

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Graciela Ramírez

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Mark Aguiniga and Caezar Saucedo
May 15, 2015

Transcription by Elian Andrade and Technitype Transcripts

Q We're going to start with question number one, identification. Can you please state your full name and please provide your birthdate, please provide your marital status? And do you have children? And if yes, how many do you have?

[00:00:12]

Ramírez My name is Graciela B., as in boy, Ramírez. My maiden name is Brauer, is B-r-a-u-e-r. And what's the next one?

Q What's your birthdate?

[00:00:30]

Ramírez 02/24/1932.

Q What's your marital status?

[00:00:40]

Ramírez I'm a widow, and I only have one son.

Q Can you tell us your son's name?

[00:00:51]

Ramírez Armando Botello.

Q Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:58]

Ramírez I was born in Mexico City and I was raised in Mexico City.

Q What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:06]

Ramírez My dad was in the military, in the Mexican Army, and he was an expert on fine jewelry. And my mom was a professional singer.

[00:01:23]

Q How many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:01:28]

Ramírez Only one sister.

Q Can you please describe us your experiences as a child and youth in your family and neighborhood?

[00:01:37]

Ramírez Well, I was raised by my dad, because my mom was usually on tours, on singing tours, and I had a very, very happy childhood, because my dad dedicated a lot of his time to me, even though he had two jobs, but he was always trying—like, he taught me how to read when I was about three years old, and took me places like museums and everything. And we lived in a very wonderful street in Mexico City, Bucareli. Because at that time the all the major publications were there, like the big buildings or the newspapers, and they were always selling everywhere magazines, all kinds of books, so it was really, really pretty.

Q What kind of music did your mom sing?

[00:01:37]

Ramírez She used to sing Mexican *ranchero* music, yes.

Q What was her name?

[00:02:49]

Ramírez Her stage name was La Soldadera.

Q Were you a Fellow actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:03:05]

Ramírez I was not a Fellow, but I was involved in the project.

Q Were you aware of their mission?

[00:03:13]

Ramírez Yes, yes.

Q Can you please explain what you knew about it?

[00:03:18]

Ramírez Well, the Mexican American Project, to me, it was a very, very important project at the University of Sac State. To me, it's like this part that started the Chicano Movement at Sac State, and it was very, very important because from there, their mission, one of the objects in their mission was to produce teachers with master's degrees, and that was really good for the Chicanos, because by getting master's degrees, they became professionals and they were role models for students, because at that time, there were not a lot of role models for Chicanos. They were able to work not only teaching at schools, but to get jobs like counselors or administrators.

The Mexican American Project also connected the university with the *barrio*, and for us it was very, very important because we became like one. The *barrio*, there were many organizations run for Chicanos. So it did many good things, but the most important, I think, is that the Mexican American Project gave students a knowledge of their background, of their own roots. Later, the Chicanos began what we call the ceremonies, the pre-Columbian ceremonies, and they were very, very important because they brought our past to the present.

Q You mentioned the pre-Columbian ceremonies. Do you know how they went about, how was one conducted?

[00:05:41]

Ramírez In Sacramento, they started with the first ceremony of the year is in May, and is the one dedicated to the children. And then the second ceremony is in June, and it's dedicated to the young women. They call it La Fiesta del Maiz, and they call the young woman *xilonen*. And then the third ceremony is dedicated to the young men; they call it the *Jaguars*. And the last ceremony is the Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, is on November 2nd. And so there are four ceremonies throughout the year.

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

[00:06:42]

Ramírez Well, I had just come from Mexico, so I didn't have the slightest idea where the Chicanos or what they were doing, but I learned English as a second language, and when I graduated from that school, I transferred to City College.

And when I transferred, one day students were recruiting people for their organizations, and I saw a table and two women were recruiting students for MAYA. It was for Mexican youth organization, something like that, MAYA. And I got interested and I went to the table and I asked questions. Lupe Portillo was one of the two women taking care of the table, and we became friends later on. We're still friends. Anyway, I asked questions to Lupe. I said, "What are these Chicanos and what is MAYA? What are you doing?" And she invited me to go to their meetings.

So I went to their first meeting, and I was just sitting there, I never imagined that I was going to belong to MAYA or anything, because I was an older student, returning student. But right away, they made me the treasurer, and I didn't want to accept. I went, "Oh, no, I don't want to be the treasurer," because I was afraid, because I thought they had a lot of money, and I didn't want to be responsible. But to my surprise, when Javier Tafoya, who was the treasurer, gave me the books and told me about the money, they had about thirty or thirty-five dollars. That was all.
[laughs]

But I began to learn about the Chicanos. I began to learn about their problems, what was their object in getting together, having meetings and all that, and I realized that they were fighting for education. They really wanted to educate our people, because in those years, the dropout was 50 percent. And we—well, I said

“we” because I joined them—began to really work for education. At that time, there were no classes for Chicanos, and so it was really hard for our students to be successful. So that’s what they were doing. So that was my early experiences with the Chicanos.

Q What year did you join MAYA?

[00:09:53]

Ramírez It was at the end of the sixties. Well, probably ’66, ’67.

Q From your experience, how did, for example, do you or other Mexican or Mexican American or just other Latinos in general, how did they react to the term *Chicano*?

[00:10:18]

Ramírez Oh, in those years, and even today, it was very, very controversial. The Mexicans from Mexico, they didn’t want to even hear that name *Chicano*. And the Mexicans from this country, they wanted to be called Mexican Americans. And you couldn’t even mention the word *Chicanos* because some people got really upset. They didn’t like it at all, because they couldn’t understand that the Chicanos wanted an education for our people, like I mentioned before. For them, it was a very derogatory name for us, so they didn’t want that at all.

Q How did you react to it personally when you were hearing it, since you’re from Mexico?

[00:11:17]

Ramírez Well, I am from Mexico and everything, but since I began to understand them, because if you learn the history of the people, you get away from stereotypes, you get away from thinking bad about that people. You say, “Well, they did this, they did that.” And in my case, when I began to learn about the Chicanos and what they wanted and what they were fighting for, then I accepted the name even for me. I still call myself a Chilanga Chicana. [laughter]

Q At that time, had you already heard about the Civil Rights Movement?
[00:12:12]

Ramírez No, in reality, no, because I came from Mexico, and even though we were getting the *Reader's Digest* in Spanish and *Life* magazine, I think it was also in Spanish, but I never remembered reading about the civil struggle here in this country, and so when I came, it was something completely new for me, yeah.

Q We're moving on to question number eight. Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?
[00:12:57]

Ramírez Yes, it did, it changed me very much, because I was always a person who never, never, never imagined to belong to *any* movement or to be doing things for the Movement the way I did. I always pictured myself as very separated from people in general, because I love writing and I always wanted to be by myself writing. But with the Chicanos, it was like a force.

I remember going to Sac State, getting off the bus, and then right away some Chicanos or Chicanas would tell us, “We're doing this, we're doing that. Come

on, Graciela.” [laughter] So here I go. Sometimes I didn’t even know what they were going to do or what was happening, but I knew that it was important, so I went. But it was something very different to me.

Q What roles do you believe Chicanos played in the Movimiento?

[00:14:21]

Ramírez Well, it was very, very important. I think thanks to the Movimiento, now we see professionals everywhere, Chicano professionals, because at that time, the sixties, the seventies, and even the eighties, here in Sacramento we only have one doctor of Mexican descent, one lawyer of Mexican descent. There were a few teachers, but besides that, you didn’t see professionals, Chicanos. So I think that was one thing that that was really important. To this day, sometimes I go places and then I see some of our students from those years and they tell me, “Oh, I am retired from this company,” or, “I’m retired from that,” and that’s something it had never happened before.

Q And from that, what do you think the difference was between Chicanos in general and Chicanas?

[00:15:36]

Ramírez The Chicanas played a very, very important role in the Chicano Movement. I remember then when I went to Sac State, because then I transferred from City College to Sac State, and the Chicanas were *always*—all the Chicanos were always busy, but the Chicanas were always organizing programs, organizing

activities, organizing fundraising events. They were always carrying flyers and delivering flyers all over campus, so I always saw them very, very busy.

So then they were these students, but we had some Chicanas faculty members. One of them was Isabella Hernandez-Serna. And to this day, there's a program at Sac State is called College Assistance Migrant Program, and it's still in existence thanks to Isabella Hernandez, because some Chicanos started that program, but then they lost the funding and it was closed, it was gone. But thanks to the efforts of Isabella Hernandez, the program came back and it exists today, and that program has produced doctors and engineers and very professionals.

Another person, another Chicana very important, was Olivia Castellano. She used to be an English professor and, boy, she helped the students all the time. Many students graduated thanks to all the time that she spent with the students.

Q We're going on to question number ten. What did you personally initiate or help initiate in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:17:59]

Ramírez In reality, I didn't initiate—I only initiated one program much later on. But during my time at Sac State when I was a student, I was doing what the Chicanas were doing. I was preparing flyers, passing around flyers, and sending information to La Voz de Aztlán. It was our radio station Chicano program at Sac State, and they would have our information in their programs. And another thing that I used to do

was to translate announcements and send them to *El Hispano*. It was the Spanish newspaper at that time.

But the only thing that I really initiated was a tutoring program at the Washington Neighborhood Center. Before the Chicanos had at the Washington Center, they had breakfast for *niños* and tutoring programs and many other activities, but at that time, it was like '76 or eighties, they didn't have a tutoring program, so I started one. I used to take students from Ethnic Studies or from CAMP to the Washington Neighborhood Center to teach the children of the *barrio*, and it was very successful. I was there for about seven years doing that.

Q What were some of the organizations that you were involved in?

[00:19:59]

Ramírez Well, in reality, I was involved in, of course, MAYA and MEChA, and I was involved in La Raza Galleria Posada. At one point, I was on the board. And, of course the ceremonies, I was taking care of the [unclear] direction in the ceremonies for about twenty-three, twenty-four years.

But my main involvement was in poetry, because I used to read poetry in all the programs that they used to have. They just called the poets and here we go. The programs were to get funds for scholarships or for bus tokens or even for food, because sometimes the student were very, very poor; they didn't have enough food sometimes.

We have programs in many places. We have programs at the *barrio*, at the Reno Club, La Raza Galleria Posada at the Washington Neighborhood Center,

many, many places. Later, probably the early eighties, we had programs at the Washington Barrio Education Center. One of the things about everything of this movement was that connection with the *barrio*, so because we had, us Chicanos, many organizations at the *barrio*, they were usually trying to get funds for their programs or something, so that's why they called the poets. So that was my main activity.

Q Going on to question number eleven. Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, cultural, political lines?

[00:22:30]

Ramírez Yes, it did, to the point that I wrote this book; it's called *Education: Una Epica Chicana*. What happened is that I graduated at City College with a degree in history. So when I went to Sac State, I began to notice that the Chicanas were doing all kinds of things, all kinds of working, working, but that nobody was writing their history. I was always thinking this is living history that needs to be written, and I began to take notes. Everything they were doing, I would take a note, and I would write down names of the people involved and things like that. So throughout the years, I began to put together the notes, and finally I said, "I need to write a book." I'm a poet in Spanish, so I wrote it in Spanish but in poetry form. So it's about 142 pages all in poetry, and it's everything about the Chicano Movement at Sac State.

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

[00:24:16]

Ramírez In reality, I never had any problems with my family or with my friends, because my husband, he had been born in Texas and he knew about the Chicanos' problems and he was very aware about the Farmworkers Movement of those years, and he tried to contribute to the Farmworkers Movement. So when I started coming to college or going to Sac State, I used to tell him what was happening and what the Chicanos were doing, and he was very, very open. He always said, "That's really good that you're involved in that. It's something good for us."

Q What was your husband's name?

[00:25:19]

Ramírez Roman Ramírez.

Q Can you talk about some of the work and the way he helped the Chicano Movement or the farmworkers in their struggle?

[00:25:33]

Ramírez Well, the farmworkers' struggle was something very, very important also to the Chicano Movement, because for the first time we saw here in Sacramento people being forceful about their rights and about their needs. I remember that we came, my husband and I came to Sacramento in '65, and in 1966, Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers, they had their march to Sacramento. At that time, I didn't understand what was happening or anything, but my husband said, "We have to go. We have to support the farmworkers."

We went to the Capitol and we waited for the farmworkers, and it was really—I feel like crying. It was really, really beautiful, because we were at the steps

of the Capitol, and from there we saw *all* the people coming, and there were thousands of people coming with their flags, their *huelga* flags. It was very moving. That's why I have this crane with the flag—not the flag, but the cranes have something red on their heads, because I talk a little about Cesar Chavez, I mention about the times, the day when he passed away.

Q So we're going to go on to question number twelve. If you can please describe some of the impacts that your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano had on your career.

[00:27:51]

Ramírez Wow! It had a great impact in my career, because I became a Spanish instructor, and at that time, the Chicanos were pushing for professors in Spanish who were native speakers. So I got at a time when the department really needed Spanish native speakers, and they hired me. As soon as I signed up for my master's degree, they hired me to teach one class, to be a T.A., and I started teaching then, and I taught Spanish for twenty-five years.

Then I used to run the CAMP project, and the director there was Martinez. I don't remember her first name right now. Because I was a volunteer there, she used to ask me sometimes to be a speaker in her class. She was teaching La Mujer Chicana. I used to go and teach her class or be a speaker.

At one point, she moved to South California, and she recommended me to teach in Ethnic Studies. So I began to teach La Mujer Chicana, and that has been the best thing that had ever happened to me in my life, because I taught La

Mujer Chicana for thirteen years, and I was like on the clouds because I was learning the history of Mexican women in Mexico and the history of the Chicanas here in the United States. And really those thirteen years, I must repeat that they were the best years in my life. I saw the culmination of my studies right there.

Q Looking back with your experiences with the Movimiento Chicano, do you feel like there were some issues that were unresolved?

[00:30:28]

Ramírez Well, during the Movement, I was always concerned, like I was saying before, about losing all that history. I was always thinking, “The Chicanos should give themselves time to write their history,” and I was even worried about that. But now with this oral history project, I feel really relieved, because we’re not losing our history. Our history is being preserved thank to people like Selon Valadez, Professor Valadez, and thank to Professor San Rios, his wife Tina Rios, who have been working really, really hard in this project, and hopefully it’ll be digitalized and hopefully it will be all over the place in the computer, the Internet. So now I don’t think we have any unresolved issues, no.

Q We’re going on to question number thirteen. Describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived.

[00:32:05]

Ramírez In Sacramento, it impacted very, very much because when I mentioned before all the organizations that started thanks to the Movimiento, and even today we

see the murals in Southside Park or at the garage at Macy's, the garage at Macy's, and many other places in Sacramento, and it was because the artists from Sac State, they began this concept of art in public places, so that was one thing that is visible even today.

And then they used to go and do things at the *barrio*. For example, in the late seventies or early eighties, they began the Washington Barrio Education Center, and that was a very important step. It was from City College, and City College gave the Chicanos some funding to rent the building downtown, and the Chicanos began to have classes and began to have Chicano instructors, and they started that center with twenty-six students. But when City College didn't have the funding anymore, then we left the center with 600 students, so it was very, very successful. And many things that they did, that I don't remember all of them, but it was very, very important, that connection with the university and the *barrio*.

Q We're going to be going on to question fourteen. With many of the activists that were involved with the Movimiento Chicano, seeing as they have passed on, do you know of an individual or individuals who have impacted the Movimiento Chicano that you would like to recognize?

[00:34:41]

Ramírez Yes, I would like to recognize—this is kind of personal. I would like to recognize Professor Francisco X. Alarcón from Davis and Artmand Tecon, two Chicanos who started a group of writers at La Raza Galleria Posada, and they started this group with the name of Taller Literario, but later on, it became Los Escritores del

Nuevo Sol, Writers of the New Sun. And thanks to these people who started this group, we have been together in the group for twenty-three years and it has been one of the most successful programs or things that happened in the writing world, because we have seen in the Internet that writers' groups, they only stay together for seven years or eight years, and we have been together for twenty-three. So it's really good. On that activity, we have done poetry readings everywhere. Now we have gone to San Francisco, Yuba City, Stockton, many places, and we are a group of Chicano writers, poets. So I think Francisco and Art did a good job.

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

[00:36:50]

Ramírez Oh, there are *many* challenges, many challenges, to the point that I'm glad that I'm not a student right now or a child right now, because right now the conditions, I think they're worse than they were in the sixties and the seventies. Poverty is really bad right now. 2015, it's incredible, but instead of going forward, it seems to me that not only the Chicanos but the whole country is going backwards, because now this is less education, less programs, less everything. And it is really sad, but that's the reality.

Q And do you see yourself staying active to try to challenge those issues or educating others to take on that challenge?

[00:38:00]

Ramírez In reality no, I don't see myself active anymore. I'm eighty-three years old and I get tired. I just want to be home many times, and I just want to continue in my writers' group, the Escritores del Nuevo Sol, and writing. But to be involved and to do different things like I used to do, no, I just couldn't, and it's really sad because sometimes my heart says "Yes, yes, you should do it," but it's too hard.

I think this interview, this activity is going to be the last thing that I'm going to do for the Chicano Movement, just continue in my writers' group and my writing.

Q Thank you very much, Graciela. I appreciate your energy and your time.

[00:39:27]

Ramírez Thanks to you. You did a really good job. Thank you and thanks to you, Feliciano.

Q Thank you. *Muchas gracias.*

[End of interview]