The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education Oral History Project

Antonio Negrete

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Sarah Gama
May 29, 2015

Transcription by Bradley Chamberlin and Technitype Transcripts

Gama Good morning.

[00:00:08]

Negrete Good morning.

Gama Please state your full name.

[00:00:09]

Negrete Full name is Antonio Al Negrete.

Gama Please provide your date of birth.

[00:00:18]

Negrete Date of birth is August 14th, 1952.

Gama And your marital status, please?

[00:00:28]

Negrete Single.

Gama Single. Do you have any children?

[00:00:33]

Negrete Yes, two.

Gama Two children.

[00:00:34]

Negrete Antonio Negrete, who's eighteen, and Michaela, who's sixteen.

Gama Where were you born and raised?

[00:01:01]

Negrete I was born in Selma, California, basically raised in the Fresno County area. We moved around, Firebaugh, Del Rey, Sanger, Fresno, depending on where my father's job was as an educator.

Gama And what did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:21]

Negrete My father was a teacher. He started off as an eighth-grade teacher. He was actually my eighth-grade teacher in Tranquility. And then he was also a coach. He coached a girls' track team that qualified for the AA Olympic trials.

Gama Oh, wow!

[00:01:42]

Negrete That's when he was over with that Edison Elementary School in Fresno and another school called Fresno Colony.

Gama And what about your mother?

[00:01:53]

Negrete My mom was a homemaker. Early, she worked at a factory. They cooked, like, Mexican tortillas and things like that nature, but she only did that for the first five, six years.

Gama And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:02:11]

Negrete I had four brothers and one sister.

Gama Please describe your experiences as a child and youth in your family and neighborhood. So what was it like?

[00:02:24]

Negrete Well, early on, we lived in a farm. My grandfather had a farm, my uncles had farms, so agriculture was real important. During the summer, we picked grapes, peaches, tomatoes, mostly grapes, though, because my uncle had grapes, and peaches with my other uncle. So we lived in an agriculture environment, so I was exposed to a lot of things that seemed to be natural to me. It wasn't until I left Fresno that I met other Chicanos that didn't have that farm experience, but that was kind of a different experience.

Gama Were you a Fellow, Felito or were you actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:03:17]

Negrete Well, my father was. We lived in Del Rey at the time, and he got a notice to be accepted into the program. What's ironic is the day he got the notice, our house and store burned down the day before, and it was really the first time I saw my father cry. And I'll never forget his words. He goes, "In life you got three seconds to feel sorry for yourself, and then you got to move forward." We went to the post office, and it was like a miracle happened. He goes, "Hey, I just got accepted to the

Mexican American Project. We're moving to Sacramento." [laughs] It totally changed our lives.

Gama In what ways would you say it changed your life?

[00:04:00]

Negrete Well, his dream was always to be a principal, and he felt because of he was a dark-skin Mexican, that he felt in Fresno County he was blacklisted. I mean, this is what he would tell me, "I'm blacklisted. They're not going to let me be a principal. I tried to be a coach. I tried to be a teacher. I can't move up."

So he felt that this was a great opportunity for him, because the way he explained the project was they're taking educators of Mexican American descent and try to get them to become principals and superintendent, which eventually he did become principal of Ethel Phillips and C.P. Huntington here in Sacramento County, and eventually superintendent of Mendota Unified. So my father is a prime example of a success in the Mexican American Project. If the goal was "We're going to get educators from California and make them principals and superintendent," my father would be a prime example of exactly that's what happened.

Gama How did your participation in the Mexican American Education Project influence your thinking and involvement in the Chicano community?

Negrete Well, I would say that because my father was involved with the project and we moved to Sacramento, everything we did was related somehow, like an offshoot of the Mexican American Project. When we moved over here, I went to Sacramento High School and got involved with the Washington Neighborhood. At

the time, a gentleman of the name José Montoya had the Barrio Art, so we got involved with that.

I brought this because this is something we did as high-schoolers in 1971. This is called "Chicano Speaks Out." The other day I was looking through it, and I was kind of amazed. You had Adolfo Limas, who I think now works over at—I think it was the part of the Cal Grants, and then Arnold Torres, who became a spokesperson and a lobbyist. Hector Patiño, the brother of Lorenzo Patiño, his brother became a judge. And, of course, there's many others here, but I was looking at this the other day and I go, "Wow! This is kind of amazing," because it's the first documentation I can remember in 1971.

We had Chicano Studies. A gentleman by the name of Richard Soto, who was a Brown Beret, a Vietnam vet, I think Richard now is located in Stockton, but he started Chicano Studies at Sac High in early 1970, and I was part of that class and so was many others. So, indirectly because of the move to Sacramento, because of my father getting the project, a lot of things blossomed for us as kids relating to what happened in Sacramento.

Gama And how did your participation in the Mexican American Education Project influence your career and/or your life work?

[00:07:30]

Negrete Well, what my father did when he came up here, we would take turns as brothers. He would say, "Okay, once a week, one of you guys is going to come with me and just hang out at the campus." So we would go hang out at the library,

we'd hang out at the bookstore, and, to me, that was educational because you got exposed to the campus. And my thinking right away was, "Gee, college is like a giant high school. No big difference." And I think it helped me, because when I met other Chicanos going to Sac State or San Jose State, there was a detachment to the college, because I think for a lot of times, this was their first time away from their family and they didn't really relate to the campus like I looked at it. Because I was exposed so early, I kind of looked like, "Hey, man, this is pretty neat." And they looked at it like, "Gee, I'm away from home and I miss my mom and dad." [laughs]

Gama Did your study of cultural anthropology or your knowledge of cultural issues influence your involvement and participation in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:08:40]

Negrete Well, my father, before he got picked at the Mexican American Project, he was teaching at Fresno State and he had books on cultural anthropology, and these were early books. I was reading them, like, around '68, '67, Mexican American cultural differences. They were talking about the culture of cooperation as opposed to the culture of competition and the kind of differences that have group interaction as opposed to individualistic goals, goals of the community. So to that extent, I was exposed, but my father, I think, had a lot of background on cultural anthropology prior to coming into the Mexican American Project.

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

[00:09:38]

Negrete Well, I think, the awareness when my father first came here to Sacramento in the Mexican American Project, the first day when I was with him, the first thing he told me, which I thought was real funny, is he goes, "I'm learning about Mexican Americans from a White professor." [laughs] So he goes, "To me there's a contradiction there." But I think he felt like because this was part of the program, I could sense that he said, "I'm just going to kind of go along with this and see where this takes me." So I was aware that my father had issues, but he was going to go along and basically say, "I think there's something here that I've never seen before, so I think I'll stay with it."

Gama And how did other Mexicans or Mexican Americans, Latinos, react to the Chicano and the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:10:42]

Negrete I'll put it the way my father put it. My father always felt that being Chicano was two things: it's a philosophy and it's a political awareness. He would always say, "I don't think you can call yourself a Chicano and not be a registered voter." [laughs] He always said, "You have to have the political awareness of what's going on to be effective, and that's part of the activism." He was a World War II vet and he was saying, "He, if I fought the Nazis and dodged their bullets, you guys are going to vote. Don't ever let anybody ever tell you that you're not an American. You've got to understand that when you go to Mexico, they're not going to accept you and the Anglo is not going to accept you, so this is your own identity." And he felt that the *Chicano* word itself was an identity that came from within the community

and it dealt with political activism. To him, there was a connection between calling yourself Chicano and being aware of that political activism.

Gama Had you heard of the Civil Right Movement at the time?

[00:11:57]

Negrete Well, I've heard the Civil Rights Movement in terms of the Black Movement. To me, the Black Movement really was two things: the Civil Rights Movement relating to Martin Luther King and the Black Power Movement that I saw in Oakland relating to the Black Panthers. Eldridge Cleaver and Carmichael, those guys were a little bit different. One was saying, "We could be politically active and change the world through nonviolence." The other side was saying, "We see a lot of injustice in our community and we have to defend ourselves. We have to defend our own people through arms."

So that was a radicalization, and I think the Chicano Movement, in a sense, kind of picked up on some of those elements especially in the late sixties when Chicanos were dealing with the draft, which related to the Vietnam War, which was to a lot of Chicanos unfair. If you didn't have the money to go to college or didn't have the grades, you ended up in Vietnam. So I think the draft itself propelled the Movement against the Vietnam War.

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

[00:13:24]

Negrete Yeah, I would say affected me in all of my outlook, mainly because of what I saw and what I was involved with. In the high school, we had racial riots at Sac High. In '71, we had where police would come in fifty at a time.

There was a disconnection between the Blacks and Chicanos simply because Chicanos were saying, "We want a relevant education." And I know we had big groups. There would be 200 Blacks on one side, 200 Chicanos on one side. We never got into a physical fight, but when I talked to my Black counterparts, they were saying, "Well, why are Chicanos destroying the trophies?"

And we would say, "Because the trophies don't mean anything. They're not relevant to us. What does this mean?" I think the Blacks looked at that this was something that the performed at. Whether it was football, baseball, or basketball, the trophies meant something to them. But I think in time, they realized that, "Okay, maybe there's something here that we can agree on." We destroyed the cases, but we never destroyed the trophies. [laughs]

Gama So any other way it changed you personally?

[00:14:52]

Negrete I think in terms of what I saw, one of the contradictions that I saw, I think, within the Movement, or one of the changes, I should really say, is that in the late seventies, you could see Chicanas having their own personal agenda in terms of what they wanted to accomplish on a personal level within the Chicano Movement. I'm not sure the word *conflict* is the right word, but let's say there was tension in terms of when people said, "We're traditional in terms of family," I think Chicanas

were saying, “Well, does that mean I have to stay home all the time? Am I always in supportive role or can I create my own agenda from within?” And I think that carries over into today simply because, to me, I see more Chicanas/Latinas at the academic, whether it’s community college, UC Berkeley, or the UC system, or state system. So I think that quiet revolution goes on today.

Gama What role do you believe that Chicanas played in the Movimiento?

[00:16:15]

Negrete Early on? In 1973, I volunteered at La Raza Bookstore, and one of the volunteers there with me was a person named Juvencio Romo, and eventually I met her sister Tere. That whole family, specifically Tere Romo, Juvencio Romo, Cathy Romo, were really involved in the Movement. Cathy Romo became, I think, one of the first secretaries for the bilingual program at Sac State. Juvencio Romo later on lead the Chicano Youth Conference in Sacramento, I think around ‘79, 1980. And Tere Romo was always involved, starting, I think, around ‘75 with La Raza Bookstore and many other cultural events that took place in Sacramento. Tere’s *still* very, very involved.

Gama So what did you personally initiate or help initiate in this Movimiento Chicano?

[00:17:32]

Negrete I think my best contribution was when I was at La Raza Bookstore, we started to throw fundraisers and dances, and at these dances, I brought in groups that

the music was basically what I would consider Afro-Cuban. They termed it salsa music. We brought groups like Salsa Alagran [phonetic], George Santana.

In fact, I brought this to show. This was kind of like one of our flyers for the bookstore, and this took place in 1976 at Sac State. You can see it's Jorge Santana with Salsa Alagran, Francisco Aguabella. Francisco Aguabella is Cuban.

I think one of the things that when I was a small child, my father was in a band. His uncles and cousins were musicians; one was a piano player and one played timbales. They exposed me to all of this stuff when I was a young kid, so I learned about Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, Mango Santamaria, way before Jorge Santana and Jorge Negrete. [laughs]

So it was really weird, because when I was working at La Raza Bookstore, when I met people from back East and I had the music on, they'd go, "So you're Puerto Rican?"

I go, "No, I'm Mexican."

"Well, yeah, but you're playing Joe Cuba and you got all of this other music."

I go, "Yeah, well, I know all of that stuff but, but, no, I'm Mexican." [laughs] So I thought that was kind of funny. But I think the music really brought more of a unification in terms of a definition of *la raza* to Sacramento.

Gama What are some of the organizations that you were involved in? [00:19:43]

Negrete Well, obviously, La Raza Bookstore. When I was going to Sac High, with the MAYA [phonetic] Club. Those really were the two main organizations while

I was here in Sacramento. Obviously, I was involved with other organizations, but not in Sacramento.

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

[00:20:26]

Negrete Well, I think the bookstore was connected so much with the Royal Chicano Air Force. The two people that I worked with at the time, Phillip Pike—we used to call him Santos—and Louis "the Foot" [Gonzalez], Louis was a poet. They were also involved with not only with their own personal artwork or things, but connected with the Royal Chicano Air Force. So the bookstore had a connection because we would order the books and the students from Sac State would come and buy those books. So we would have professors like Olivia Castellano come and say, "I'm going to order some books. This is the books that I was you guys to order and I'll tell the people to come down." So there was always a connection with the students of Sacramento State and La Raza Bookstore when the bookstore was located there on F Street. I think it was 1228 F Street. This was in the early seventies.

Gama You mentioned you were in the MAYA Club. Could you elaborate how that's significant?

[00:21:40]

Negrete Well, the MAYA Club, the significance there was throwing cultural events and pushing for Chicano Studies at that time, which we did through Richard Soto. The vice principal at the time was a gentleman by the name of Robert Acuña.

So I think they felt that this would be a good thing, and since there was so much upheaval during that time, ‘70 and ‘71, we kind of got our way in terms getting that program, that studies instituted into the high school.

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

[00:22:28]

Negrete Yeah, it had to, because, you know, here’s again the influence of my father. He would always say, “It’s hard for me to believe that someone could call themselves Chicano and not be politically aware and politically active in the community.” So his thing was always more the political activism in the community, and that’s how he kind of measured people’s involvement in term of how they related their own identity to the Chicano Movement. Whether you were involved with the Great Boycott, whether you were involved with the Chicano Moratorium, whether you were involved with La Raza Bookstore or the Royal Chicano Air Force, that’s the kind of things he looked at.

Gama And how did these changes impact your personal relationship with family, peers, and significant others?

[00:23:26]

Negrete Well, I think the basic relationship is I was always drawn to other people who kind of believed in the same way, and still do today, so it became a circle where if you identified with the Chicano Movement, I was always, in a sense, in that

circle, and so I never looked to go outside that circle in one sense. So my personal relationships, all of my relationships and business relationships start from that core.

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

[00:24:09]

Negrete Well, I think the biggest thing was just in my outlook. I always felt that, especially when I went on to work at the state level, that what I did was not exactly who I was; it was just a simple classification. I was an auditor, so auditor was what I did, but it doesn't make exactly who I am.

So I remember there would be times where I felt other Hispanics were being discriminated, and I made it known. I was one of the guys that I would go to the executive office and say, "You got an issue and you're going to listen to me. I may be wrong and this may get me in trouble, but before I leave, you're going to know how I feel."

I remember one incident where I was talking to a young Mexican American, he was a receptionist, he couldn't have been more than nineteen, and he had two pictures, and I thought maybe it was maybe his sisters because he was so young. He goes, "Oh, no, those are my daughters."

And I remember the supervisor, a White older female, came to me and started saying, "Oh, this is great. While you guys are talking, the public is waiting." Well, there was no one waiting, and right away I just felt that this was wrong, the way that she was coming off.

I immediately left and then I talked to her supervisor, and I basically said, "Look, I'm going to tell you how I'm feeling. I think this woman is racist. This is California, this is the 1980s. She's got to get with the program. This is not Mississippi 1960."

And then the next day, I found out instead of *me* getting in trouble, they told her that she couldn't be out of her office and she was not to interact with staff. So, obviously, there was a history of this person. It's just that I don't think anyone at a professional level confronted these people that this was going on.

So I think I was always [laughs] not getting in trouble, but always making sure that management was aware that when I felt something, they were going to hear from me. I always felt whatever consequences may be, that's just the way it was going to go down.

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

[00:26:40]

Negrete Well, I think on a personal level, maybe the greatest tragedy still is with the farmworkers. When you really look at it, there's farmworkers today in California today that are dying out in the field. The farmworkers are still not covered by the National Labor Relations Act; they're still excluded. So that might be unfinished business that really has to take place. They're still exposed to pesticides. So things that they fought for since the 1930s are still continuing in California. So the Movement wasn't able to really to change that.

On the other hand, I think some of the greatest success, what I call the quiet revolution now, to me is taking place on campus, where I think the academics, people in academia see this, which are people like yourself, Chicanas, Mexicanas, Latinas. There's more of you, and I think that will have repercussions, everything from personal relationships to the corporate world. So I think this is the quiet revolution I think that continues.

Gama Yes. Describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived.

[00:28:11]

Negrete Well, I think the big thing was in politics. When you look at who is a supervisor, who is on the city council, who is head of the Senate committees now, they're Hispanic. Whether you're talking about Phil Serna or Kevin de León or Loretta Sanchez, at the community, at the state level, I think that's where the biggest—when you look at Hispanics in politics in the seventies and you look now, I think that's the greatest success, is the political awareness that people *can* have a direct impact on people's lives through politics.

Gama And how else did you see it impacting the community?

[00:29:02]

Negrete Well, I think economic impact in terms of there's more self-reliance, there's more "We can do it." "*Sí se puede*." That whole philosophy carries over into, I think, the business world. I think the next step really is to look at enterprisers and go into the corporate world. There's not enough what I call Chicano/Latino

representation in the corporate world, and I think that'll be the next move. That's, I think, where technically *your* generation will come into play.

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

[00:29:54]

Negrete Well, there I have to go back to my dad. I've got a picture here that I wanted to share and talk about impact. Here is my father, and the gentleman next to him is Gilbert Padilla. Gilbert Padilla married my dad's sister, so Gilbert became part of the family. Gilbert was one of the original organizers with Cesar Chavez in 1955. So my dad and Gilbert would always be talking about what was going on with the farmworkers, what was going on in the Chicano Movement. When my father went to Fresno, he met Gilbert. When Gilbert had a march or meeting the governor's people, they would always talk and strategize about what was going on. So I think both these individuals influenced each other in terms of strategy not only in the Chicano Movement, but what was going on with the farmworkers.

My father has obviously passed on. Gilbert is still alive. I think my father's greatest impact really was to encourage others in the Mexican American Project to continue their college, to go as far as they could, whether that meant now continuing graduate school or even a Ph.D. My father never, I don't think, really got to follow his dreams only because he got cancer, but I think eventually the last job he had was

over at St. Rose as a principal. Unfortunately, he was only there for several months before basically the cancer took over.

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

[00:31:59]

Negrete I think in twofold, the Chicano community, the biggest thing I see is they need to infiltrate into the corporate world, because the corporations, what's happening now, you can see, whether you're talking about the banks, whether you're talking about the mutual funds, whether you're talking about state government, city government, corporations—and you can see that here in California, Silicon Valley—Chicanos need to be well aware that that's going to be, I think, our next move of infiltration, to try to influence what these corporations are doing. I see a lack of that.

When I was an auditor—I'll give you a great example—PG&E, when I met PG&E, they had, like, twenty-two people meet me, and twenty of them were lawyers and not one of them was Hispanic or represented the community. And I think what's funny, if you look at PG&E and their advertising right now, everybody they advertise is Hispanic. Why? Because of this blowup in San Bruno. So they put the Hispanics when they're in trouble. "Well, let's run them out there and say what we're doing in the community." But we're not on the board making an influence. So I think that's the next level, and that's where we hand the baton to *you* and say, "That's where you guys have to take it." Because you can see when the corporations are in trouble, they bring out the Brown face. They don't want any influence. We're not there.

Gama Do you see any other challenges aside from—

[00:33:48]

Negrete Well, I think I talked about what I consider the quiet revolution, and that challenge is going to be in the future. What role you guys play, the females, in terms of you have your own personal agenda, so what does that mean for your own personal relationships? Simple questions like "Do I get married? Do I want kids? How does that affect the whole culture that has been perceived?" You guys are not taking simply a support role; you guys are taking a leading role. And for the future, I think that will define the Movement tremendously over the next ten years. I can't even project how it would come out, but obviously I have certain ideas, but that's up to you guys to define.

Gama And do you see yourself as staying involved in meeting these challenges?

[00:34:53]

Negrete Yeah, I see myself always involved. Right now the two issues that I'm always involved in are healthcare for the elderly, because what's happening now is when you go back, the average male one hundred years ago lived to about fifty-six, the average female, sixty. Now the average male is living till about eighty-two, the average female, ninety. So you're seeing things in the Chicano community, dementia diabetes. As people get older, you're seeing more healthcare issues, and I think this is going to be a big issue because I don't see right now the federal government really

putting money into prevention and these types of things and putting more money into the community.

I think the other thing is the unions, specifically, let's say, unions, governmental bodies. Whether it's local government, special district, state, I think there's going to be a cutback in these types of protections in terms of benefits. So the promise that was made, there's been court decisions recently that said, well, you can go back on your promise if certain things and certain financial situations are created that there may be some pushback.

So I think there's two areas that are keeping the promise that the union made in contracts in the fifties at the government level and then what holds for us, healthcare in the future for the elderly.

Gama Anything else you would like to add on to your involvement or anything? Any last words?

[00:36:55]

Negrete No, just I think the most important thing, from my perspective, is my father was such a great influence on me. It's funny, as I get older, I swear to God it feels like I hear his voice. [laughs] When I was getting ready to buy a house here in Sacramento, one of the early things that my father told me was when he was in Fresno, one our Armenian friends that he had was getting ready to sell 40 acres and would be willing to sell the 40 acres cheap to my dad, and my father said, "No, I'm, I'm not a farmer." But when he looked back on it, he goes "I made a mistake. I could

have still been a teacher and bought that land." So he goes, "Sometimes what happens is something hits you, and do you see the opportunity?"

So when I bought my first house, it was what I called the Ugly Duckling on T Street. When I went to the back and the weeds were high, and—boom!—it's like I heard my father's voice, "Do you see the opportunity?" And so I bought the house and been there since 1995. [laughs]

Gama Well, thank you very much.

[00:38:17]

Negrete Thank you.

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

[00:38:26]

Negrete I'd like to add this picture and reemphasize before I came down here, I was trying to get a picture of him by himself, but what I realized is a lot of his pictures were always in a group, whether it was other fellow students or just with family.

This particular picture is with Gibert Padilla, who basically worked with Cesar Chavez since 1955. And I think both of these individuals, my father and Gilbert, influenced each other in terms of strategy, whether they were talking about politics in the Chicano community or the strategy for farmworkers.

My father, when he came over here, he became principal through the Mexican American Project; one of the schools was C.P. Huntington and the other one was Ethel Phillips. And I believe in Ethel Phillips, his secretary at the time was Mary

Montoya, José's wife at the time. Ethel Phillips was right off of Franklin, so it was based in the heart of the Mexican community, Franklin Boulevard here in Sacramento.

So I think my father, by his own actions, encouraged other educators that they could not only become teachers, but become administrators, and I think that was probably his greatest influence on other people. He was a "rah-rah" type of guy to go to college and pursue. For him, one has to remember my father was a World War II veteran, so he took advantage of the GI Bill, and he was saying the greatest thing ever was the GI Bill because he got a chance to go to college at Fresno State. And according to him, him and Phil Sanchez were the only two Mexicans there he remembers graduating from his class. Phil Sanchez later on became a political Democrat out of Washington D.C. and had influence on politics there.

My father had all kinds of side jobs before coming to Sacramento, everything from selling insurance to being a cab driver, but his real dream was to become an educational administrator, where he felt he could have a big impact on kids' lives, and I think throughout the Mexican American Project, it was a good mesh.

Gama Any last reflections before we conclude our interview? [00:41:23]

Negrete Well, the only thing I would say on a personal level is thank God for the Mexican American Project, because we would have never came to Sacramento, I would have never met the Romo sisters and had my two kids. [laughs] I would have stayed in Del Rey and got involved with some other stuff. [laughs]

[End of interview]