

Well, then I come in and I start talking about farmworkers' union and, "We should bring the farmworkers' union to the fields." That just drove everything crazy

at home. That was just adding fuel to the fire, because my mother was like, “Yeah!” and then my father was like, “No!”

Because my father was the kind of guy—honestly, I mean, down the road from there, he insisted that I get a job at Setzer Forest Products, so he shows up at the place with the forest guy, with Mr. Setzer, and said something like [speaking sheepishly], “Here’s my boy. I hope you give him a chance,” and he’s looking down at the floor.

And I’m looking at this man, going, “What the *hell’s* wrong with you? You’re a man! Don’t do that.” But that was his personality. My father was submissive. My mother and certainly me, we weren’t anywhere near that, so there was always conflict at home.

How did that affect me? But what it did give me was even more reason for me to continue in school, because then I started to adopt—up until that point, what I saw education as was an opportunity for me to not have to work in the fields, for me to not have to get up at 4:00 in the morning and go distribute milk like I did in Tijuana. I didn’t have to shine shoes, sell *tamales*. I didn’t have to do any of that stuff if I got an education. I could do something different, something better. And what I had in my head, that meant like maybe I could get a job as a mechanic somewhere, maybe I could get a job as, I don’t know, some job where I could be driving, where I wouldn’t have to be totally working physically, digging a hole or building something all day. But it was about me. It was about me, how to make my life better.

What *Chicanismo* did was open my eyes to the need for collective involvement and collective improvement, that it wasn’t about me, that I was only one

out of millions who could benefit if I got an education. I mean, that's the way it looked to me. You know, if I get a job, that's one thing, but if I get an education, I can actually help the rest of these people that are here with me. And if he gets an education and she gets an education, if those of us in my world who were being given an opportunity, if *we* could get an education, then we could help the ones behind us, and they could help the ones behind them. That's how I saw it. It was like a chain that we were starting in those days.

Something that I've never forgotten is I remember marching. I don't know what march it was, I don't know where or when, but I just remember marching and it was with the farmworkers, and there were these ladies, and they were so typical *señoras* from my time, respectable ladies with their nylons and they were all kind of chunky and wearing dresses and the same attire that they normally wore out, but they were marching for the farmworkers. And I was thinking to myself as I saw them, "You have nothing to gain from this. There's nothing in this for you."

Remember, when you're from Tijuana, you have to grow up very, very, very quickly, more than you do here. I learned in the street. By the time I was eleven, twelve years old in Tijuana, I knew all about drugs, prostitution, about the facts of life, the dirty side of the street, the underbelly of life. I had already seen that. I had already seen people, you know, dog eat dog. That's the world that I came from, dog eat dog. But I get here and I see these people that are giving of themselves for something that they're going to get nothing in return, for nothing, really, *para nada*. Why in the world would you do that? And I'm looking at them and I'm being so

impressed, and, I mean, I fell in love with those ladies. I fell in love with them. I don't know who they were, but I fell in love with what they represented.

I fell in love with the notion that we can be a link in a chain that will eventually lead to us breaking our chains and being free, really free, having our own, having our own identity, our own education, our own everything, that we didn't have to depend upon the beneficence, the good spirits, that we didn't have to wait for charity, you know.

I never was a proponent of accepting charity. I'm too damn proud to take charity. I was always against welfare for that reason. It's like, "*Nah, chingan a su madre, yo me rasco con mis propias uñas.*" And I'll tell you, my mother was on welfare for a while later on. But I was always against that. I was always more in favor of we don't need anybody. We work hard, we're a hardworking people. Those ladies taught me that there was more to life than just myself. I saw it in action when I saw that, and it just convinced me. It just made me feel like "Yes, I belong here. This is my place in the world. This is what, I don't know, God put me here." I mean, I just found a purpose, that there was more to it, that this isn't just about me getting rich or making money. It was about me helping people. Well, that's how the Movimiento affected me. It gave me the most powerful reason of all to do what I needed to do to become somebody, what I used to call "I need to be somebody." Well, I guess I did.

[laughter]

Rasul You sure have. You mentioned the ladies there. What role do you think the Chicanas played in the Movimiento Chicano ?

[00:47:54]

López You know, that's a wonderful question. That's a wonderful, wonderful question. I think in the early days we took the roles that we had at home and we brought them to the Movimiento. The men wanted to be the men, and the women were supposed to be the women. I believe, really, in my heart of hearts, I believe that we had no idea what we were in for, and I would dare any man who was alive in those days to tell me, to show me when and where he, on his own, thought that it was unfair for men to have leadership rules exclusively, for women to be the ones that had to make the *burritos*, for the women to have to clean, for the women to have to cook, for the women to do these other things while we did this, this, and that. I would challenge anybody to say, "I stood up on my own and said, 'This is wrong. We shouldn't do this to our sisters,'" because I don't remember that at all from anybody.

I do remember, however, hearing from Chicanas for the first time, "Wait a minute. If we're going to be *compañeras*, we're your *compañeras*, not your servants." And to me, to me, it presented what I believe is—I don't know if you want to talk about this, okay? So you may want to edit this out. To me, it also presented one of the most shameful aspects of the Chicano Movement, because the Chicano Movement wasn't all good. In my opinion, there were regrets. I think we should have regrets, and then there were moments in which I, frankly, feel that it was shameful.

One of the most shameful elements of the Chicano Movement was the way in which men exploited Chicanitas, young Chicanas and the innocents. You know, I saw it. I saw older Chicanos, older guys, oftentimes guys that had gotten out of the joint or who had been wherever in their lives and they come back and they're in their mid-twenties, and they've got these seventeen-, eighteen-year-old girls. and they started

basically using them sexually. They started abusing them by, “*Ay mama, sí*, it’s part of the Movimiento” and then they would start what we call in Tijuana *lavandoles el coco*. And I think that they abused those women sexually for their own purposes.

I won’t name specific people, but there were a number of men who were considered to be—teachers at San Diego State. My wife was a student at San Diego State. And a Latino teacher—and I’ll name him: Palacios. He and I were friends. Melinda and I, my wife and I, didn’t know each other. Palacios, she went to him one day because she was in his class, and he gave her a B, I think, in some paper or something, and she went to talk to him, why instead of an A. And he said, “Well, you know, there is a way for you to get an A.” And, I mean, here’s this dude, you know, one of our own, trying to get her to give up the booty in exchange for a grade.

I saw other guys in the Movement getting close to these really young Chicanas who a lot of them came from very humble and naïve environments. They came from these very humble environments and they were very naïve. They didn’t really understand. They trusted these guys. Some of these guys were instructors and they placed their trust in them. We trusted them as a community to be leaders, to have integrity, to have conscience. They had none. They betrayed us.

Here in Sac City College—I’ll tell you something that really, really—the reason that I get so worked up about this is because here at City College I was a peer counselor for EOP in 1973, I think it was, and by whatever reason, I ended up with six young ladies as my counselees, and they were beautiful girls. [laughter] Elisa Rocha was one of them, these girls that were really smart, really beautiful, but, to me, it was unethical for me to reach out to them and ask them out or do anything. That

was wrong. They were trusting me to be their mentor. How could I turn around and say, “Okay, but you know what? How about we go out tonight and have a good time?” So I felt constrained by that, and I didn’t resent it. I mean, it’s part of my responsibility. I accepted it.

Well, then I hear that a counselor here at City College, a Chicano, a so-called Chicano—and I say “so called” because I think it’s a betrayal to the Movement—here’s this so-called Chicano counselor here at City College making a move on one of my counselees. And he *did*. I mean, he eventually took her, married her, and then later on divorced her. But I mean, there’s no reason for that. There’s no justifiable explanation for a thirty-something-year-old man to be hitting on an eighteen-year-old college student when he’s a counselor in the same institution, and that was *here* in City College in Sacramento. There was only one of them, so you know who you are. And it was wrong. It was wrong.

And what really struck me is that nobody stood up to him. Nobody in our community stood up to him, and I personally felt really, really angry, and as you can tell, I still carry that anger because to me, that was the epitome of everything we should not stand for, and it was exactly what our community should be condemning, and we weren’t. Nobody was.

So I started to understand how much more at a disadvantage those girls were, because those guys weren’t hitting on me. You know, I didn’t have to deal with that. I just went to school and I heard their rhetoric and I understood most of it was bullshit. Again, I came from Tijuana. I understood. I saw the hustle. I could see a hustler. These girls couldn’t. And to me, that was really, really, really wrong. The *artistas* did

it. A lot of the artistas with their little hocus-pocus and all these meaningless rhetoric, you know, they would lay it on the girls and, yeah, they'd all fall for that crap because those guys were cool.

I think that the sexism that we exhibited in those days is shameful, and I think we ought to talk about it, because if we don't talk about it, if we continue to pretend that it didn't exist, we're not going to correct it. And I think it's important for our children to hear us admit that there was a time in which we were wrong. We acted just as poorly as any other men in this society toward our women. We mistreated them. We treated them as sexual objects and that was wrong. And not only did we do that, we taught ourselves, we propagated and we accepted treating our women as sexual objects, and that was wrong.

For instance, I remember my very first interview on KERS on *La Voz de Atzlán* was with Dolores Huerta, and, honest to goodness, before I had that interview, I didn't even know who she was. People talk today about Dolores Huerta having been a cofounder with the UFW with Cesar, and that she was always side-by-side with Cesar, and that's a lie. Plain and simple, that's just a lie. We never saw Dolores Huerta standing next to Cesar Chavez. Yeah, you'd see her physically perhaps every once in a while, you'd see her here or there, but the notion that we had this bigender leadership, that we were always, 50-50, *la mujer* and next to the male, that's a lie. I'll challenge anybody. Show me. Show me the evidence that women were in leadership positions in the UFW back in the sixties or the seventies or in any *movimiento*. Bert Corona down in L.A., I met Bert.

Union leaders in those days, they were all males. You know, all the Movement was dominated by men, and we never gave Chicanas an opportunity to be anything but secretaries and treasurers. Every organization, who's the secretary? There she is. [laughs] That was wrong of us. That was wrong. I didn't understand so much—I understood the sexual exploitation. I didn't really see the sexism per se as much as I do now, and I think we owe it to ourselves to be honest and open about it and say, "Hey, you know what? We needed to treat our sisters better." And I hope that we've learned.

Rasul And you mentioned that you saw that early on.

[00:58:30]

López I did.

Rasul How about as the Chicano Movement progressed? We saw stronger Chicanas in different roles than just making *tamales*.

[00:58:39]

López *Absolutely*. That was, to me, one of the coolest things about our movement, is that eventually, and it didn't take long before—I remember one particular gal, Silvia Olmos, who no longer lives in Sacramento, but I remember Silvia Olmos standing up in a *Voz de Atzlán* meeting. We were all there, and Silvia almost stood up and Raquel—I can't remember Raquel's last name. Anyway, Armando's girlfriend. They both stood up, but first Silvia stood up and spoke out against—and I don't remember the exact issue, but I remember she says, "Wait a minute. This isn't fair." And she started speaking so eloquently to the point, to the sexism that we were imposing at the time, that we were sort of accepting. She just

threw it in our face and it was like what could we say? [laughs] She was *right*. She was right.

My recollection, to be honest with you, Silvia almost was the first woman that ever touched me in a sense of my soul, my intellect, my sense of “This is wrong.” You know, I understand sexism. That was the beginning of my conversion, if you will, to a different perspective, and I thank her. I mean, we never did talk about it, but I remember that impression that she left on me.

Then there was Raquel. Raquel was more in your face. It was easy to want to fight with Raquel because she was, like, very, very aggressive. Silvia was very sweet. She took a different approach and it was less confrontational, yet for me it was more effective because it really made me feel *really* bad. [laughter]

Rasul I remember Silvia, yeah.

[01:00:41]

López Yeah. Raquel made me—okay, get in your face, but Raquel would prompt this “Okay, well, let’s duke it out.” Silvia, no. Silvia, she was right. Anyway, that’s just one example of how it happened.

Rasul What did you personally initiate or help initiate in the Chicano Movement?

[01:01:00]

López Oh, my. Really? I have a hard time talking about this, honestly, because I feel like a braggart.

Rasul Again, one of the things, our humbleness, we are humble, but also it's important that other people know the purpose behind it, not that you initiated it, but the history part of it.

[01:01:32]

López Well, I mean, obviously, as I had mentioned earlier, I think my very first contribution was starting the notion of Cinco de Mayo celebrations in school. That was my first involvement, my first taste of leadership, if you will, and, of course, I continued it.

My next, probably, was I left Sacramento in fall of '73 and went down to San Diego eventually, and I was at San Diego State when I realized that they had a campus radio station that had no Chicano programming at all, yet here we were in San Diego, of all places, with no Chicano programming on the public radio station.

So I went to their manager, and long and short of it is after long discussions, we started what eventually became *La Voz de Atzlán* on KPBS in San Diego. Then later on, it became other things. A guy named Jose Mireles, who had been up here in Santa Rosa at a Chicano radio station up here, he ended up down there and the two of us joined forces and started producing bilingual programming for KPBS. I did that for a year with him. That was probably the first thing that I initiated.

Later on at San Diego State, we started a Chicano Pre-Law Society, because after I decided I wanted to go to law school, I found out that there was nothing available for me there and there was nothing available for anybody else, Chicanos. All of the pre-law stuff was geared toward other people, and we know who those people are, but they weren't us. So I started reaching out to law schools, finding out

that the law schools themselves were trying to figure out ways to contact us to find candidates for law school.

So I came back to San Diego State and I started talking with my friends, with the *machistas*, and it's like, "Hey, we need to apply to law school. I met those law students and, yeah, they're smart, but they're not that smart. There's a lot of us who are just as smart as they are and we should apply. Look at what we can do as lawyers."

So a guy who's now a judge in Santa Clara, Ed Davila, and I started what became the first Chicano Pre-Law Society at San Diego State. Judge Davila has done a wonderful job in his community now. He eventually became a lawyer. He graduated from San Diego State, went to Santa Clara, I believe, and then he was in Santa Clara County. Might still be on the bench, may have retired by now. But we started this program particularly for *raza*. In my years as a lawyer, I can't say that I initiated—I mean, I was a part of a number of organizations.

Rasul Did you get involved because Rodrigo Mayorga—there was a law—
[01:05:07]

López Well, I'll be honest. So I go away from San Diego State to UCLA Law School, graduate from law school. I want to come back to Sacramento, and I came up here a couple of times looking for work. First guy I went to see, because I had met him here when he was running for, I think, city council, was Lorenzo Patiño. So I went and knocked on Lorenzo's door. And Lorenzo remembered, because we had talked or whatever. But Lorenzo and I had a very unproductive conversation, because it turns out that Lorenzo's nephew had applied for law school at UCLA, Don, and

was turned down. He was interviewed by the Chicano law students over there. We were involved in the admissions process by recommending and not recommending people. Well, the Chicano law students didn't endorse him, didn't endorse Don, and they didn't endorse him because he had no signs of involvement with the community at all here. When they asked him, "What have you done?" he'd say, "Well, my uncle is Lorenzo Patiño," and that was his claim to fame. So they didn't support him.

Lorenzo reminded me of that when I came looking for a job, then thanked me for seeing him, wished me luck, and sent me on my way. You know, it's life.

But I also found myself unable to find support from anybody else. The only guy who lent me a hand in those days was a guy named John Virga, from the big Virga family, and John was awesome. John was absolutely awesome.

So I realized back then that I needed to do something more. I got involved with La Raza Lawyers and I became president, probably the only three-time president of Raza Lawyers in its twenty or thirty, forty, fifty years of existence. That's where I met Rodrigo Mayorga, and we started reaching out to people and trying to help people in a different, more sustained way.

But you know what I'm really most proud of as a *Chicano*, what I've done? Isn't so much as an organization. It was that I started working in 1980 in the State Public Defender's Office and I realized that our court system did not require that non-English-speaking people have an interpreter provided to them when they were being prosecuted for crimes. I saw that people were going through the entire process being convicted and sent to prison. I ran into a client that had no idea why. He knew what he had done, more or less, but he didn't really understand what he was accused of, he

understood only that he had to do a certain amount of time, because he never had an interpreter throughout the whole thing. And he sat through a jury trial with not knowing.

That led me to do some research and to find out what is it in the law that allows for this, and eventually I got to the point where I started coming up with some written arguments and I started distributing those written arguments throughout the state. I wrote up my own argument, I put it in a brief in the Court of Appeal, and then I started talking to other lawyers.

That cost me dearly, because my boss, when I first wrote up the argument and I took it to my boss, he laughed at me, a White guy. He just friggin' laughed at me, said, "Are you *crazy*? They don't even want to pay for lawyers. You think they're going to want to pay—what happens if we have five defendants and they're all Spanish speakers? What are you going to do?"

I said, "You give them five interpreters."

And he starts laughing at me, says, "No way! There's no way this is ever going to happen. You can write it, but you're going to lose."

I said, "Okay. I shouldn't lose. I should win. I'm right."

He said, "No, you're not. You're not going to win."

Fast-forward a few months later, I run into a justice from the Court of Appeal, who was a liberal. He pulls me over to the side and he says, "Come on. What are you doing? You're wrong," and dah, dah, dah, dah. He tells me all these reasons why I'm wrong, all these little hyper-technical regulations and crap that he was talking about.

I said, “But wait a minute.” So we argued a little bit back and forth, but the Court of Appeal judge was telling me that I was wrong, pushing me toward “Give it up.”

But I was just stubborn, and I kept talking about it and talking about it, and every time I could, I talked about it, because at the State Public Defender’s Office, we used to get phone calls from lawyers from all over the state who were criminal defense lawyers looking to see what they could do about things, and so I would always ask them when they had a defendant who didn’t—I would always ask them, “Does he speak English?” If he didn’t speak English, I would say, “Well, look. I’ve got this argument,” mailed it to them so that they would include it in briefing in the courts. It took three years of that.

Eventually in 1984, as a matter of fact, in an opinion written by Cruz Reynoso, *People vs Aguilar* held that every criminal defendant in a proceeding has a right to an interpreter every stage of the proceedings. Quite honestly, that’s probably my most—and it wasn’t my case, that was the funny thing. It was a case that took my argument. A friend of mine had this case. He says, “Hey, man, could you give me the argument?”

I said, “Sure. Here.”

“Well, what do you think about this case?”

And I gave him some pointers on how to write it, and then he gave it to me and then I rewrote it for him, and I gave it to him, and eventually it ended up in the Supreme Court, and even though my name’s not on it, I know that that was my idea that eventually led to that, not just my idea, my advocacy led to that holding in the

Supreme Court, and that changed the course of history for a *lot* of people. I mean, I don't know how many people it benefitted, but it really made me feel—it took me back to the days of those *viejitas* that were demonstrating with me that day. I mean, I made the link in my head. I remembered. I thought, “This is for you.” That's how I felt, you know, this is for them, for those *señoras* that were there that day.

To be honest with you, I don't talk about it very much. I've talked about it in public and legal settings, but really in a Chicano environment, this is the first time I've ever taken credit for this. I don't tell people about this. It's just something I did, and it's just part of my history and it's like, okay, I did it, but it's something I did when I was young, it's something that I did that I take credit for and I can safely say it was *me* that came up with that one. Had I not been here on this Earth at that particular time and had my mindset and believed in what I was doing, it wouldn't have happened. So I feel pretty proud about that.

Rasul Right on, Gabriel.

[01:12:53]

López I bet you didn't know about that, huh?

Rasul No, I didn't. I can remember myself advocating, working at Concilio, and I was their interpreter, but they didn't have one before. But I was in the legal part.

It seems like what you're talking about right now, that took a lot of your time. It took a lot of your commitment. How did this involvement in the Chicano Movement throughout your life impact your relationships with your family, with your peers, with other significant others?

[01:13:29]

López Well, let's take that backwards. With my peers, it alienated a lot of my peers. Frankly, I started alienating judges when I said my name. "Good afternoon, Gabriel Vivas [Spanish pronunciation] appearing for the defense."

It's like, "What's your name? Excuse me, counsel?" Because I never anglicized my name for them.

As a matter of fact, to be honest with you, as I side note—I don't that you care about this, but at KBPS there in San Diego State, my very last year as a senior, they auditioned for the news, somebody to read the news, and I won the audition. I had the gig and everything until I went to meet with the professor who was running it, and he says [imitating the professor]: "Oh, by the way, this is an English-language format station, so that name, you're going to have to pronounce it differently."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He says, "Well, Gabriel or Gabe, or however you wish to pronounce it, but it has to be in English."

I said, "Well, I speak English."

He says, "No, no, no, but it's just the name."

I said, "That's my name, Gabriel [Spanish pronunciation]."

"No, no, no, that's not English.

I said, "Well, that's my name."

Bottom line is I had to give up the job because I wouldn't change my name to Gabriel [American pronunciation].

So I don't know why I brought that up, but anyway, well, you know, language, language is important.

Rasul Absolutely.

[01:15:17]

López To me, language is key, and it's something that I understood early on in life. So it alienated me from a lot of my peers. As a matter of fact, to be honest with you, it's alienated me from even some Latinos who think that I'm being unnecessarily divisive and confrontational by insisting on these issues.

I mean, the interpreter issue, I won't embarrass them, but there were a couple of Latino lawyers who told me, "Come on, man. We expect—." Things like that, you know, that were much more accepting of the status quo than I was, than I am. So I was a little bit alienated from them.

But my involvement in the Movement, really, I was very, very lucky to have found a woman to share my life with, who believed in the same things I believed. She told me early on, "Gabriel, I'm shy. I'm not like you. Gabriel, you do these things." We'd had an experience back in college when I first met her, when my grandmother died and I was supposed to make a presentation on behalf of the UFW, because at the time there was this big issue going on with UFW, and I had to go to the Student Council and all this in front of all these hundreds of people to make a presentation. But two days before, my grandmother dies in Tijuana, so I have to go to the funeral from my grandmother.

Well, my girlfriend Melinda took my place that day. Then I walked in just as she was beginning to speak. It was really dramatic. But she always supported me, and that's my way of saying Melinda was always, always, always supportive. She's been just as committed, and I feel personally that whenever I do something for the

community, people may think that I'm the one that does it, but I see it as *we're* the ones that have done it. Melinda, if I hadn't been married to her, if I didn't have her at home knowing that no matter how I get beat up outside, I still have somebody who believes in the same things I believe, it wouldn't have happened.

My sons, for better, for worse, they had to hear all about *Chicanismo* and all that, and to this day, I'm always on their case because they haven't done enough.

[laughter] They are who they are, but I am who I am.

I have a lot of Anglo friends that at times have had difficulty with my politics, but I try to make a point of speaking about it with them and addressing those things that bother them, because if you have a problem with what I do, then tell me. We'll talk about it. Maybe you'll learn something. Maybe I'll learn something.

Bathroom break. Sorry, man.

Rasul Okey, dokey.

[recorder turned off]

[01:18:38]

López They weren't good-looking like me and could just sway them [whispers] with my debonair style [laughs], without taking advantage of positions of authority, because I wasn't an authority. [laughs]

Rasul You've answered this one, but answer it anyway, okay? Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, cultural, political lines?

[01:19:05]

López The Movimiento gave me a focus for my anger, for my indignation, for my awakening as I started to understand the forces, the political and economic

forces, that were behind racism and discrimination, and I started to understand history and the role of our country, the United States, in the world. It was a lot of information in a short period of time for a young mind to assimilate, but the Movimiento gave me a focus. It's like "This is a part of the world. This is a corner of this progressive movement, and I'm going to be a part of this one. This is where I'm going to put my energy, because these are my brothers and sisters, these are the people that are my blood," and they're the ones that I related to the most. I felt that everybody else had their own defenders in society.

It's one of the reasons I became a lawyer, is because—I mean, one of the reasons I went into journalism was to teach youths, the media, to teach, and when I started seeing the politics involved in that environment, I felt that I needed a law degree to give me the independence, because I knew that eventually my politics were going to get in the way of my progress, which they did, social progress, economic progress, and I wanted to be in a place where I could be independent enough so that I wouldn't have to depend upon anyone or anything, and I wanted the tools.

The Chicano Movement, I happened to go to UCLA at a time when it coincided with a very important piece of the Movement, during the *Bakke* response, and while at UCLA, my fellow Chicano law students and I, we closed down the law school. We took over the law school. I stood in front of the cameras. I remember in Los Angeles I stood in front of the cameras in 1978 and I told them, I told the world, "If we're not going to be here, if our people can't come here, nobody's coming here." In fact, we had a hunger strike. Cesar Chavez came into town and he was with us.

I mean, we just became very, very focused on needing to have education open to everyone, and that helped me a lot in the sense of my focus and how to put my energy, where to put my energy, because a lot of times I think when you're young, you get scattered. I was against the war, I was against this, I was against that. You have all these issues that are out there, and it's hard to figure out where best to put your energies, and my energies right away, "This is where I'm putting my energies." I care a lot about the environment, I care a lot about this, I care a lot about that, but these were my people, this was my blood, and there was nobody else helping us. And I didn't want anybody else to, quote, unquote, "help us." We don't need anybody else's help. We're just as smart as anybody. We're just as powerful inside as anybody. We can do things for ourselves if only we put our minds to it. So once I became convinced of that, I decided that I wanted to spend my life helping the poor, helping the disenfranchised, but specifically helping the poor and the disenfranchised that shared my blood.

Rasul Looking back on the Chicano Movement, what issues do you think are unresolved?

[01:23:45]

López I think today we need a resurgence of the identity issue, of identity. I say identity in the sense that there's a large, large group of young people who see themselves as being Latinos, but don't attach any meaning to that other than the color of their skin, than the surface. I think we've lost a lot of young people's attention to their own long-term needs and our social needs, and I think that with the large numbers has come sort of a complacency that says "Well, you know, there's so many

of us, we're going to be fine." And that complacency, I think, has its roots in a lack of understanding of who we are. We're not the same people that we were in 1970. We're not. I mean, I understand that. I mean, with the influx of immigrants from Central and South America, we've changed. Our society has changed. California has changed, in particular. I can understand that we shouldn't necessarily call ourselves Chicanos anymore in the sense of some of us are Chicanos, but not all, and there's a different reason, a different history, and I have no problem at all with including some of those folks.

I do have a huge issue—and this is a counter to that, in contrast. There's all these other people who run around the place saying, "Well, I'm a Hispanic." And my question to them is, "Where's Hispania?" *Hispanic* is a word that basically it means somebody whose ancestries derive from the Iberian Peninsula. Well, that includes Portugal and Spain, and I don't see myself having very much in common with Portuguese or Spaniards, not in my personal history, not in my political environment. They have nothing to do with us. So to me, that is a way of sort of bleaching out some of our identity, and what really frustrates me is having my own people accept that.

It reminds me a lot of the olden days when back in the sixties, in the early sixties—and you'll see this a lot. In fact, you see it in the *Malcolm X* movie, where Black people were straightening out their hair, and a lot of them not only straightened out their hair, but they dyed it blond, you know. To me, calling yourself a Hispanic is the same thing as straightening your hair when you're Black, because it's the same thing. "Let's see how I can make myself more palatable to White people." Please, you know? If they don't like me the way that I am, that's their problem, not mine. I don't

have a particular duty to please other people by changing my identity and changing who I am. I am a lawyer, I'm a good lawyer, and if people can't see that, well, that's their problem. I'm a Mexican. I'm a Chicano. I'm a father. I'm a lot of things, and I'm proud of who I am. I may not be the richest man in the world, I never will be, but that wasn't my goal. My goal was to help my people, and that's what I've done and that's who I am and that's who I'll always be. I think that today we need to see that. That's number one.

Number two, the other issue that I think is supremely important, and I don't know if, in fact, it actually is the biggest issue, is education. Our schools aren't serving our population. We have a huge dropout rate, and it's interesting, because it's like everything else in society, we blame the dropouts. We blame the children because they can't learn in school. What people don't understand is that it's not the children who are failing; it's the schools that are failing. It's the educators who are failing. It's the system that we have set up in a way that is too slow in reacting and providing the educational means by which our children can grow, and it's not just ours. It's poor children in general, poor people in general, but specifically Chicanos, Blacks. I mean, the biggest problem is we count high school dropouts, but we don't count junior high school dropouts, and a lot of our kids are dropping out at the junior and elementary school dropout.

Rasul Mentally, they dropped out at fifth grade.

[01:29:10]

López And mentally, they dropped out long before. Part of it is the schools, but I also have to tell you, I do blame the schools, but I also feel that there's also,

once again, looking inward into our own people, yes, we come from people who are poor. I mean, you come from a family from Michoacán. Fact is that if you come from Michoacán, if you come from Oaxaca, if you come from some of the towns around Jalisco, education was not an important issue in your home, in your family. Chances are very, very good that no one in your family ever went to past sixth grade, if they ever got to sixth grade, because those are rural environments in Mexico where education is not valued, where people are used as little more than beasts of burden, because there's a lot of indigenous people in those areas, and the history of Mexico shows that there was very little, if any, industrialization in those areas. They remain rural even till today, and there's been a really, really, really poor effort on the Mexican government's part to educate those people. That's where this notion of *normalistas* came out of, the forty-three *normalistas* that were killed. The reason they need *normalistas* is because *normalistas* are people that only have a high school diploma. That's what *normal* really is. It isn't even a high school diploma, but they're going to go out and teach, and they're called teachers because they're teaching children at least to get out of sixth grade and how to read and write so that there isn't so much—what's the word? *Analfabato*? Poor people who can't read or write, what do they call them?

Unidentified *Analfabato*.

[01:31:09]

López Yeah, in Spanish, but what in English? What's the word in English?

Rasul Illiterate.

[01:31:14]

López Illiterate, yes. There are millions of illiterate folk coming over, and that has a huge impact, and we have to recognize that here. We Chicanos have to recognize that a lot of our people who are coming in, a lot of our immigrants are illiterate, and because they're illiterate and because of the value system that they bring with them, it is counter-education in terms of values, and it is short-term thinking. It brings with it things like short term, no long term, no understanding of the need for books and reading and intellectual growth. It's always about physical stuff and doing labor.

And we ourselves, I think, can't just sit and wait for the schools to take care of it, because they're not going to. I think we have to take it upon ourselves, and it doesn't mean just teachers. It means all of us have to be aware of the fact that our children need inspiration. For instance, we don't do enough to involve ourselves with TV stations that continue to shower our little girls with sexism, with all these sexist images, where they're only good as sexual objects. You see TV, and in Spanish, for instance, you don't see very many women who are dressed appropriately, speaking intelligently, dealing with issues. You see all these young ladies with short skirts, with their bosom hanging. It's like we don't need that. Our children, our little girls need to be told that, "Yes, you're pretty, but you're really smart." How many times do you see a little girl—ask little girls, ask them, "How many times have you been told you're pretty?" Then ask them, "How many times have you been told you're smart?" You know, we Chicanos need to take responsibility for fomenting and encouraging and valuing education and valuing intelligence.

Recently I've started seeing that there are still a lot of people who distrust educated folk. How can that still be true? Yet it is, yet it is. It's this groupthink. They're starting to join this notion of, like, the Republican Party calling us elitists. And I mean "us" because I'm part of the educated crowd, right? And I'm not an elitist, but do know more than most people simply because I went to school and know more about society, about politics, about the Constitution, those things. Now, there's other people who are going to know more than me about a lot of other things, and that's fine. But in terms of education, learning the tools that children need to succeed, I know more about that than most people, and I really resent having to defend myself sometimes or to defend the notion that I value education so much, because without it, I'd be shining shoes in—well, I wouldn't be shining shoes. I probably would have been a criminal in Tijuana. [laughter]

Rasul Time has passed since the Chicano Movement started and ongoing, and we've lost a lot of activists during that time period, unfortunately. We've lost their experience, their view of the world. Can you recall anyone that has passed away that you might want to talk about, about their character and what their contribution was to the Chicano Movement here in the Sacramento area?

[01:35:05]

López Here in Sacramento.

Rasul Yeah.

[01:35:10]

López Well, I would be remiss if I didn't say Manuela Serna, because that's the first person that comes to mind. I almost feel silly, because I'm sure that there's so

many more people that know more about Manuela and everything Manuela did than I did, but I think Manuela was one of those people who worked behind the scenes in ways—she never ran for office, she never had an elected office. She was president of the board of Concilio for a while, but very seldom did you see her in that kind of a limelight. Generally, you would see Manuela speaking truth to power. That’s one of the things I loved about Manuela.

Rasul Can you say that again? Speaking truth—

[01:35:58]

López Speaking truth to power. I learned that from Manuela, and to not be shy, speak truth to power, because we need more of that. I think if I had one way of describing her, it was that. She spent a lifetime of speaking truth to power and never backing down. She wasn’t always right and she wasn’t right about all things, but her heart, her mind, everything, her entire being was for people, for our people, for Chicanos, and not even an ounce of hypocrisy in that. There was no self-interest in her. I haven’t met very many people like Manuela in that way. That’s how I grew to love her, is because she was a very difficult person to get along with sometimes, but only for short periods of time, but most of the time, she was a very—her love for her people came from the bottom of her soul and found its expression in everything that she did, and there aren’t very many people in the world like that. When you have the privilege of finding someone like that in your life, you kind of need to absorb that as much as you can, and I’m real fortunate. I feel really blessed to have had Manuela in my life.

Rasul Yes.

[01:37:42]

López I think Ron D_____ was an important person. He was at City College. Ron was *really* important in the seventies. He was one of the few—he was a Vietnam vet who came back, and at the time, I remember most of the guys who had come back from Vietnam were having a really hard time reintegrating, and for whatever reason, Ron did, and immediately stood out. He was a very smart guy. I remember he was not shy at all about speaking on behalf of us and organizing and working like a dog for everything that he got into. I really admired that about him. I loved that man. Melinda, my wife, I remember she was just devastated when he passed away, because he was a guy who gave everything. He gave it his all, and our people, Chicanos in Sacramento, are better off because of it.

There were other people who died that I know made contributions, but they weren't as close to me, so I hesitate to speak about it, because those two are the ones who come to mind right now that I knew personally and I was close to. I was close to a lot of others, but not like them, not like I was close to them.

I knew Joe Serna, for instance. I knew Joe pretty well. Everybody's going to talk about Joe having made the contributions that he did, and undeniably Joe was a star in the greater universe. I mean, how do you become mayor of a city looking like Joe Serna? Not at all your prototypical candidate, not at all your prototypical politicians, but he taught a lot of people.

I remember Joe reached out to me, "Let's get you into politics." And I remember talking with him about it, and I said, "Okay, but how much time can you spend with your family? How much time do you have to devote to fundraising and

things of that sort?” Because I had two little boys at home, and I wanted to be part of their lives. Being a candidate, being a political officeholder is important, but not more important than being a dad, than being a father. So Joe and I spent a lot of time talking about that, and he was very important in my life and obviously in the lives of God knows how many other people. I’ll leave it to others to talk about more significant details.

Those would be, I think, my top three. I’m trying to think of others that—I keep thinking these names that come up, but I wasn’t really that close to them, so I can’t even give you an analogy of that many more things.

Rasul And Manuela spoke to power and to Joe the same way too.

[01:41:14]

López Exactly, exactly. Manuela did not discriminate. Manuela spoke to power. When Joe had power, Manuela spoke to him, and when she thought he was misusing it, she addressed it. I mean, look. Without Joe Serna, there never would have been Arturo Venegas, but also without Manuela Serna, there wouldn’t have been an Arturo Venegas as chief of Sacramento’s police department.

Rasul Absolutely.

[01:41:37]

López People don’t realize that. People right away say, “Well, Joe Serna was responsible.” No. Arturo Venegas became chief of police in Sacramento to a large measure—I think Arturo Venegas would not have been chief of police in Sacramento had it not been for Manuela Serna.

Rasul Absolutely.

[01:41:58]

López That I know for a fact. Arturo has impeccable credentials, he's a very smart man, and he was very successful, and there's no reason in the world why he shouldn't have been, but it wouldn't have happened but for Manuela.

Rasul Absolutely. Gabriel, this will be our final question. Overall with the Chicano Movement activities and events, the farmworkers' strike, how do you think the Chicano/Latino community benefited overall here in Sacramento? What impact has all that had on the Chicano community here?

[01:42:42]

López I look back at the days when *La Voz Atzlán* was in Sacramento. Let's start with that in my mind. In my mind, it starts with that only because I remember we were an organizing tool for people, because it was like today's Internet. If you wanted to know what was going on, you could always listen to KERS and we would tell you what was going on in the Chicano community.

The reason I bring that up is because I think what the Chicano Movement did is it made us aware of each other. That's the first thing it did. It made us aware of each other, that we weren't just another Mexican. There were a lot of us. And in those early years before Jerry Brown became governor, there weren't very many middle-class Mexicans in Sacramento. I mean, we all divided up into whatever labor group we did, but it was all these labor groups, and we were struggling to find more representation in government and things of that sort. But I think that the way in which the Chicano Movement blossomed in Sacramento paved the way for a lot of those

Chicanos that came later on to work for the Brown administration or, indirectly, were hired into higher-paying jobs, state jobs, because of Jerry Brown.

People talk about CAFE, for instance, all the great things it's done, and it has done. [Neptaly] "Taty" Aguilera and his group, they've done wonderful things, but there wouldn't have been an infrastructure, so to speak, without the Chicano Movement in Sacramento before they arrived.

I think that we made contributions to Sacramento that have been—I think what we've done is we've set up a situation where we are undeniably part of the fabric of what is Sacramento, and for those who stood up and were willing to be counted, those people had a huge impact on the lives of many who just sat back and reaped the benefits, and that continues to be true, but I think it was particularly important for Sacramento.

Here's my best answer. Sacramento never had a real *barrio*, but it did have a Chicano Movement, and the Chicano Movement seemed to bring those of us who were from different *barrios* to the same place and we began talking about issues that we had in common. The people from Bryte, the people from Oak Park, the people from Del Paso Heights, the people from Alkali Flats, I remember not being able to go to parties in some of those areas because I was going to get jumped because I'm not from Del Paso Heights. I remember shots being fired at parties. We never got along too well. But when the Chicano Movement arrived and we started meeting and talking about ourselves as Chicanos, we stopped being from Bryte, from Del Paso Heights, from Oak Park, from Alkali, and we started becoming more brothers and sisters.

That, I think, has had a huge impact, because I wouldn't have been a friend of a lot of dudes that I've met over the years, like guys from Alkali Flats. I wouldn't have been hanging around with them, you know. Nuh-uh. I would have been—it's like, "No, no, you guys stay on your side of the world. I'll stay in mine." But for the fact that there was a Washington Neighborhood Center. [laughs]

And as we started, I think, to grow from there, I think it's helped us all, and I think that that created an environment that welcomed other people from the state as they arrived. I mean, we've had a huge influx of Los Angeles natives, and they found a home here because we started that, that community of Chicanos, that Mexican Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, whatever you want to call them, now was born out of the Chicano Movement. Had it not been for that, I don't know. It would have been a totally different place.

Rasul Okey dokey. Well, thank you, Gabriel, for the interview.

[01:48:09]

López Oh, my pleasure.

Rasul And thank you for your commitment to our *raza*. I say that from my heart.

[01:48:15]

Rasul Well, thank you. As you know, I mean it from my heart anytime. I'll do anything I can to help people, especially young people, today, always. If you ever find a day when I'm not willing to help young people, it's probably because I'm dead.

[laughter]

[End of interview]