

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Deborah Denise Ortiz

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Evelyn Panilla
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Transcription by Sofia Ledesema and Technitype Transcripts

Panilla: Okay, cool. First of all, thank you so much for joining us and for making the commitment to come. Your stories are really important and we really appreciate it.

[00:00:05]

Ortiz Well I'm glad I got to be a part of it.

Panilla: Okay, so we're going to jump right in.

[00:00:09]

Ortiz Okay.

Panilla: Just go ahead and tell me your full name.

[00:00:11]

Ortiz My name is Deborah Denise Ortiz.

Panilla: Cool. And your birthdate?

[00:00:16]

Ortiz Ugh! [Panilla laughs.] March 19th, 1957.

Panilla: Cool. And your marital status?

[00:00:23]

Ortiz I am single.

Panilla: Okay. And children?

[00:00:26]

Ortiz No children.

Panilla: All right, cool. Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:30]

Ortiz I was born and raised here in Sacramento. I was born at what was then called the County Hospital, and then raised—first neighborhood was the Fruitridge area, which at that time was off of Fruitridge Road between Martin Luther King Boulevard and Stockton Boulevard. So I lived there until about 1970 and then I lived two years in Northgate, which was another *barrio* and very rural at the time. And then after that, high school and most of my adult life, Oak Park.

Panilla: Okay. And what did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:04]

Ortiz So my father and mother got married very young. She was sixteen, he was seventeen. So my father started out working the hops when they had beer hops on Folsom Boulevard, and then he was fortunate, and then he worked at the Senator Hotel and then probably when he was twenty, he got a job at McClellan Air Force Base, which was civil service.

My mother worked in the canneries. She worked at Campbell Soup. She also worked at a place close at the end of Broadway where they used pluck poultry or turkeys or something. And then later on in life before she passed away, long after

divorce and illnesses, she became a state worker, which was always a dream of Chicanos in this town, to get out of the fields and the canneries and into state work.

Panilla: Very, very cool. How many siblings do you have, if you have any?

[00:01:54]

Ortiz I have had four brothers. I was the only daughter. So I had two older brothers, two younger brothers. We were all a year apart. Actually, some of us were eleven months apart. So my mother had five children by the time she was twenty-one. So I was the only daughter, right in the middle.

Panilla: Cool. Describe your experiences as a child and your youth and in your family and neighborhood.

[00:02:18]

Ortiz Yeah. Well, it was interesting, when I lived on Enrico Blvd off of Fruitridge Road, the whole block was new homes that were built in like 1958, and all the families there were *mexicanos* and they all either worked at Campbell Soup or Southern Pacific or, like my dad, McClellan Air Force Base.

We had kind of a little almost rural childhood. It was lovely. We were poor working class, but we didn't know it. I had very close hundreds of cousins on my dad's side. My dad was one of twelve children. And my grandparents lived to be 101 and 95 here in Sacramento. So we used to go to my grandparents' house and we always had cousins' parties, baptisms, weddings. And my mom's side was large as well, but not as many children. So it was a very nice childhood.

Went to Oak Ridge Elementary School and St. Patrick's Catholic School on Franklin Boulevard. Poor working class, Catholic school and public school, but it was a great childhood, it was safe, it was Sacramento. It was a good place. Even though the families were working class, we all had a tight neighborhood setting.

Panilla: Very cool. Were you a Fellow during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:03:36]

Ortiz No, I was not.

Panilla: Let's see. We're going to move on to number six. Did your study of cultural anthropology influence your involvement and participation in the Movement?

[00:03:53]

Ortiz I didn't study cultural anthropology. I'm not sure whether that's—

Panilla: Okay. How about whatever you studied?

[00:04:01]

Ortiz So my undergraduate work, I went to UC Davis out of high school, and I was the only one in my family to graduate from high school or go on to college or law school. What did I study? I studied sociology, pre-criminal justice, because I thought I wanted to be a probation officer and save a lot of my family members. But my immersion into UC Davis was certainly a continuation. I was involved with MEChA, I was involved with Chicano Pre-law, but I also was involved with what was then called the *Third World Forum*. So it was at the time when *Bakke* was coming on to the campus. So there was certainly a lot of cultural changes mid-

seventies to late seventies with Chicanos at UC Davis. So my immersion of the whole kind of cultural anthropology analysis was our community, first generation to be in colleges.

Panilla: And what years were you at UC Davis?

[00:04:58]

Ortiz Seventy-five to '80.

Panilla: And was that straight out of high school?

[00:05:00]

Ortiz Straight out of high school.

Panilla: Okay. So can you tell me more about the experience of your transition to UC Davis? Like, how did you get there?

[00:05:06]

Ortiz Well, I think I was just lucky. I was not an outstanding student in high school. I was fortunate enough to have somebody sit down and do a Statement of Purpose and help me apply. I got into CSU and to Sac City and UC Davis, and I did not know the difference. Somebody said, "Well, UC Davis is better."

So my experience was a culture shock. I lived in the dorms the first year. I felt totally out of place. The dorms were not—I think was probably like two Chicanas on the whole floor. I right away joined MEChA and found a place at Chicano Studies. But it was also an interesting time for women because there certainly were comments from some people that good Chicanas stayed home and had babies for the Movement. Believe it or not, that was sort of an interesting dynamic at that time. Not all men. But

women had to really define their role in the Movement at that time, and it wasn't just to cook for all of the activism.

I also took it a bit further because I became very involved in—after my third year there, when the *Bakke* decision was moving through the courts, which was the first anti-affirmative action lawsuit for a man who wanted to go to medical school at Davis. So by then I'd become involved with more Third World Coalitions and activist groups, actually kind of Marxist-Leninist groups, and I worked with a lot of other ethnic groups to defeat that decision. So there was a little bit of a transition at that time with strict Chicano Studies or MEChA Mechistas relative to the role of women as well as the role of other ethnic groups to fight common struggles.

Panilla: Right. So it's clear that your experience there had a definite impact on your perspective, so how would you say that influenced your understanding and participation in the Movement?

[00:07:07]

Ortiz Oh, it affirmed it. There's no question in my mind that as the first generation of—and I wasn't even the first. I was about three years or four years behind the first generation. 1970 probably was that first generation. It was a defining moment and lots was happening. My awareness came a little earlier when I was like twelve years old and there was lots happening in Sacramento, but really Chicanos were defining their own identity not relative to the African American Movement, which was a high-profile movement at that time. And there were so few of us in colleges and universities, and our parents' desire for us to be there was not

necessarily consistent with their understanding of what it took for us to be there. So it was culture shock, it was exhilarating, it affirmed everything I ever believed in. It was my core base at Davis. The Chicano Pre-Law Association, MEChA, as well as *Third World Forum*, and all of the work that I did, I was an editor for a newspaper, that really helped me give a voice that was bigger at the university campus level.

Panilla: And was that newspaper like the *Cal Aggie* or was it like *Third World Forum*?

Ortiz It was called the *Third World Forum*. It was an insert. We actually kind of just started it or reignited it at that time. We were underneath Freeborn Hall and we didn't have as much money as the *Aggie*. I laugh because I read something recently about activism, about no longer funding the *Aggie*, but I remember when they were not going to fund the *Third World Forum*. No, this was it. They weren't going to fund *baile folklórico*. And we at the *Third World Forum*, there was activism where people took over Mrak Hall and shut down the *Aggie*.

So I remember handwriting my editorial—I think it was entitled “The Politics of Protest”—and hand-carried it to an outside printer where we did the editorial about standing up and making sure that cultural arts and *baile folklórico* was funded. So that was the activism in my role at *Third World Forum* to be able to have them shut down the *Aggie* so they can't go to press, but we, on the other hand, managed to print an editorial that was handwritten, telling the story about the inequity in funding.

Panilla: And what year was that?

[00:09:31]

Ortiz I want to say it had to have been 1978 or '77, so it was towards my mid-experience at UC Davis. So it'd be helpful to find it out.

Panilla: So we're going to, I guess, take it back a little bit. Because you said you started coming to consciousness and learning about the things that were happening around you pretty early on, so what is your earliest memories of the event that attracted you to the Movement?

[00:09:58]

Ortiz Well, it was fascinating. The summer of 1969, we lived in Fruitridge. My parents had gotten a divorce or were getting a divorce, and we lived in this part of the city that wasn't even city, still isn't city, and I was able to go to the Washington Neighborhood Center, which was in Alkali Flats. Alkali Flats was the heart of the Chicano community at that time in the sixties, and there was a neighborhood center called Washington Neighborhood Center that had all the youth activities.

So my mother got my brothers and I able to go to this summer camp for a week, and it was lovely. It was up in the mountains. Our counselors were the first generation of Chicanos at the universities, 1969, and some of them were Brown Berets, some of them were Chicanas. My counselor was a Chicano that seven years later I find out is a distant cousin of mine, because I become friends with her sister at Davis.

And it was exposure to the Movement and defining ourselves as Chicanos and really kind of an eye-opening experience. At the same time, I remember that was the summer that we landed on the moon. We're seeing civil unrest with the Black Power

Movement. That rest of that summer, we would go there for activities, and the counselors that were there and the youth were there, and they probably were eighteen, nineteen years old. We did marches at Folsom Prison against prisoner rights. We did a sit-in at a place that would eventually become DQU University. We were just so involved in activism that summer, and I was a kid, and I don't think my mother knew. But I was keenly aware of watching what was going on across the nation and understanding the role of Chicanos taking on the advocacy for my grandparents, because my grandparents were farmworkers and my grandfather was a farm labor contractor. We would pick fruit here in Sacramento or tomatoes for summer money. But it really put a face on the struggles and hard work of my grandparents to come to this country and raise my father and my aunts and uncles. That was summer of my awakening.

Panilla: And just for record sake, how old were you during that summer?

[00:12:21]

Ortiz I was twelve.

Panilla: That's really young. [laughter]

[00:12:23]

Ortiz Yeah. It was lovely, though, and I was always very academically strong in school, my brothers not so much. I read a lot, and I was the only daughter, so I often did things on my own. For me, it was a really transformative summer and it defined my identity going forward that was strengthened when I was in college and then later on in my career.

Panilla: Would you say that that also helped influence your choices to do well academically or to continue on later into college?

[00:12:52]

Ortiz You know, it's interesting because I—my counselor was this woman named Amelia Gomez, and when I went to Davis in the fall of '75, her sister Soledad became a very good friend of mine. Most of the families here in Sacramento at that time were from the same region my grandparents were from, Los Altos de Jalisco, which is all the families. And she said, "You're from Los Altos, aren't you?" We find out we're related.

So her sister, who I subsequently find out is related to me, was a smart, attractive, dynamic but otherwise kind of like my family Chicana, but she was in college. And my mother had always told me, "You will not get married young, you will not get pregnant. You will go to college." I had no idea how I would go, but that woman was my first, "Ah, okay. She's done it. I can do it." So in terms of me aspiring to go to college and be very different than my mother's life, that woman was a symbol for that, and subsequently when I went to Davis, it was still a struggle for Chicanas at the campus at that time, but at least there was someone that preceded it.

Panilla: Right, right. How did other Mexicans or Mexican Americans or Latinos, however they identified react to the term *Chicano*? Because I know you're using it a lot now, but at the time was there any backlash towards it—

[00:14:18]

Ortiz It's interesting.

Panilla: —or like the Movement, the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:14:22]

Ortiz So my parents were very young and my parents divorced. But my father was actually very involved in at the civil service Affirmative Action Movement at McClellan Air Force Base, so I heard it in my home when I was a teenager or when I would for one year live with my dad. He was very much involved with at that time Lorenzo Patino and Louie Lovera here in town, were some early leaders that are—both of them have passed, as well as my father. But it was not an uncommon term with my father. It was not necessarily a comfortable term with my grandfather, his father from Mexico. He didn't get this *Chicano* thing. And he was *mexicano* and understood his grandchildren weren't *mexicano*.

But in campus, obviously, it was fine, but there were places you knew where to use it and where not to use it. But we were at the height of—not every Mexican American or Chicano at UC Davis used the term *Chicano*. So we indeed were a subgroup, or progressive group, or more evolved group or at least a more challenging group, where we would challenge the status quo.

Panilla: During this time—well, you kind of already answered this, but I don't know if you want to elaborate more.

[00:15:42]

Ortiz Sure.

Panilla: During the time of when you started learning about everything, you knew about the Civil Rights Movement.

[00:15:47]

Ortiz Yeah.

Panilla: How did that impact you?

[00:15:49]

Ortiz Well, you know, we grew up poor, so I was always conscious of being working class and poor. And I wasn't *mexicana* because I wasn't born in Mexico and I didn't speak Spanish. So I knew I wasn't quite *mexicana*, and my mother didn't raise me as quite as traditionally as some Chicanas were raised. I didn't have *baile folklórico*. I didn't have a *quinceañera*. So I always struggled with I knew I was proud, I knew I was comfortable with the term *Chicana*, but I think much of my consciousness was defined also by class, you know, being a voice for poor people independent of their ethnicity, that that is really compelling—because I did a lot of—I was involved with some study groups that were also Marxists-Leninists. So, for me, I knew I was Chicana, called myself Chicana, was not *mexicana*, always felt a little bit—because I didn't speak Spanish, that there was always that dynamic as well at Davis that you're Chicana, but you're not *mexicana*. But I also felt very comfortable working with other Third World groups that had economic struggles.

I don't know if that goes to the heart of your question.

Panilla: Yeah, yeah. So you were able to find solidarity through those struggles to be able to better understand the Movement?

[00:17:08]

Ortiz As well as shaping the Chicano Movement at UC Davis, even when it meant sort of working with what at that time were some pretty chauvinist elements in the Chicano Movement. So that was not a comfortable place to be in, but it was an essential part of that change and evolution.

Panilla: Right. I'm going to assume that the answer to the question is yes. But how did the Movement change you personally?

[00:17:35]

Ortiz You know, I think it affirmed sort of my personal experience, my family experience. It affirmed it in a sort of a political lens. So my life experiences and the sense of wanting to help poor people all my life and wanting to honor my grandparents, who were immigrants, it found a way in a political infrastructure. So the Movement gave me that sense of "Ah! This is the right thing to do."

And it is a unique experience, and it carries with me today. I mean, I subsequently went on to be a city councilwoman and an assemblywoman and a senator, and throughout that time, those core values, and part of it being a Chicana and understanding the place of Chicanos in the state, or Latinos, as I use the term more commonly today, is affirmed consistently and continues to be the way that I either weigh in on a conversation about advocacy in general or access to healthcare access or access to education or inequities in education, and I continue to advocate on behalf of those who continue to be in, unfortunately, a lower strata of achievement.

Panilla: Okay. You've touched on this also, but can you expand more on your belief of how Chicanas played a role in the Movement?

[00:19:04]

Ortiz Ah! Yeah. I think Chicanas, depending on where you are in terms of your immigrant status, the role your mother played, the role you played in your family, there is no one experience. My mother had an eighth-grade, ninth-grade education. My mother was born in this country, as were her parents and grandparents, in New Mexico, but she always knew her only daughter was going to go to college, so it was never questioned. My mother pushed me to do things that I didn't know that I was going to do. But I know that some Chicanas struggle with the desire that their parents have for them to achieve, but perhaps the discomfort of a daughter moving away or perhaps some expectation that if they choose a path of education, it's not going to result in the traditional marriage/child route.

So I think Chicanas' role in the Movement will always be a point of needing to educate our own on a regular basis about expectations, about assumptions, and even though Chicanas have achieved, there are more Chicanas in higher education and, unfortunately, Chicano males continue to be a very small, small percentage, there are unique struggles that women have in this process, you know, traditional notions about the role of a woman in relationships.

So I believe it's easier now but it was not particularly easy in the seventies. I mean, there were still some persistent notions about the role, like whether women were at the table in the MEChA meetings designing *mesa de activa*, the governing board, or whether when duties were broken up, "Oh, yeah, the women will cook the food." Well, not always we won't. [laughs] So, hopefully, things are different now.

Panilla How did you navigate that? How did you assert your position in, like, “I’m a part of this”? Or how did you work through it?

[00:21:24]

Ortiz You know, it wasn’t always easy, and I don’t think I always did it as tactfully as maybe I should have, but I grew up with all brothers [laughs] and I had a mother who told me I could do anything, so I was pretty bold, if a little clumsy, and it wasn’t always what other women were doing. I mean, I generally became the spokesperson to push the envelope even if other women felt that way. So, you know, it was not an easy process and I don’t know that I maneuvered it perfectly, but, you know, it had to be done just like when you see at any point in any movement where the problems are, someone has to address them. You can’t ignore them.

Panilla: Okay. So what were you personally involved in? So you say MEChA and the Third World Coalition. How did your involvement personally, things that you initiated, help in the Chicano Movement and your time where you were involved?

[00:22:22]

Ortiz So I was very involved in the *Third World Forum* as a campus editor, so I wrote for that newspaper. I was in the Chicano Pre-Law Association since I eventually went on to law school, and that was advocating and creating a peer support system for other Chicanos who wanted to go to law school. I headed up what was then called the Jamaica. I don’t know what it’s called now, Hermanas de la Raza or something, but at that time it was called the Jamaica. We had a week of activities and I oversaw the organizing of it.

Panilla: For MEChA?

[00:22:55]

Ortiz Well, it wasn't exclusively MEChA. It was sort of *the* Chicano week of Cinco de Mayo activities, essentially. It was called the Jamaica. So every year we would always have Los Lobos and there would always be a committee and we'd have to organize the food and the vendors and stuff. So I was very organized, very involved in organizing, heading that up.

What else did I do? Gosh. You know, I organized a lot with this group called the Anti-Bakke Decision Coalition, and that group was formed in reaction to *Bakke* coming, and doing the protests on campus and organizing the efforts to elevate the visibility of this really horrific Supreme Court decision, which was the first anti-affirmative action decision. So I did a lot of campus organizing around that. Gosh, I can't recall. Lots of social activities with our friends. But Chicano Pre-Law, *Third World Forum*, MEChA, as well as the Anti-Bakke Decision Coalition.

Panilla: Can you talk more about *Bakke* and if it changed anything on campus, like the campus climate or like how many students were there that were against it and how many were just kind of complicit?

[00:24:12]

Ortiz Well, you know, the backstory is this is a man who was older, was already an engineer, and he challenged that he didn't get into the UC Davis Medical School. I think his first challenge was either '74 or '75, but it took multiple years to

go up through the U.S. Supreme Court and finally, unfortunately, have his admission upheld.

How did that define us? It became a rallying point at Davis at that time. I was also involved with—even though I wasn't pre-med, I had a lot of friends who were in what was then called CHE, Chicanos in Health Education. There was Clinica Tepati here in Sacramento. I was pre-law, but I still volunteered there because it was my hometown and it was right there in Alkali Flats. So a lot of the medical pre-med students were my friends, pre-law students, and they were *very* organized around this, because these are people who are now wonderful physicians, who were the only ones in their family who graduated from high school, who were farmworker families, who just have been succeeded in life and are serving the community.

But they, as students struggling through chemistry and through all of those pre-med courses, seeing a man who already had a professional career as an engineer, who already had achieved, you know, had status to begin with in society, who was challenging what was a rule that if you're certain age you don't get admitted to medical school, had nothing to do with him being a white male, but he challenged that. And, you know, these are people who had hopes and dreams, and this symbol of this activism, there was a rallying cry. There was *so* much activity. Really, truly, the demonstrations, the protests were pretty significant.

At the same time, you had a really horrendous kind culture at UC Davis, which had been an ag college, when there was this fraternity called Alpha Gamma Rho that did this *horrible* initiation song that I know to this day about Lupe, that also

caused all of these protests at the same time as this *Bakke* decision is working its way through. So the culture of UC Davis at that time, former ag farmer and that fraternity juxtaposed against Chicanos hungry for change and Chicanas hungry for change, and their first steps in the door of a university, an elite institution, and here you see the doors closing with *Bakke*.

Panilla: I know that within the Chicano community and the Chicano/Latino community there are subgroups of people who are interested in different—like I’m pre-med and I’m sociology. So would you say that what happened with *Bakke* and then what happened with everything else, that it brought the whole community together because it kind of pulled at different heartstrings for different people?

[00:27:12]

Ortiz Yeah, I think it did, but there was still this notion that somehow “Oh, you pre-law people or you sociology people, you can do all the activism. We’re pre-med. We have to study.” So there was always this—there had been this sort of “Oh, we work harder than you and we’re not political, but we still think the *Bakke* decision is bad.” So they were still activists. But there was those divisions. I don’t know if they persist to this day, these notions about who works harder and who has time to play with politics, but thank God we played with politics.

Panilla: Yeah, definitely. Okay. So you’re involved with a lot organizations, with a lot of coalition building, with a lot of community work. How do you think those activities or those organizations created play in the Movement?

[00:27:12]

Ortiz I think it was seared in the identities of a generation, you know, our minds, our hearts. You're idealistic when you're in college anyway. You're young, your life is changing, and you're really cognizant of how different your life is from your parents'. So that life experience in that window of time where you're pushing the envelope on many things, it stays with you throughout your life. I mean, those are the formative years, and I think most of us never fully recognized until later in life how fortunate we were to be there. So I think absolutely for me it formed the foundation. Well, it affirmed what I felt at an earlier stage in my life and it began to give me the tools on how I could translate that in my career and my future in being a voice for others and doing activism in other ways.

Panilla: Did the Movement further raise your consciousness along social, cultural, and political lens? You kind of talked about, like, you became really aware, hyper aware of your surroundings and where you came from. Do you want to describe how that happened for you?

[00:29:24]

Ortiz Well, in terms of ethnic identity, it was always a little different than others, I mean not to say I was the only person, but there were more traditional *mexicanas*, Chicanas, who were either first generation or born in Mexico and I was not. So we always had that difference where I wasn't quite as traditional.

I'm sorry. Go back to the original question.

Panilla: How did the Movement raise your consciousness along social, political, and cultural lines?

[00:30:00]

Ortiz Got it. So I think it just affirmed my identity as a Chicana, not *mexicana*, certainly not mainstream American because of my last name and who my grandparents, their model, and that importance, but also because I was poor. So it affirmed my identity as a Chicana. And later on in life, it was okay not to be more traditional *mexicana*, because I was like so many other people that are Chicanas in this country. So it absolutely affirmed my identity, and later on, I more commonly use the term *Latino*, not that I don't ever use the term *Hispanic*. [laughs] It's just not in my politics. But I have come to realization that maybe even using the term *Latinos* a little bit of a compromise, but I'm not always in a Chicano crowd. So when I'm talking to mainstream professional liberals or non-liberals, I would lose an audience. Like, for example, when I served in the legislature, there's a reason you say *Latino* and you still advocate for immigrants, for educational access, for health access. You use the appropriate term for the appropriate audience, but it in no way compromises my core values.

Panilla: How did these changes—like you became really aware of yourself—how did they impact your personal relationships, like, with your family, your peers, or significant others?

[00:31:39]

Ortiz I went on to law school, was involved with—we changed the name, actually. I changed the name from Hispanic Law Students to Latino Law Students. My father was proud because he was much more sort of *mexicano* than my mother,

although he was born here. My mother was proud, although she wasn't *mexicana*; she was *manita* from New Mexico, which is a little different. My brothers, who were working class, never went to college. I think they identified themselves as Chicanos. but they weren't activists, but they were proud of me. And my relationships, personal relationships, I think they were all favorable. I mean, whether it was with non-Latinos, non-Chicanos or with Chicanos, I mean, I was very clear about my identity and people to this day know me to use my mediums on behalf of particularly immigrants.

Panilla: Cool. Okay. Let's see. I had a follow-up question for that, but I guess we can just move on. Can you talk more about law school? Like, when you moved on to law school, did anything change? Was it harder to keep up with relationships with important people in your life?

[00:33:04]

Ortiz You know, law school was a period of time of time in which I was very focused. I worked full-time and I went to law school at night here at McGeorge, so there was not a lot of time for—I had been involved prior to that with some progressive organizations and study groups and every week focusing on sort of working-class sort of perspectives of activism, but when I was in law school, it was law school and it was work. But I was involved in the Latino Law Students Association, and we created—and I helped and I pushed it—a tutoring support program at McGeorge that was funded by McGeorge. What was it called? We got a full-time instructor and a mentor, but it was a resource that we had to advocate for,

and there weren't a lot of us at Mc George at the time. So I still stayed involved, but trying to create a support system for many of us who were struggling in law school. So it helped define me.

Then what else did I do? I worked full-time and then was involved, and then I also was involved—because I worked full-time at Lege Council, but I was involved with the Chicano Latino Capitol Staff Association, so most of these people worked in the Capitol. I worked at Lege Council, but was involved in that organization during the day and then I went to law school at night.

Then when I graduated from law school and worked in the Capitol, I built that group and we built our strength because there was not so many Latino staffers in the building at that time, so continued that activism in the State Capitol in the eighties, late eighties, when there weren't that many staff there, to try to get people hired, to have our organization raise money, to have interns. So that activism continued on that staff capacity in the Capitol.

Panilla: Okay. Moving more on to, like, further in your life, can you describe some of the impacts that your involvement with the Chicano Movement had on your career?

[00:35:10]

Ortiz Yeah, you know, it's interesting. Oh, gosh, I forgot about this as well. I was the first Chicana ever elected to the Sacramento City Council here, and the last, unfortunately. We've not ever had another Chicana. We had one *mexicana* appointed, but then she ran for election and didn't get elected.

But prior to that, I lived in South Oak Park during high school and college and law school, and bought my first home there, but I was involved with this group called the La Raza Rights Committee, I guess when I was in law school. I forgot I was still involved with them. There used to be lowriders on Franklin Boulevard, and the police were cracking down on them. We had a newly-elected city councilmember, Joe Serna. Actually, Mayor Isenberg, who subsequently became the assemblyman who I followed, and Mayor Serna, there was the police cracking down on the lowriders on Franklin Boulevard, and also they went over to Tahoe Park to do cruising. We handed out "These are your rights from the police" kind of handcards.

So had a very stern meeting in the home of then-city councilmember Serna, you know, telling us who are we to do this? So I was pushing the envelope at that time, as you viewed politicians as the ones that were coopted versus those of us who were activists. Of course, subsequently I become an elected official, and I'm sure some people felt that I was coopted in some way, although I can't recall specifically.

So how did it form my position? It was a sense of immense cultural pride in this town when I ran. I ran against the wife of a very beloved former assemblyman, Lloyd Connelly. I also ran against someone who was strongly backed by the police and fire unions and the developers in town, and then also someone else who was a very well-heeled Republican physician.

I was not given a chance of winning because the voters were Curtis Park and I lived in Oak Park. So what worked was we had my friends from grammar school, my *tias*, my cousins, we had this sort of this grassroots movement of people in this town.

We didn't have the most amount of money, but we have the best phone banks, we had the best food at the phone banks, we had the best ground operation. You know, we had Placencia giving out free *pan dulce* from Esperanza on Election Day because it was a federal election. So if showed up and showed you voted for Deborah Ortiz, they'd give you *pan dulce*. So but for the sense of cultural pride in a district that didn't have a lot of Latino voters, that's what gave me the edge.

It really came after in 1990 I was part of a coalition of African Americans, Latinos, and the LGBT community to redistrict the city council in Sacramento, and that seat, which Joe Serna had been the city councilperson, he becomes the mayor, that's the seat I ultimately ran for, which had the largest Latino population in the city, which wasn't that much. So that was ground zero for cultural pride at that time, and it was an element of my success in not only that election, but my assembly and my senate race. Even to this day—and I've been out of the senate for eight years—I'm on the Los Rios Community College Board of Trustees, but to this day, there are people who, "*Ay, Senora Ortiz, yo recuerdo usted cuando estaba un la senadora.*" So there are people that to this day had such an immense sense of support and cultural pride. So Sacramento is—I tell the story, my grandparents' story is a story of many, many *mexicanos* and Chicanos in this town. They worked in the fields and then the women got out of the fields and in the canneries, and then their children became state workers or state senators.

Panilla: So it was a community effort.

[00:39:27]

Ortiz Absolutely, yeah.

Panilla: Okay. So if you look back at your experience in the Movement, are there any issues that you think were left unresolved?

[00:39:38]

Ortiz Issues in the Movement left. Is that the question what challenges lie ahead, kind of?

Panilla: No, that's for later on.

[00:39:49]

Ortiz Oh, I see you're still saving that. Issues unresolved for me or for the Movement?

Panilla: I guess you can take that however you want for yourself. You can answer both yourself and the Movement.

[00:40:03]

Ortiz I think there are always issues unresolved in the Movement because the Movement's organic. There are waves of *mexicanos* coming to this country, coming to Sacramento, this region, which isn't quite L.A., it's not quite San Diego, it's certainly not some of the poorer parts of the Central Valley, and surprisingly, despite all the challenges in this city, Chicanos *have* been supported by non-Chicano voters, for example with Joe Serna, Phil Serna, myself. So, unresolved issues, I think the Movement has to renew itself and it has to stay abreast of the times without losing its core value focus. The realities, I mean, a heightened sense of victimization of immigrants today is horrific, but it's not new. It's not unlike the deportations that

occurred of even U.S.-born Chicanos that were deported back to Mexico during tough economic times.

So I think unresolved issues are, you know, we still have the highest dropout rate. Our dropout rates from high school have not improved much from the time I was in high school. Our access to higher education, certainly four-year institutions, is terrible. The community colleges are the biggest source of higher education for Chicanos, yet so few of us make it to transfer to four-year institutions. Those are *huge* unresolved issues.

The ongoing issue of defining race and ethnicity in our society and how society views us, because part of society, I mean I've heard it. "Oh, Latinos, Chicanos, you guys are fine. You're kind of like Irish and the Italians. You're going to assimilate." Absolutely not the case. And how do you effectively educate the public? Or putting us in sort of progressive or—let me be very clear—liberal White people who feel a sense of obligation in the African American Movement but not quite as much when it comes to Chicanos. So we're kind of that in-between ethnic minority, yet we're what, 40 forty percent of California's population, what, 70 percent of the kids in K-through-12 system? So those are unresolved issues. Those issues were not directed then.

Affirmative action was one means of fixing it. That door's been closed. How do we smartly, strategically, politically address this ongoing issue of access to higher education? If it's not the affirmative action model, what does it look like? So what's

our role in challenging public education system to educate our youth? So I think those are unresolved issues.

Panilla: Okay. So just your involvement in the Sacramento area. You obviously really love where you come from.

[00:43:16]

Ortiz I love my town.

Panilla: [laughs] Can you describe how the Movement impacted the community life here for you or through your perspective?

[00:43:24]

Ortiz I really want to go back to the basics. I mean, the early *mexicano* families that settled here were all from Jalisco. It's different now; more families from Michoacán, from Zacatecas, little bit from Oaxaca. But those early families like my grandparents, there was always a place in the house for one family to come and get settled before they moved and stayed here, and that transition and that assisting family and network really defined the face of Sacramento. I mean, most of the businesses were Jalisco or Hacienda or the Esperanza Bakery, all the families were from Jalisco, from Los Altos de Jalisco.

So, Sacramento, another story is how *mexicano* families were displaced. Urban renewal on the west side of Sacramento, well documented throughout the history of Sacramento, but not quite told from a Chicano perspective, my grandparents' home was on Third and N. The city exercised eminent domain and wiped out all the west side, and now they're putting housing back. But Ernesto

Galarza told that story of where he lived on the west side in *Barrio Boy*, but it was like twenty years prior to my grandparents' home.

So that reality of *mexicanos* coming here, being a part of our economy, owning homes, but being relegated to either farm labor contractor or farm labor work or canneries really defined our place in Sacramento, and it hasn't changed that much today. Yes, we've got Phil Serna, who's on the Board of Supervisors and we had Joe Serna, who was a mayor, and then myself, but those are such the exception. In terms of the political fabric of the city, we should be a stronger, more visible presence.

Panilla: Okay. My next question is what you think the current or future challenges are, which you kind of answered, so if you want to add, go ahead briefly. But my final question is, do you see yourself as staying involved in meeting the challenges that you kind of outlined earlier?

[00:45:43]

Ortiz Absolutely. I was termed out of the Senate at the end of 2006, and I didn't run for office again until 2010, and I decided to run for the Los Rios Community College Board of Trustees, because in the legislature, most of the work I did was in health but also education. I authored the Cal Grant Entitlement Bill, which creates a much more robust Cal Grant scholarship program for economically needy students, because it was the way out of poverty, it was a move up for Chicanos, *mexicanos*. So my desire to sit on a community college governing board was really spurred by the sense of wanting to do something in terms of access to higher education for Chicanos here in Sacramento, and much of my work has been pushing

the envelope with the administration and our policies to do, for example, outreach to Dreamers. We were doing a lot of outreach at Los Rios to students in general, but we weren't doing anything for Dreamers. So I pushed them to actually do more outreach and working with high schools, and part of a promotion video is going to be about Dreamers as well.

Panilla: Is this currently?

[00:47:03]

Ortiz Yes, yes. And, you know, I'm actually the first and only Chicana that's ever been elected to the Los Rios Community College Board of Trustees, which is crazy. So I am staying committed, but I'm really focused on health access and educational access. Those are the two areas that I am passionate about. And we've got a lot of work to be done here in not just this town, but in the state and in this nation, and if I can do anything with that, I mean, really most of this work is the next generation. It's your generation, thank goodness. But there's a role for us to say so much ground has been covered, but there's still yet so much more to be done.

So I will always be involved, and it's just something I feel very strongly about, the injustice in the treatment of particularly immigrants, but also where we are in society and how we don't have as much of a sense of insistence by others. We haven't imposed upon others to make policy decisions that we need to be at the top of their list.

Panilla: Is there anything else you'd like to add, anything at all?

[00:48:15]

Ortiz Well, no. I would just like to add that most of us have somebody in the back of my mind that inspires us, and it was always my mother saying, “*Mija*, you’re going to go on to do these things and have opportunities that I never had.” And my grandparents on the other side, on my dad’s side, hard work, humble family of eleven children, hundreds of grandchildren and great-grandchildren that contributed to this economy, that were part of the fabric, but never, I think, given the kind of honor and place in our community that they and others like them deserve.

Panilla: Thank you so much.

[00:49:17]

Ortiz Thank you. Hopefully that works.

[End of interview]