

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Manuel José Pickett

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Tina Huang
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Transcription by Ann Nhu Nguyen and Technitype Transcripts

Huang Can you state your full name?

[00:00:11]

Pickett My name is Manuel José Pickett.

Huang When is your birthdate?

[00:00:12]

Pickett April 4th, 1950.

Huang What's your marital status?

[00:00:16]

Pickett I'm married, very beautiful woman, Rosenda Ramos.

Huang Do you have any children?

[00:00:22]

Pickett I have one daughter and I have three foster kids that I raised. My daughter's a sixth-grade schoolteacher, and the other three are doing pretty well. They're pretty much settled in their own lives.

Huang Where were you born?

[00:00:37]

Pickett I was born in Fresno, California.

Huang Were you raised there too?

[00:00:42]

Pickett Yes, yes, I was raised in Fresno. I was raised probably in one of the poorest areas in Fresno. They were the projects. There were about 300 units, one-bedroom units, and pretty large families.

Huang [inaudible]?

[00:01:03]

Pickett Yes, yes. Some real experiences there.

Huang Was it hard [inaudible]?

[00:01:08]

Pickett Well, yeah, it was difficult because you had one small playground. I mean, the city didn't do a whole lot to keep up that neighborhood. You had the brown projects, you had the white projects. It had nothing with ethnicity, but the brown projects, white projects, you have the blue projects, you got the grey projects, and every one of those projects, all the kids developed gangs. There were gangs that were from five to eight, and the other gangs from eight to twelve, and then adults, right? And every once in a while, we'd have gang fights against these kids.

Huang What are the grey projects and blue projects? What are those projects?

[00:01:46]

Pickett They're low-income projects. The city develops them to put people who can't afford housing.

Huang What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:58]

Pickett My dad was a seasonal worker. My mother did as well; she worked during the summer. He had jobs working at factories. If prunes were in season, he'd work in the factory. But for the most part, we worked in the fields. We picked grapes, melons, apricots. We picked watermelons. We picked cotton. In fact, I worked the fields since I was about eight years old. We use to go as a family unit and make money for the family. That's how we made a living. We also worked the fields during the weekends in order to keep the family going, because we were very poor. We were a very poor family.

Huang Did you have any brothers or sisters?

[00:02:47]

Pickett I have a brother, Raul, and two sisters, Irene and Trisha. My sister Trisha is the youngest. She's eighteen years younger than me.

Huang You guys all went to work at the fields?

[00:03:03]

Pickett Well, no, my youngest sister never did, but my sister Irene and my brother and I did. We worked the fields till we were about sixteen, seventeen. Sometimes we traveled, stayed in labor camps, which was part of survival, part of life.

Huang Can you describe your experience as a child, like in your neighborhood with your parents and your family?

[00:03:28]

Pickett Well, I came from a family that, I mean, we grew up very poor, okay? Whatever money we made helped us survive, but, you know, there was so much love in my family that I don't really remember any poverty. I don't remember being hungry, although I know that we weren't as fortunate as most families. Like I said, we grew up in the poorest neighborhood, the poorest area in Fresno, and probably the most violent. It was 90 percent Black and about 10 percent Chicano/Latino, which meant that we had to fight all the time, because weren't exactly the dominant group there. That just kind of dictated my whole life as a child when I lived in that area.

My dad got a better job, he got hired at a factory, and we moved to even a worse neighborhood, worse meaning that there was a lot of gang activity. I mean, it wasn't like you could just kick back and relax at home. You always had to worry about what was going to happen.

I went to Kirk School that was 90 percent Black and about—well, no, about 85 and about 15 percent Chicano. Again, we had the same situation. I was raised basically having to be tough just to survive, like my brother, but my brother was kind of a bully himself. That was his nickname, so they left him alone. Me, I wasn't much of a fighter. I used to get into a lot of scuffles, but since I worked so much—I mean, as children, it's different than it is now. You worked the fields. I took the paper routes, I shined shoes, I had customers that I used to do their yards and their lawns. I'm talking about eight years old. I use to do many different things to make extra money. We gave the money to my parents. My parents would then give us an allowance. But also I had side jobs where I would clean the back of stores, for

example, and I would keep that money. So I always had about at least two dollars in my pocket, and that was a lot back then. You're talking about the fifties, okay?

The way I survived that school is that I found the two toughest guys in the school and I paid them fifteen cents a week to be my bodyguard, so that nobody bothered me anymore for the longest time. [laughs] And it was that kind of dynamic, it was that kind of childhood that I was raised in as far as the environment, as far as the neighborhood. And it was fine. I mean, I never really look back at it and say, "Oh, my god, it was horrible." No, it really wasn't. It was kind of fun, it was adventurous, but it was kind of scary.

Also I was very well connected to my larger family, you know, my grandparents, my uncles. We all went to the same church. We always ended up at my grandmother's and grandfather's house, who lived in our neighborhood. All the kids, everyone was there. We all ate lunch there after Mass. So I got to know my family very, very, very closely, my relatives.

My dad was a very hard worker, a *very* hard worker. I mean, you look at his hands now and they're all scarred, and he hasn't worked years. That's basically what he felt his responsibility was, was to raise his family the best way he could. He got a job, finally, at a factory, but my family didn't have a car. We never drove, so either we walked everywhere or we took the bus. Using a car was out of the question. So he'd take the bus to work, which was about ten miles away, and he walked two miles to work out the country, and that's how basically he pretty much got to work and back.

My mother did seasonal work. She had scarlet fever as a child, so it kind of affected her walking and she couldn't stand very much, and that kind of affected the rest of her life. But that was basically the way our lives went.

As a child, probably the things that affected me the most were probably—well, a couple of things. My dad used to love to sing. Whenever there was a mariachi somewhere, he would get up and he'd sing with them, and he'd teach me all this music and it's very key, this part of him. And they used to take me to this movie house called the Teatro Azteca in Chinatown Fresno. They showed nothing but Mexican movies. And in between the movies, they had what is called an *aficionado*, which means they brought trios, they brought singers, entertainers that entertained you while they changed the reel of the movie. Sometimes they didn't show up. Most of the time they didn't show up, so he'd hold up a dollar, probably hold up five dollars and say, "Who wants to come and sing two songs? I'll pay you five dollars." For five dollars, my dad would go and sing, because he was the favorite.

The one dollar, he'd nudge me, and he'd say, "You go sing."

I'd say, "No."

"Go sing!" And he says "It's for a dollar."

So I'd get up there and I would sing a song. And then when I ran out of songs, I would start dancing or I would do a skit with my sister.

So that was the first beginnings of theatre, basically my field of study. Those were real influences of my life. I did that quite a bit. I got to the point where I was entertaining people at the house by doing little skits and things like that, so it began to creep into my creative bloodstream, if you will.

Probably as a child or youth, another thing that affected me is that I went to Irwin Junior High School, and there they had music classes, so if you wanted to learn how to play an instrument, what you would do is you'd show up, select an instrument, and they would train you. Unfortunately, I was sick on that day, so they gave me a trombone, and I said, "This is the *last* instrument I want to play." But I ended up playing it for fourteen years, and playing that instrument got me through school, because I became part of bands. I learned how to read and write music.

That led me to learning how to play trumpet, and then I learned how to play the flutes. At one point, I learned how to play fourteen instruments. So when it came to joining a band, there weren't very many bands that would refuse me. And I'll go back to that later on when we start talking about the Chicano Movement.

I think another thing that was important to me as a youth is the fact that I had an older brother that I could always look up to. We didn't get along at all. We didn't get along at all. I think we spent half of our lives in the backyard fighting, but he made certain choices in his life that I followed that got me even pushed in closer to the Chicano Movement, so that was another important part of my life.

But as a child, basically it was that, work in the fields, surviving the neighborhood, and learning from my parents. My mother had an eleventh-grade education, which was rare back then, okay? And she dropped out of school because my grandmother developed this horrible arthritis; she couldn't walk. And so she had to drop out of school to care for all nine children, and she was, like, seventeen years old.

My mother was very instrumental in terms of our education. What she would do every single year is the moment we got our books, she would read them all. She would read them and she'd study them until she knew exactly what they were about. Then she'd tutor us all year. My father, he was just a genius in math. You know, he was fourteen years old and he was an accountant for this huge store in Mexico. He'd teach us how to count using our fingers, and not one, two, three, four, five, but just combinations. And he'd teach us geometry. So we had two parents who were totally involved in our education. So those influences made a big difference in our life.

Most of the guys that I hung out with when I was young are either dead or dying in prison. There's one that I remember in Fresno, he's homeless. So it kind of shows you the kind of neighborhood that I grew up in. But, you know, fortunately, I had parents who really took the time to pull us out of things that could have affected us, because I made some *really* bad choices in my life when I was young that could have made the biggest difference in the world. But we were taught differently.

Huang Were you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:13:34]

Pickett No. No, I wasn't.

Huang What were your earliest memories that attracted you to the Chicano Movement?

[00:13:45]

Pickett Well, I was just coming out of high school. My brother had just gotten involved in the Chicano Movement in '67, and he had become a part of the Black Berets. Black Berets were there before the Brown Berets. He started talking about revolution and picking up rifles and taking over the country. I was, like, seventeen years old, and I was like, "What are you talking about?"

And he says, "No, there's a Chicano Movement that is happening, and you either get involved, you either become part of the process, or you end up becoming the enemy." And it kind of scared me a little bit.

So he got me involved in the EOP Program, the Educational Opportunity Program. I was already in City College my first year, and they recruited me to Fresno State. Before I went to Fresno State, they did a weekend retreat up in the mountains, and the weekend retreat in the mountains brought in Brown Berets, they brought in some of the leaders in the community, public speakers they brought in, and it was a very hardcore Chicano Movement discussion, the need for the Movement, the need for the culture, the language. It just completely immersed you in the ideology and the Movement itself.

I was just sitting there with my mouth open and my eyes open. I felt like, "I want to be a part of this, but how can I be a part of this?" is what I was asking myself. It had affected me. That weekend had affected me so much that it made me choose to go in that direction, okay? Immediately I joined the Brown Berets, which was part of the military forces of the Chicano Movement. They're the ones who was supposed to defend our people in case of any violence. And that's my earliest experiences were through that one particular retreat.

Then I became involved in MEChA at Fresno State and became part of the struggles through the college, through the university until 1969, where I was in part of a protest and I was arrested for inciting a riot. So by then, I realized that it's not going to be an adventure; it's going to be a real challenge, because those are the consequences of going against the system. And so then I began to say it was worth it, it was worth it.

Huang Did your father influence you at all?

[00:16:47]

Pickett Not necessarily my father, but when we became involved in the Chicano Movement, actually, my mother's the one who influenced me the most, not that she said, "Be in the Chicano Movement," but I come from very strong women in my family, very strong women. A lot of the men are passive. My dad is passive. He worked so hard, would just come home and just sit on the couch and fall asleep or rest, you know. But my sisters were the ones who were the strongest people in our family.

My mother was 4'10", she weighed about 115 pounds, but she was a very powerful woman. She would confront *anyone*. She confronted teachers at the schools on our behalf, she confronted the police department when she felt there was police brutality. She confronted the Border Patrol.

I remember one time I was with her, we were shopping, and this one guy comes running out the store and the cops tried to stop him, and he knocked the cops down. He had just robbed it, and on his way out, they shot him in the back three times, and then they got upset because he had physically pushed them down, and they

started kicking him. My mother yelled at them and stood between the police and the guy that was shot. She said, "He's dying, he's dying. This guy is going to be dead. Why are you kicking him?"

And the police said, "If you don't get out of the way, we're going to arrest you."

She goes, "Well, arrest me, but you're not going to kick this guy." And all kinds of people started gathering. She said, "Look at your police department here. This guy's almost dead and they're kicking him."

And everybody started getting up, yelling at the police. It was just getting bigger and bigger, and people could actually have this riot. They told the lady, "Okay, we're waiting for the ambulance. We'll just leave him alone."

So she was a stick of dynamite. And she's the one who taught me to stand up for what I believed in, for my rights, and I think that was the most indirect influence that I had.

Once I became involved in the Chicano Movement, it also brought me closer to my grandfather. You see, my grandfather was a very strong person, an emotional person. He comes from a long line of revolutionaries, famous revolutionaries. His grandfather is M_____ Manuel Pineda. During the Mexican-American War, they took over Baja California. My grandfather was the one who raised guerilla forces that chased the U.S. out of Mexico in Baja California. In fact, they have this huge statue of him in San Antonio. And so his brother was involved with Magón and just down the line. You walk into his living room, he had Zapata, he had Hidalgo, he had Pancho Villa on his wall. He had all of these people that were

part of Mexico's revolutionary fight for struggle, and we kind of looked at them, he'd tell us the stories.

He was a poet, a very well-known poet. He's a published poet. He'd write nothing but poetry about revolution. We'd sit there and we'd listen to him as kids and it was very, very fascinating, but he had this cold side about him, right? He would go to breakfast and he'd always wear a tie, had a wooden spoon by his plate. If we sat and we ate with him and we reached across, then "whack!" He'd whack your hand. So you had to kind of have the best manners in the world.

You couldn't speak English in his home. He had this *huge* yard. If anybody came up to the yard and they wanted to sell something, he says, "We don't speak English here. Do you speak Spanish?" He would tell him in Spanish.

One time this one salesman says, "Well, we're in America."

And he goes "Really? Where's Mexico? China?" That's what he told him. [laughs] So the guy just walks away.

But was a very, very, very strong-willed person, showed a lot of dignity. But once we became involved in the Chicano Movement, it opened up a whole new world for us. He was starting to talk about the importance of the Chicano Movement and why revolution was important. He began to read poetry at the Chicano—anytime we had a rally. José Montoya knew him. He became involved in everything that we did. So the Chicano Movement actually opened up the relationship between us, my brother and I, and my grandfather. That was very important to us.

Huang What was the role of the Chicanos in the Movement, in the Chicano Movement?

[00:22:05]

Pickett Well, my mother, for one, as I mentioned, had an impact on me. You know, I was thinking about that question. I was more impacted, more affected by a lot of the women in the Chicano Movement than a lot of the men, because it was mainly the women who didn't have to hide behind any kind of a *macho* personality, even though at that time I was also trying to define what that meant. But they were themselves. They were straightforward, but at the same time, they were compassionate. Some of the people who affected me the most were actually women in the Movement, people from Fresno State especially. A lot of the professors were women, a lot of the women who were leading particular organizations. They were very, very strong women that affected me during that time. I can name quite a few, but I won't say their names, but yeah, definitely affected by Chicanas.

Huang What role did you play in the Chicano Movement?

[00:23:24]

Pickett What role did I play? Well, let me just give you a little background on that. I was a musician, as I mentioned, to tie everything together with what I had said before. I had played in bands since I was twelve, okay? My mother bought my brother a used guitar and he broke it, sold it to me for five bucks and I learned how to play it. I would write music and I would sing all the time.

When I became involved in the Chicano Movement, I was playing in this band, probably one of the most popular bands in Fresno, but I wanted to play music that had to do with the Chicano reality, had to do with our people, our struggles. So I tried to gear the band toward that and move them toward that kind of

music, but they said no, they wanted to just make money. So I started playing Chicano music, and that's one way that I became involved.

Another way that I became involved is that one day I was sitting—Luis Valdez—I'm sure you heard of him—the director of Teatro Campesino, approached me. They were very poor at the time; they were living in a basement of a church. And said, “Manuel, I'm going to get married this weekend. Would your band play for my wedding? I don't have any money.”

So I went to the band and I said, “Listen, this guy is very involved in the Chicano Movement. I'd really like to play for his wedding. He can't afford it.”

And they said, “No.”

And I said “Okay, don't pay me for a month.” And we were making twenty-five bucks a week. That was a lot back then.

So they said, “Okay.” So we played for his wedding.

The next day I went to pick up some cords I had left, and he was sitting on the steps and he says, “I know you're coming back for these.” And he says, “How would you like to become the music director for the Teatro Campesino?”

And I said, “Well, let me think about it.”

Two weeks went by. I came back and I said, “I'll do it.” And I joined the Teatro Campesin, and we took off to Mexico and toured the entire country doing theatre, political theatre. And that's how I became involved. I think that was your question. That's how I became involved just through *teatro*, through my music, through my performances, through my love of how the arts affected people and that was a way to teach people about what we were doing in this struggle.

In fact, my training in music was just taking advantage of whatever opportunity I could find to train me as a musician. We couldn't afford lessons. I mean, in high school, orchestra was from 7:00 to 8:00, band was during lunchtime, dance band was from 3:00 to 4:00. So I would go to school from 7:00 to 4:00 every single day, and we didn't have a car. But I wanted to learn, and that helped me later on be even more effective in my work, my artistic work with Chicano Movement. So things kind of fell into place.

Huang Did the Chicano Movement affect you personally? How did it affect you?

[00:27:06]

Pickett Well, I think because of the kind of involvement that I had, it created a sense of a different personality for me, or it strengthened me as a person. You know, being involved in Teatro Campesino was not easy. You're a part of it. There's nothing else you do. You do it 24/7, and you get sixteen bucks a month, one day off. You're doing ongoing performances. During the summer, we would tour the Southwest, the entire Southwest. The following year, we would tour the Northwest, the East Coast, Latin America, Mexico. And there would be twelve of us in a van, okay? This was like a regular cargo van, you know, a regular cargo van. There would be a stage. Three of us would be laying on top like this [demonstrates], three would be sitting between the stage and the door, two would be sitting in the back, and the rest would be crunched up in the front. If that van overturned one time, we'd all be dead. But that's how we traveled.

No air conditioning. We would travel sometimes through the desert, it would be 110 degrees. We'd be like, "Oh, my god," and sometimes we would have to shift so that we'd be able to get to the window so we could breathe. In fact, I developed claustrophobia because of that.

But it was commitment. It was commitment. It committed me to a field that I carried on for the rest of my life, and it was that kind of commitment, that kind of involvement, that kind of dedication that made me realize that being involved in the Chicano Movement would be a lifetime endeavor. It wouldn't be a fad, it wouldn't be something that you do for now, you know. It's something that dictated every single thing that I would do and did in my life. See, *teatro* and music was just my way of being involved in that Chicano Movement. It changes your personality totally. The movies that you see, how you interpret them, how you interpret world politics, how you raise your children, how you raise your grandchildren, the kind of woman you marry, every single part of your life becomes affected. Every part of your personality becomes affected by being involved in the Chicano Movement.

A lot of people say, "Oh, the Chicano Movement has died." No. If you're committed to it, if you become a part of it, it never has ever gone away because it's become a part of everything that you are for the rest of your life. Sometimes it has to do with how much you were committed to it. That's how it changed me. That's how it affected me as a human being, completely changed it. Everything made sense to me.

Huang Did it change how you see the world now, how you view it?

[00:30:37]

Pickett Oh absolutely, absolutely.

Huang How so?

[00:30:39]

Pickett Well, when I look at war, when I look at things like wars the United States is in, I used to think in terms of, well, the U.S. is trying to defend this country, the U.S. is trying to hold its own against the world, but it has nothing to do with that. It has to do with money, it has to do with world power, things that don't even affect us as human beings. How I see politics, for example, in Mexico is completely different, has completely affected that. You know, to me, I don't feel like I need to defend Mexico anymore, because I think Mexico is pretty corrupt itself.

It changes the way I even see working-class people. You know, it's no longer *Mi raza primero; afuera mi raza nada*, which means "For my people everything; outside of my people nothing." That used to be important because it helped us focus, it helped us direct our energy, but now you've got to look at this as there are other people who are dealing with oppression outside of us. So it affected my way of looking at people, of struggle, period. So, yeah, it did affect my view of the world in that sense.

Huang Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement at that time?

[00:32:30]

Pickett I'd heard about it, Martin Luther King, and I'd heard about some of the Movements were happening. Again, you're talking about the sixties?

Huang Mm-hmm.

[00:32:40]

Pickett Yes, I did, but, you know, being involved in the Chicano Movement back then, you were very much, as I said, “For my people everything; outside of my people nothing.” We were concerned with what was happening—“we” in terms of myself and people that I worked with, that I knew—what was happening to us as a people. What was happening to Blacks and Asians and Native Americans did not necessarily concern us. You know, that’s changed a lot. Our perspective has changed. But back then, we were pretty much connected to our own people and our own struggles.

The Civil Rights Movement for many Chicanos was considered to be Martin Luther King and the Black Movement. At a grassroot level, we were more connected with United Farm Workers, Cesar Chavez, the community organizing, things like that. It’s not to say that the different groups didn’t come together at times. I mean, when we marched in San Francisco against the Vietnam War, there were millions of people and people of all backgrounds, okay? But then after that happened, I think people went back to their own particular struggles.

There was always a sense of struggle that was there. We knew that other people were struggling, and we tried not to interfere with that and many times we supported it, but our focus was basically our people and those were the things of a lot of classes that were being taught. That was what we did in theatre, in Chicano *teatro*, you know. So that was the way we dealt with things.

Huang How did the Chicano Movement influence your career?

[00:34:47]

Pickett My career?

Huang Yeah.

[00:34:48]

Pickett Well, for one thing, as I mentioned, I was a musician and I got involved in *teatro*, Chicano theatre, joining Teatro Campesino, and it became a part of everything I did. Chicano theatre became my direction. Chicano theatre became my profession. I mean, I liked going to plays like everyone else, but I don't do anything other than Chicano plays, okay, because I did Chicano theatre for a whole different reason than just entertainment. Entertainment is part of it. I mean, what we do is refined theatre, we do it well, it's entertaining, but that's not why we do what we do. We do what I do to politicize people, we do what we do for sociopolitical reasons, cultural reasons. So that defined what my profession was.

At Sac State, for example, if there weren't courses that didn't deal with Chicano theatre, I would create them. I would write them, you know. There's four or five questions that I wrote that dealt with Chicano theatre because I knew that was my profession. My profession wasn't just theatre; my profession was Chicano theatre. That's what I do. And when I retired, the reason I retired is so that I could continue to do the same thing, Chicano theatre. My music, the groups that I play with, we do particular styles, we do Tex-Mex, we do Mexican music, but then we do Chicano music as well. And I affected that, I changed that. So my profession is I'm a director of a theatre company and it's a Chicano theatre company.

Huang Do you feel like you were able to influence others about the Chicano Movement?

[00:37:03]

Pickett Yes, I do. I really do. I mean, when I came to Sac State, especially here in Sacramento, I was in Gilroy, California, and I was in Salinas, and I was in charge of doing a program called Upward Bound Program and Neighborhood Youth Corps. Basically, they took young kids, high school kids, most of them were Chicanos, and I created plays, and the plays that I created were very political. The plays I created had to do with their lives, the situations that they had, and the neighborhoods that they were living.

This guy named Aaron Muñoz, who was working for a person named Steve Arvizu, who at the time was a dean at Sac State, the person named Aaron Muñoz went to Steve and said, “Hey, this guy is doing the kind of stuff that we need to be doing here at Sac State.”

And Steve said, “Let’s recruit him.”

So I was recruited to go to Sac State. My wife at the time applied for law school and got accepted, so I went to Sac State, she went to UC Davis. And that’s how I became part of what was happening here in Sacramento. So my charge was to get involved with Chicano Theatre Program here at Sac State, and at the same time start one in the community. I was going to do it anyway.

In the process, I created a couple of theatre companies, developed a Chicano Theatre Program at Sac State, created a theatre company in the community, a very active one that continues to exist today for over thirty-five years. It’s an internationally-known theatre company, still doing Chicano theatre. All these people who were involved with the *teatro* became affected by it. All the audiences who came to see the shows probably never had been able to experience what Chicano theatre is

and the importance of it, whether children were involved, teenagers, any group of people. So I think that's my biggest contribution to Sacramento or the Chicano Movement is keeping the Chicano Theatre Movement alive, period. So it's been a while.

Huang Were you involved in any other organizations?

[00:39:53]

Pickett Lots of organizations. I was one of the founding members of TENAZ, which is a Teatro Nacional de Aztlán, and it's the national theatre of Chicano teatros which started back in 1969. It involves people from Mexico, from as far as France, up from California all the way to New York.

I was involved with just almost every organization: MAYA, LULAC, I was involved with local *teatro* organizations here in Northern California. I'm involved with Toward Equity right now, which is an organization that is forcing the city council to fund small arts organizations as opposed to Eurocentric groups that have nothing to do with actually the personality of this city, which is multicultural. So I've been involved with quite a few, quite a few organizations.

Huang What significance do those organizations play in the Chicano Movement?

[00:41:13]

Pickett Well, TENAZ, Teatro Nacional de Aztlán, they basically pulled together all the theaters that were in the United States—we're talking about maybe four, five hundred people—and helped them and organized festivals where part of it had to do with performing work and critiquing it and offering training in political

theatre, guerilla theatre, part of it having to do with strengthening our political ideology. What exactly are we trying to do with our theatre companies? Where are we losing ground in terms of that? And just seeing performances and sharing it with the community. New things are coming, new ways of performances, new ways of doing things. So we did shows every part of California, New Mexico, New York, Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Cusco, Peru, Nancy, France. We had festivals everywhere. Those were very important because they helped keep the Chicano Theatre Movement alive.

Other organizations are still here. MAPA has to do with elections and candidates and things like that. LULAC is fighting discrimination. MEChA still exists. It's a student organization that tries to represent the Chicanos on campus in dealing with discrimination, so they've been involved.

Huang Looking back at your experience in the Chicano Movement, do you feel like there's any problems that are unresolved?

[00:43:05]

Pickett Oh, yeah. I mean, that's where the struggles still exist. Some of the things have never been taken care of. I mean, they've been dealt with, but a lot of problems still exist. I mean, discrimination is here, inequities are here. So a lot of the things that we were dealing with back then still exist today. I mean, we've accomplished a lot, we've accomplished a lot, but there's still a lot more to do. That's the whole purpose of struggle, is that you can't stop struggling, you know. It's like a serpent that sheds its skin, right? That's a symbol of struggle for the indigenous people of Mexico, is that you struggle through life and then you shed your skin and then the new snake is born, sheds its skin. That's struggle. The skin are struggles, the

skin is life experiences, the skin is all the battles that you fought. But once you stop the struggle, the skin will suffocate you. So if you're politically involved, you never stop struggling and you never stop moving.

Huang Do you feel like there's a way of solving these problems that haven't been solved?

[00:44:31]

Pickett There's always a way to solve it, and I think the best thing is consistency, consistency. I'm involved in this organization Toward Equity that deals with, again, getting the city council to fund small arts organizations, and we're very organized, we're very organized. Tonight we're confronting the city council. It's taken that kind of initiative to make things change. I mean, without even thinking in terms of fundraising or scholarships, there's nothing wrong with those, but thinking in terms of "Let's get some community organizing together. Let's do something that's going to impact the community that are going to make some changes," and those things take volunteering. They take time. We meet every Saturday at 9:00 in the morning, regardless, creating our own discipline to be able to do the best that we can. And we're not doing it just for us; we're doing it because our community deserves it.

How committed are you to certain issues, certain struggles? How committed are you? Knowing what time it's going to take, how much work it's going to take, you know that from the get. But it's that consistency and the commitment that it's going to make us deal with these issues. If you don't deal with the issues, if you throw up your hand in the air, "Oh, well, the system's too big. They're not going to listen to us," nothing's ever going to get done.

So you learn from your mistakes and you keep going forward. That's for any group. That's for anybody. That's for any one person in their lives, you know. Every time you turn a cheek when somebody deals with you with disrespect, all you're doing is adding to the problem, because that person will continue to disrespect you or people like you for the rest of your life. So being involved in the struggle forces you to deal with the issue. "Wait a minute. What did you say?" And say you didn't like it, regardless of who the person is. That's the same thing with the struggle. "Wait a minute. This can't happen. We've got to do something about this." And that's what keeps the Movement going. It's the Movement inside of you and the Movement that's out there. They all work together.

Huang Have you ever thought about violence? Like, with all these struggles, have you ever thought about solving problem by violence?

[00:47:19]

Pickett Oh, yeah, many times, but not anymore. I don't think you're going to accomplish anything with violence, you know. I mean, you can see you're not going to deal with police brutality with violence. There's just too many of them. It's crazy.

But back in the sixties when I was involved with the Brown Berets, for example, we were trained. We were the military arm of the Chicano Movement. We were committed to die for our people. We were being trained to some extent in guerilla warfare. We were trained to use weapons, how to fight. I had a Black Belt, Taekwondo, and I use to train people. So we had to become a military force. We had to commit ourselves. I mean, the farmworkers were nonviolent. They couldn't fight back these goons, these motorcycle gangs who were beating them up, and the cops.

So whenever there were issues, we had to stand in front and sometimes take the blows and sometime spend time in jail for it, but that was our commitment.

There was violence there, a lot of violence, riots. When we went to the Chicano Moratorium when I was there with the Teatro Campesino, they just shot so much teargas at us. My girlfriend at time, this lady took her into her house, and I left. She said, “No, come back in here with me.”

I said, “No, I can’t leave my friends out there.”

When I turned around to walk away, I got a police baton across the head. Next thing I knew, I was in jail with people like “Corky” Gonzales, some of the leaders that were in the community, and we stayed there for a couple of days. But there was violence. I mean, there was violence. Back then, I thought that that was the only way to do that, that there was going to be physical violence.

And then another time even in the eighties, I joined an organization, it was a communist organization that talked about the only way to change things in this country was through violence, organized violence, but it was more ideological. It short-lived, I’ll just say that, but it was convincing. I mean, the thought of violence nowadays, sometimes I feel like I get angry enough, but you’re not going to change things that way. You know, you’re going to turn people against you. You’ll either turn people against you or turn people away from you.

Huang When did you change the idea that violence doesn’t solve [inaudible]?
[00:50:30]

Pickett The Movement began to get away from that whole romantic notion of revolution, physical revolution. That changed a lot of it. I got married to a very

intelligent woman who talked a lot of sense to me about nonviolence and why it was important, why it was effective, and just the overall effect that violence has on people, you know, what it does to them.

Sometimes violence is selfish, because you can cause violence, you can cause riots, you can cause these problems, but then what if other people get hurt? What if community people who come to support you get hurt? You're responsible for that. And is that your overall objective? I mean, if I have people with me or I see friends being beat up by police, I'm going to go and intervene. I'm going to say, "Hey, listen, leave them alone." I might get arrested for it.

But to initiate violence, I'm beyond that point. You can be very effective and still have a certain—how should I say this? I'll give you an example. Cesar Chavez's Movement was nonviolent, but because it was nonviolent, it became even more violent but in an effective way. There would be striking, right? There would be a striking in front of a Safeway store, for example, and people would come and they'd be shouting in their face, spitting in their face, throwing grapes in their face because they didn't want them there. They were the ones who were violent, and then the media was catching it. They were saying, "Wait a minute. These are people who are expressing their constitutional rights and they are being violently attacked, and nobody's doing anything about this." A lot of people would see that. Doesn't matter what color you were. A lot of people were seeing that and it was affecting them. It was causing more and more support for the farmworkers. It was that kind of thing. So by being nonviolent, it caused violence which had more of an impact on the

people who were watching this happen, so it's using violence against itself is what it is.

Huang How did the Chicano Movement affect the community as a whole?

[00:53:17]

Pickett Well, different ways. I mean, the United Farm Workers Movement, for example, it affected the farmworkers. It gave them a sense of dignity, it gave them just basic necessities that they needed in life like restrooms, basic living, medical. It made the whole world appreciate who they were as a people and what they were contributing to society. They unionized; someone to protect them. Of course, they were continually trying to fight for that but it caused that kind of movement.

It did a lot for people in the arts, for example. Before the Chicano Movement came, we had poets, we had artists, painters, we had musicians, but they were kind of in the closet. You know, they would be writing on their own, they'd be painting on their own, they'd be writing poetry. But once the Chicano Movement started and it gave them the images to paint, the ideas for the writing, the plays, the performances, the music, things to write about, it was so explosive that it brought all these artists out into the open. So it affected the entire Art Movement throughout the country, so they were affected, you know.

Community groups, like, for example, the urban areas where you had a lot of the youth, some were involved in gangs, some were involved in different things, a lot of those guys became part of the Brown Berets. A lot of those guys became a part of the Movement, and I think that affected them in a way. I think that even helped them get out of that situation. You end up going to college. When I went

to college, I knew a lot of guys who were *vatos* or guys who were part of gangs in Visalia, and they came and went to Fresno State. We got them involved in Fresno State, and it just changed their lives completely. The Chicano Movement did that. It gave them direction, it gave them something other than what they were doing to fight for, and that was very, very important for them.

Huang Did you feel like you were restricted to express yourself before the Chicano Movement?

[00:56:07]

Pickett What do you mean?

Huang Like you weren't able to express yourself? Like you were talking about how people were able, after the Chicano Movement, they were able to show their expression of what they thought.

[00:56:18]

Pickett Oh, yeah, definitely. That's exactly what it did. I mean, I love the theater. I mean, I use to go in the back of the theater and watch them rehearse and things like that. Like I said, I was always performing in the band music and always in the entertainment world. Theatre, I'd never stepped into, because back in the sixties, for one, we really felt that that wasn't a place where people of color were welcome. There were very few people of color. I mean, can you imagine back in the sixties a Chicano being Romeo and with a White Juliet? I don't think so. The audiences wouldn't accept us. The directors wouldn't want it, would say, "Are you out of your mind?" They did that ten years ago. They had a Black Romeo and a White Juliet, and

people just walked out. Back then, they would've strung you up. I mean, they wouldn't have done that, but they would've—you know.

So those opportunities were unheard of. I mean, we could maybe be a walk-on part or something or play the music for the plays, but as far as being involved in theatre, we weren't exactly welcomed. And also our culture, as well. Our culture—Chicanos didn't do theatre. It just wasn't something we did, unfortunately, but mainly because of discrimination that we had to deal with.

So the Chicano Movement opened the doors to us. You don't have to do Eurocentric plays or plays that deal with things other than your own. There's a lot of material within our own culture that we can use, and they created a whole different kind of movement, a way of expressing ourselves.

The same thing with my music. I started writing music about the Chicano reality. I started writing plays. I started writing musicals using our material, our songs, directing shows that would fill houses where Chicanos weren't even allowed before. We just did *Zoot Suit* at Sac State couple years ago, and we sold out every single house and we had about fourteen shows. We made more money for that department in the history of the university through our productions. That wouldn't have happened before if it wasn't for the Chicano Movement who created this Theatre Movement in general. Not that the money doesn't matter; it's just to let you understand how big this became. The industry, the movie industry, it blew that apart, and you're going to start to see more and more Chicano plays that are coming into the silver screen. I'm writing one right now, in fact. So, yeah, it did have an impact.

Huang What future challenges do you see for the Chicano community?

[00:59:42]

Pickett Well, to me, it's keeping things consistent. I mean, for us to have a different perspective, we're taxpayers. You know, we're people who work, okay? Even the people who are not here legally contribute \$4.2 billion to the economy here in the U.S. Things like voting, we're going to be one of the largest groups in California, but it doesn't do us any good if we don't exercise that right, if we don't vote. So people have to vote, you know.

Once you start voting, once you start showing that the numbers are working toward our advantage, then you begin to have power. The Chicano/Latino community were very important in terms of getting Obama elected, and people are beginning to realize that. So then you begin to have that power and then you begin to affect people like the city council, especially in smaller communities.

So the struggle now is to keep our community focused, finding creative ways of keeping our community focused on particular issues. I'll give you an example. You know they closed down the five schools in Sacramento? They closed them down. Nobody did anything. But this one community out here on 21st Avenue, called Joseph Bonnheim, they refused to let the issue go, and what they did is that they organized all the parents in that community and they approached the school board, and they're opening their own school. It's a charter school, but all their kids are going to go to it. And after they opened it, it became so widespread that lawyers and educators came in, people who had written these charter school proposals before, the same thing. And this community's going to get a school in the community run by

the teachers that *they* want to hire. It's going to be funded by the city and they're going to win.

They just did a presentation at the school board. They had 200 people there, all wearing yellow tee-shirts. The kids were wearing armbands, headbands with the same logo that the parents were wearing. It was impressive, and they did an incredible presentation to the school board, answered every single question. That is what makes things happen. It makes it happen. The school board was just kind of looking at each other. They had nothing to say. They were overwhelmed. It's those grassroots efforts that are going to make a big difference in society right now in the Chicano Movement, so getting behind them is important.

Huang Do you feel like you're going to be involved in meeting these challenges?

[01:03:11]

Pickett I'll always be involved in meeting the challenge. Is that what you're asking? Yeah, always. Like I said, struggle becomes a lifetime endeavor, not just something that you're doing once in a while. Challenges, they're there going to be there forever, you know. And if struggle is a part of your life, you're always going to be involved in something that makes a difference. You don't necessarily have to win all the time to make a difference, okay? So, yeah, there's always going to be challenges, there's always going to be something that I'm going to be involved with. I have to be. I have to be. It's part of what the Chicano Movement has done for me, it's what the Chicano Movement has created to me, the kind of person it has created, and

so I'll be involved forever, I mean, how long that is. [laughs] And so will my family, my kids.

Huang Thank you for your participation.

[01:04:25]

Pickett Thank you. I don't know if that made sense. I went on forever, but—

[End of interview]