

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Melinda Rasul

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Alejandra Romero
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Transcription by Alondra Rangel Ramírez and Technitype Transcripts

Romero So just state your full name.

[00:00:10]

Rasul Melinda Anne Santana. Santana's my maiden name.

Romero And your birthdate?

[00:00:17]

Rasul 9/6/1954.

Romero Are you married?

[00:00:23]

Rasul Yes.

Romero Do you have children?

[00:00:25]

Rasul Yes.

Romero How many?

[00:00:26]

Rasul Three.

Romero So where were you born and raised?

[00:00:29]

Rasul Sacramento, California. I'm a Valley girl. I was raised in the Delta and Elk Grove area. My grandparents had a small farm in Sheldon, which is like the other side of Davis, like that kind of small, really tiny community. They had a little ranch.

Then my dad worked the farms in that area, and then he got a job maintaining—like a foreman at another ranch in Isleton, so we moved to Isleton when I was about five, and lived there for about three years, and then we moved back to the Franklin—again, the dairy area. That's the dairy area. And then into Elk Grove when I was about ten. Then I stayed there until I went to college here, and that was, like, long distance for me back then. So I graduated from Elk Grove High School.

Romero How many brothers and sisters did you have?

[00:01:18]

Rasul Just one sister. We had a small family.

Romero Describe your experiences as a child and your family and neighborhood.

[00:01:25]

Rasul Well, again, because I was raised in the country, so not the city life at all, I was a country girl, so pretty much isolated. I lived with my grandparents till I was five, so there was always a lot of cousins around. So when we moved to Isleton, we became even more isolated because we were living on the country and there was just my mom, my sister, and I, and my dad working the fields. My school, I had very small communities, a lot of *mexicanos*, who, of course, worked the fields like my dad did, and then the ranchers' children, who came from wealth. You felt it at an early

age, okay?

Then moving to Elk Grove really opened up my eyes to what I could be involved in, because we had a library in Elk Grove, so I could ride my bike to the library. Right before my tenth birthday, that summer was fantastic, because I'd ride my little bike to the library and I'd get my books out and go home and read and just became like a little bookworm. So it was fantastic. City life, that was city life.

[laughs]

Romero Where you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:02:31]

Rasul No.

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

[00:02:38]

Rasul Because growing up in Elk Grove was a very country community, the school was very much country, a large population of Caucasians and then the *mexicanos*, we came from farmworker families or we lived on the ranches that maintained the growers and things like that.

My mother was born here, but raised in Mexico, so she was a little more—I don't know how you say it in English—not *jaitona*, but she never really wanted me to hang around the *mexicanos* that much. She wanted me gel in with the Caucasians that were in our community, so she was involved with our local church, which was predominately Caucasian. So I grew up with a lot of Caucasian, not a lot of friends,

but in the Caucasian community of Elk Grove. And my dad also wanted that for us too. He didn't want us to mingle too much with the Mexicans because they felt that it was going to bring us down. I was thinking about that when I was reading the question. It started bringing back memories.

So when I was in high school, that's when the Chicano Movement—you started hearing the word *Chicano*. And up to that time, I never felt like I belonged anywhere. I had a really good friend who was African American, I had some Filipino friends, a couple really fantastic childhood Caucasian friends, and they also understood racism. And especially when we were seniors, my girlfriend who was African American, she wasn't chosen to be part of the homecoming procession because she was Black. She was a cheerleader, we were in student government together, everything, and she wasn't chosen. I just remember seeing her and she looked at me with tears. She goes, "They didn't pick me." And I'll never forget that. That's when I really knew that, "Man, this is a screwed-up school."

Plus, too, you know, I was never asked to go on dates, and, you know, I didn't think I was ugly, just maybe "too brown" for everybody, I guess. That's what you think, right? So in my senior year I just knew that things weren't right. In fact, I was a civic teacher's aide, and he and I were pretty close. He goes, "What do you think about this Chicano thing here? He asked me.

I remember saying, I go, "I don't know quite what it means, but I do know I'm not Mexican and I know that Americanism doesn't fit me because I feel racism and discrimination," I go, "but I'm going to look into it when I graduate," I told him. And I did.

Romero So how did the Mexicans, the Mexican Americans, and the Latinos react to the term *Chicano*?

[00:05:21]

Rasul My mother hated it. [laughs] I'll never forget my parents when I—I came to City College because I didn't want to go to Cosumnes because that was like an extension of Elk Grove. I remember getting involved with certain projects. I'd go, "Well, you know, the Chicanos," I'd tell my mother.

She goes, "Don't use that word." It was very derogatory to Mexican families, so a lot was that. My sister, who was very Americanized, just thought it was just so terrible of me to be involved with Chicanos and the community and all that. My mom thought it was degrading or beneath me to be involved like that.

Romero Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movements at that time?

[00:06:00]

Rasul Mm-hmm. One of the things that I did when I was in Elk Grove, they passed monies from the federal government to develop community neighborhood, like, clubhouses, right? And Elk Grove, because of the high concentration of Latinos, we got monies for that. So a couple of my teachers from Elk Grove and students, we rented a house, because you got money to rent a house, and we started like a tutoring program, so we were tutoring other Latino children from the community who needed development in their English skills or just homework skills. So I loved that. So that's one of the things we did with some of those monies that came our way.

Romero Did your involvement in the Chicano Movement change you personally?

[00:06:43]

Rasul Oh, absolutely, yeah. [laughs]

Romero Can you explain a little bit?

[00:06:46]

Rasul Sure. Again, you know, going back to coming to City College, my first year here I was also part of a lot of Vietnam veterans coming back at the same time. This was in '72. I went to summer school. I graduated in 1972, and so I was also part of Vietnam veterans coming back, and getting to know them.

Then also more monies were coming down in the community, and at that time, my one of my sociology teachers told me about a program in the Washington Community Center called Project 30, and it was mentoring, so mentoring at-risk high school kids, to help them get through high school. So that was my real first eye-opening experience in the *barrio*, the essence of a *barrio*. So I did that for, I think, a whole year. It was my second year at college. That was Project 30. I remember hearing about other programs that were happening in our community, but I was going to school, doing Project 30, and starting to kind of branch out into other areas, but that really opened my eyes to community development and what that meant.

Romero What role do you think Chicanas played in the Movement?

[00:07:54]

Rasul I think we all played different roles, depending on your background, where you came from, and what you needed to find, what you needed in your life. For me, it was liberating, okay, because I didn't know who I was and where I fit, and I had so many unexplained questions about what Chicanoism was. So my role was

more working with the community and learning about the community, and I really enjoyed helping people and other families. Then I had other friends who were professors who were going to Sac State. So it just depended on how you saw yourself along that journey.

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

[00:08:45]

Rasul I think community development programs and enriching those programs into our community. One of the other things that I did is that because we were a small type of community, we would hear about each other, right? One of my mentors, who is now my sister-in-law, she was the director of Washington Council, and this program had the Breakfast for Niños and it had the Barrio Art Gallery, Art Program. So they heard that I was doing work at the Washington Center, which was a little bit different. When I started looking around for another job, they had an opening for the Breakfasts for Niños, and so I started working with them. And that program, it taught me so much in terms of community development, coordination, how to write a budget, how to write a grant, how to coordinate activities in the community.

I was very shy. I was *very* shy when I was younger, and, again, that comes back to not having a lot of confidence in knowing who you are. So a lot of these strong Chicanas, I learned a lot from them and how to really feel better about myself and knowing who I am and feeling strong about what I was able to do and recognizing that. Rosemary Razul, Manuel Acerna [phonetic], Juanita Holendo [phonetic]. I mean, I organized. I helped organized farmworkers who came in through

a march for like—there was like five thousand people. We put together meals and housing. I mean, it was an incredible experience learning how to coordinate these incredible activities that were going on.

Romero What significance did the activities, organizations created play in the Chicano Movement?

[00:10:34]

Rasul Well, like, for instance, like for Breakfast for Niños, this program worked having breakfast and activities in the *barrio* housing projects, so we had not only like the *barrio* of Washington, but we had a couple of housing projects that were predominately welfare families or low-incomes families, and they helped feed children, before they had their breakfasts at the schools now. So we helped feed the kids in the morning. We also did activities so kids who never been to the ocean or been to the snow or flew a kite, we were able to bring those type of activities into their lives, because probably wouldn't have gotten them, considering their family situation. So those type of things that we did, and these are more grassroots things, but they were important. There's a couple of young people that we worked with that went on to continue their college education.

And I was young; I was in my twenties. I think I was twenty, twenty-one when I was doing this, so it was, like, overwhelming but very exciting. And, again, for my family being *mexicanos*, I was being very rebellious, which was a trip [laughs], because I didn't think I was rebellious, but I was. And I think sometimes when I'd go visit them, I would get very defensive about the way they would come at me on certain things. "What are you doing with your life? Why aren't you studying

more at school?" So that would be that kind of thing. I'm sure it happens now. But back then I was very rebellious.

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

[00:12:09]

Rasul Absolutely, absolutely, only because there was a huge void in my life of not knowing who I was, meeting all these fantastic people like Sonon and lot of the RCF Chicano artists. I remember going to La Paz for Cesar Chavez and making posters for him and talking to him about my dad's a Teamster [laughs], you know, it was that kind of—it was so enriching, you know, and meeting other artists from all over the country and doing art shows and doing protests. It was so freeing too. It was freeing because I finally felt like me, and I wasn't, like, hiding behind anything and I wasn't ashamed, and that was a big thing. I was thinking that I wasn't ashamed anymore to be Chicana and to be Latina, because there was so much that I valued in my own culture, but also in our host culture too.

Romero So how did, like, calling yourself a Chicana impact your family relationships?

[00:13:14]

Rasul Ooh, rebellion, yeah. [laughs] For a couple of years, it was pretty bad. You know, back then we didn't have cell phones, you know, so if I didn't call every—there would be like a week two weeks I wouldn't call or I wouldn't go visit. And my parents lived in Elk Grove, so it wasn't that far, but I just didn't want to deal with it. Again, those types of behaviors haven't changed, you know You don't want

to deal with it. Now they can hunt you down with a cell phone, but back then, they couldn't. [laughter] And where I was living at, because I had moved out—I moved out right before my nineteenth birthday, and, again, because they just wanted to control me and control my thoughts and my movements and my ideas, and I just was done with that, so I moved out when I was very young, and that really empowered me to be able to do what I wanted to do, and that was to keep on working in the Chicano community and bring services to them.

Romero So how did the Movimiento Chicano impact your career?

[00:14:16]

Rasul From a very young age, I've always liked to do service, so when my mother was involved with the church, I was always part of serving kids First Communion and working with different Catholic activities. And same thing when I got into high school, I always was tutoring or helping families out that needed something. Again, the community, working in service agencies, community agencies. I'm a social worker. I have a bachelor's in social work and a master's in education.

Every time I went back to work, I worked for the Women, Infants, and Children Program, again servicing people. Right now I work for Elk Grove School District. When I first went into this school district as a social worker, I worked with foster youth, again servicing at-need students, and now I'm servicing young adults to finish their high school diploma through adult education, and, again, servicing students. I love that, I do. Often people would ask me, "Why didn't you get your administrative credential?" And maybe in another life I might do that, but right now I like doing direct service, and I think that's what it is, it's direct service.

Romero Looking back at the Movimiento Chicano, do you think there's some issues that were left unresolved?

[00:15:36]

Rasul We were just talking about that earlier. I think that when we were younger back in the seventies and eighties, there was such a cohesiveness. We had communication, we had goals, we had goals to fulfill, so we all worked as a group to fulfill them. Whether it be raising money because we needed to send some kids to the snow or we needed to make some money for our Breakfast for Niños Program or for Sacramento Concilio, we had a goal. We all pitched in and we did it.

When Prop 13 came in, it stopped giving money to different community agencies. When that came in, we became like almost community agencies going after the same bone, so everybody's fighting with each other instead of working collectively with each other. I felt we tended to fight with each other, and in that sense, we started losing communication.

Then also, you know, a lot of us went in different directions, became state workers or became more professionals, if you want to use that word, and with that came other responsibilities. And we had families, so it kind of pulled us away from the *Movimiento* or what needed to be done, and we never really had a true essence of a leader. We had Joe Serna, who was our mayor for a long time, and he helped us along the way, but we never had anybody else to take that spot. The communication, the goals, I think that's what we're missing.

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

[00:17:20]

Rasul In Sacramento, greatly, especially in our *barrios* and at-risk neighborhoods with the different activities we did at the time, brought a lot more richness to the *gente*, to our *raza*. It helped students think about what they can achieve and looked at goals and moving on with their education and going into college and whatever they might want to do, and also their families developing, letting their families know that they could obtain jobs and better their circumstances with job development and job training and all that, because that was part of that time in that year also. So, in that sense, it did help our community, because we've seen it. We've seen people that we see and then, oh, they're in college. So it's kind of cool.

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

[00:18:12]

Rasul I think that we still—well, I can only reflect with my own children and I'm also a mentor for the Puente Program, and each group that we see with the Puente, they're all so different in terms of their cultural identity or awareness, okay? They're all so different, and I see that with my own children too. We try to provide them with as much of our *cultura*, again living and taking both our Mexican roots and our American roots and just balancing it all out and providing them with the best opportunities we can.

So even with our own children, I've seen how they see themselves or how they identify themselves, I think it's a better word for it, so the identity of that, who are they, how do they see themselves and why. And even though we've tried to

provide them with as much richness as we could, they're still going to be exposed or influenced by their own community, their own peers, their own environment that they have outside of our home, our family. So I think it's interesting and also challenging to see that, and also, yeah, I think that's probably the biggest thing.

Then again, communication, not that we're disenfranchised, but there's no big goals anymore like we used to have. The one we can think of is the UFW, the farmworkers. But now it's more the educational gap with our students, that's a big thing, well, for me personally. We're still having this huge gap with our education.

Romero Can you just elaborate a little bit on what's the Puente Program?

[00:20:17]

Rasul The Puente Program is a statewide California program only, that helps bridge students from community college into four-year colleges, okay? And what it does is that students are to participate in an English program that's designed for them to help them develop writing skills and also presentation skills, and then also a cultural program that talks about what is Chicanoism and what is Latino and how they see themselves and their own culture. So it kind of emphasizes that too.

They have a mentor that they kind of match up with, and that mentor also helps them with different things they might be interested in. So we go to the theaters, we go to plays, we go to cultural activities, things like that. So it just depends on what their needs are, but the emphasis is just the bridging the gap from the bridge, so from community college into four-year college. So they have a counselor that is designated for them and then also a teacher, an English teacher. Then the last two years, they've had a teacher from Davis that's been working with them also.

Romero So you mentioned the Breakfast for Niños. How many years or how long were you involved with them?

[00:21:44]

Rasul I was in the Breakfast for Niños for about two years, and that one I learned a lot from Rosemary and a lot of other people, you know, community development, how to write a grant, how to take care of proposals. I was also in charge of students from Sac State. They would come and cook. So we had breakfast every morning for families, and the students of Sac who got credits, they came and cooked every morning, so it was really early. [laughter]

Romero What type of things would they cook?

[00:22:18]

Rasul Well, usually sausage and bacon and pancakes, and every Friday we used to do *chorizo con huevo* and have *pan dulce*. It was always interesting because at the very beginning of the month, families have their food stamps, okay, so we used to always kind of not cook a lot because we know families would eat at home. Then as we worked through the month, we'd have a few more kids coming in. By the end of the month, it was packed, because by then the family didn't have any money. So, yeah, it was always interesting, that cycle of what happens with families living on TANF and all that.

From there, I left because I needed to grow. Governor Brown, because he was the governor back then too—remember we had two runs at being governor. We developed a nonprofit called ARCOIRIS, and ARCOIRIS was just a group of Chicanas wanting to promote their own self-awareness and education. So I was one of

thirty Chicanas throughout the state that went to L.A. and we trained in what what's now called workforce development type of programs. They were called back then manpower programs. So we were trained through UCLA curriculum.

Then we came back here and we got internships with the state, so I worked with youth programs through [unclear], so I supervised all the summer youth programs and other youth programs throughout the state. I guess that's why I began liking working with youth, so I did that.

Quite few of us stayed with the state, but I'm just not a state worker, I guess. [laughter] I like the direct services. So I think from there I went to work for the county. That was a summer youth coordination job, so I helped plan it and then I helped hire counselors and I implemented the summer youth program. By that time, I was married and pregnant, and I was having trouble, so I stopped working for a while. Then when I went back to work, I went back to work for Women, Infants, and Children Program.

Romero So out of all these organizations, which one would you say was the one that most impacted you?

[00:24:36]

Rasul The Breakfast for Niños. Within the year and a half, two years, probably the Washington Center, because that's when I began to work directly in the *barrios* and Project 30 and then Breakfast for Niños, working with Rosemary and the Royal Chicano Air Force and all of them, okay, which that's totally another story, especially for a young Chicanita out of Elk Grove.

Romero So you mention Rosemary. Can you just explain, like, who she is?

[00:25:06]

Rasul Rosemary was the director of the Washington Council. She was an incredibly brilliant woman, very, very bright, a fantastic writer. She grew up Catholic background, Catholic school. I can't speak for her, but when she came into the community, and I'm not sure how she came here, but she exploded. She loved it. She loved working with people and helping the disenfranchised. She just loved it. So I don't know how the steps are, but she ended up being the director, and that's when I met her, after I did my internship with Project 30 with the Breakfast for Niños.

I got a job with the post office as an intern from Sac City, and then when that job was up, then she found out that I needed a job, and then she offered me the Breakfast for Niños. Again, you know, just keep on adding to my own professional development of community involvement, community activism, and then also the other part of coordinating programs and developing those skills of grant writing and budgeting and working with students from Sac State, learning how to supervise, because some of those students were older than I were, okay? [laughs]

Romero So now how did you think your relationship changed as, like, your parents accepting the word *Chicana* and all of that?

[00:26:49]

Rasul Hmm. I think my parents were glad when I got married, because that whole "My *hija* has to get married or what's going to happen?" Right? But my husband I were very involved and we still continue to be involved in the different arenas of the Chicano Movement. We still became involved, and I think my mom gradually respected that, respected the things that we've done or that I've done, you

know, finishing school. She didn't see me finish my master's because she died about ten years ago, but I think she was very proud of my involvement and staying true to who I was, to who I am. You know, I'm not Mexican. We used to sometimes talk about it, because she would say stuff to me, being a Mexican mom. One time she told me, "You know, *mija*—." Diego, my husband, was at a meeting, and he comes home and she goes, "Aren't you going to warm up his food?"

I go, "No, Mom, we have a microwave." [laughter] "No, Mom, those days are over."

That whole way of thinking, not that I would challenge her, but I'd say, "But, Mom—," you know. And then she loved coming to things. She loved going to the festivals and to the different things we had. I think that reminded her of her times when she was up in Mexico, the fiestas and the involvements. And as we get older, we see our parents differently, and I saw my mother differently and why she reacted sometimes to some of the things because of her own situations. So as we get older, we can reflect differently.

Romero Okay, I think that's it.

[00:28:31]

Rasul Are we done?

Unidentified: [inaudible]

Rasul Let me think. Well, I was talking to Sonon earlier. We miss all the involvement that we used to do a lot. And I think I spoke to this earlier, we're all doing different things now, so sometimes you just don't know who's doing what in the zoo kind of thing. For instance, right now my *comadre* is the director of La

Familia, and I'm just so impressed of how she's kind of brought new energy. Not to take away from the person who was there before; she was a fantastic director and she built the La Familia from the ground up. But sometimes you just need new ideas and new energy, and she's brought that.

It's really exciting to see La Familia once again being very much a part of the community, because we don't really have a predominant Latino agency in Sacramento to speak of that I can really speak to. We don't have a *concilio* anymore. Washington Center is struggling, because, again, funding and the monies are so sparse up there for people to go after.

We used to have La Raza Bookstore, and it's changed the way it does things now in the community. So those things that used to bring people together, like for a huge art exhibit or whatever, aren't there anymore, so we see each other, the elders, we see each other in different events now, and it's kind of interesting. We go, "Remember when we used to do that? Oh, remember that?" So those types of things.

So having a true agency or agencies is no longer in the community, "I know if I'm Chicano or Mexican, I can go to this agency and they'll help me take care of this." La Familia is probably the closest, but they're more towards health and mental health issues. I think eventually—it sounds like they'll broaden that, so they'll be able to provide more services. They do provide some training services, but I guess that is the last one, a true Chicano agency that's been here in this community. I'm thinking, and I can't think of any besides the Center. You can't count the consulate. That's different. That's a Mexican council, yeah. [laughter] But they do good work.

[End of interview]