The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education Oral History Project

Richard Soto

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Brenda Pérez

May 17, 2014

Transcription by Neha Sikand and Technitype Transcripts

Pérez So, first of all, I would like to thank you for coming here. Can you please state your full name?

[00:00:12]

Soto Richard Soto.

Pérez What is your date of birth?

[00:00:14]

Soto August 19, 1944.

Pérez What is your marital status?

[00:00:19]

Soto Single. Tell your grandma. [laughter]

Pérez Do you have children?

[00:00:24]

Soto I do.

Pérez How many do you have?

[00:00:27]

Soto I have three, two boys and a girl, and two grand-girls.

Pérez Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:37]

Soto I was physically born in Stockton, spent a couple of days there, and then I spent the majority of my life in Tracy.

Pérez Interesting. What did your parents do for a living?

[00:00:51]

Soto My mother was a mother, a stay-at-home wife. My father was a labor contractor for the Bracero Program. He worked for farmers and contracted laborers and paid them. That was a short career. He was killed in 1947.

Pérez 1947? What was the cause of it?

[00:01:19]

Soto An automobile accident.

Pérez Do you have any brothers or sisters?

[00:01:24]

Soto I do. I have five sisters and I had one brother. Two of my sisters have passed on kind of young. My twin brother passed away two years ago.

Pérez I'm sorry to hear that.

[00:01:40]

Soto Thank you.

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

[00:01:46]

Soto Tracy, like a lot of communities in the forties, fifties, sixties, was a divided community. In a lot of the movies and written works, it's always across the tracks. So, of course, in Tracy we lived on the south side of the tracks, and where the railroad tracks are starts off with 1st Street and then goes all the way up to 22nd, 23rd, whatever. Actually, when I was growing up, 22nd and 23rd weren't even there. But 10th Street was basically the dividing point, and you didn't want to go beyond 10th Street unless you were looking for trouble, because Mexicans were not wanted over there. So we kind of stayed on the south side of the tracks. A lot of our activities were centered around our friends.

When my father was killed, my mother was left with four and a half kids. She was, I think, six or seven months pregnant when he was killed. So we moved from the home we were renting into the government housing, which was called the projects, and that's where we spent from third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade. So we moved into the housing projects. Everything on the south side of town, the majority of the population was Mexican. Probably half of them were farmworkers coming in and coming out. A few Blacks. Tracy never really had a large Black population, but they were thrown into the same group that we were. A few poor White people were there, and some that had been there for a long time and just didn't want to leave. They grew up with us and they accepted us, so they stayed there.

Pérez Moving on, were you a Fellow or a Felito during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:03:57]

Soto I was both of them.

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

[00:04:08]

Soto Well, I'm not so sure the Mexican American Education Project influenced. It did have an impact. But my understanding was that we were selected. They were looking for a certain kind of a person, and we were selected.

I had come home from overseas and went to Delta College, and immediately I had gotten involved in student activities, MEChA. Actually, at that time it was Mexican American, I don't know, something. And in 1969, almost a year after I had been there, they held that conference in Santa Barbara and they came out with El Plan de Santa Barbara. Gus Lava [phonetic], who was, I guess, an Ethnic Studies director in UC Davis at that time, personally came and gave me a copy of El Plan and said that was our action plan. So I read that, read the El Plan, analyzed it, and just started formulating a plan.

Now, when I came home, I had been a surgical nurse in Vietnam and I had certain experiences there. One is that I almost got court-martialed because of some racist activities that I stood up against, and the sergeant said, "Well, that's a direct order."

I says, "I don't care. I'm not going to follow it."

The other thing that happened in Vietnam is that as medical personnel with the kind of things that you saw, they didn't want you to go crazy, so you usually only stayed six months. When my six months were up, my team six months were up, they

went to Da Nang, got on an airplane, and I waved them goodbye. I had decided I was going to stay, so I stayed.

It took them three months to figure out that I hadn't gotten on the plane, and they sent these big Shore Patrol guys to come get me, and they said, "Buddy, you're getting on the plane this time, because we're going to throw you on that plane." So I came home. [laughs]

I think my punishment for having gone against orders is that—and no disrespect to women—I was sent to the Philippines to run a delivery room for two years, and it was kind of like I didn't like it, but it was a blessing because regardless of what time they came in to deliver a baby, they were going to call me. So realizing that, I put in for night duty, because in night duty there's nobody around and it's quiet.

I also had decided in Vietnam that I was going to college, and I also knew that I hadn't been too much of a school boy and I needed a lot of catching up to do. So for the next two years, I just read, read, read, and just [demonstrates]. I did math and science and taught myself and all this stuff. When I came back and started college, I moved right ahead with everybody else.

Pérez That's good to hear.

[00:07:39]

Soto Yeah.

Pérez Can you talk a little bit about the role, what role did your knowledge of cultural anthropology influence your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:07:48]

Soto I had taken a class in Chicano—you know, there was nothing. There was really nothing at that time. I mean, god, the kind of stuff you guys have available to now is like, Jesus, I wish I had that. There was Carey McWilliams' *North From Mexico,* there was Cecilia Aller [phonetic], and I think maybe one other book, and that was it. That was it. So a lot of our professors that we were assigned to or they were assigned to us or we chose them, they were scrambling to try put stuff together too.

So in terms of cultural anthropology, what's that guy's name? Cole? There's a book by a guy named [Michael D.] Coe, I think. He wrote a book about the Mayans and the Aztecs. We had a professor named Pora [phonetic] at Delta, and he tried to boringly take us through that.

But I think part of it is that if you don't have any clue or identification or anything, there's too many pieces that are absent, and so later, when you start getting more pieces and it starts coming together, then you begin to see, "Oh, now I know what they're talking about."

Now, some of the *paisas* [phonetic] coming out of Mexico grew up there and were scavenging and digging up little artifacts in their backyard. They were familiar with the pyramids. They were familiar with all these things going on in Mexico. But those of us coming from the housing projects, nah, we were familiar with Kick the Bucket. [laughs] We didn't have any idea.

Now, I was a little bit—my grandfather, Rafael Muñoz [phonetic], was a *dorado* [phonetic] of Villa. He was one of Pancho Villa's bodyguards. And I remember going to my grandmother's house, where we spent a lot of time since my

father had passed away, and so we spent a lot of time there, and I remember going into the house, and in the front room there were these two big pictures of him with his *caballo* and his *treinta* and his *sombrero*. And, of course, because he was Mexican, he had a *bigote*. So I knew a little bit about that.

But in those days, teachers were getting away with racist shit, you know, calling Mexicans bandits and stuff. And we were going like, "Wait a minute. My grandfather's not a bandit." [laughs] But what do you know? What ammunition do you have to respond to that? So, if anything, the classes that I took only whet my appetite to want to know more.

But, unfortunately, through the Mexican American Education Project, I'm not sure if it was as well organized as maybe they thought it was, and I don't think that they were really ready for the diversity that they got. I mean, it's one thing now to say, "Well, that's a *paisa* [phonetic], and that's a Chicano, that's a Mexican American." But you had people—there were several Vietnam veterans that came back. Me, I didn't mix with people. I was the one that everyone knew I was there, but I was the one that didn't really mix with them. I wanted to be left alone. I got divorced during the Project, during the first year, and then got an apartment and people wanted to, "Soto, let me hook it up with you and move into your apartment." No, I don't want that. I don't want that. One thing is that I wanted to be alone.

I think I was one of the few that was reading all the books, because they would call me before a test, "Soto, we know you're the only one that reads. What's important in this book?"

The other thing is that having been a surgical nurse, I was hella clean. My house was spotless. I did not want somebody to come in there and make a mess, because it was going to have problems. I saw a number of the students, especially the young ladies that hooked it up, you know, to get an apartment, and then *una queria traer el novio* and, oh, my god, "What are you guys doing in there?" [laughs] And so then one of them would have to leave, right? Then that put a financial burden on the other ones. And so I knew what I had, I could take care of myself, I didn't need any additional hassles. "Leave me alone. Let me do what I want to do."

Pérez You were talking about the bandits and stuff. Can you kind of talk about more of the earlier memories or events that attracted to you to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:13:07]

Soto There were none. There was no Movement. There was no Movement. In a little rural community like Tracy, you knew the *braceros* because you were talking to them. They were the ones who bought you beer. You got in a car, you went out to the labor camps, and "*Orale*!" We knew, like, a few words in Spanish, *cerveza*. [laughs] Anything else that was going on, you didn't really hear about it.

I remember one time I think it was the FBI was going to a house and I asked my mother, "Why?"

And she says, well, the guy was in the military, and I think it was during Korea. It had to be during Korea. I was too little in World War II. So it had to be Korea. He went AWOL, and not like me where I stayed. He went AWOL and didn't come back. So I'm thinking like, "Wow, man."

It wasn't till later when I started doing research on Hispanics and veterans, but my experience was the discrimination. When you went to the theatre and you were told you had to sit on a certain side of the theatre, you couldn't sit on the other side; when you tried to go across town and were told you were going to get your ass kicked; when you are going to school and there is this cute little *guerita* there and you want to ask her out. "Well, my parents won't let me."

Or here's a real ironic one. This White girl kind of hinted she liked me. So I'm going, "Ah-oh. [Spanish] I should turn that away?"

So I walked all the way to her house, and when I got to her house, her two older brothers came out and in certain terms let me know that dirty Mexican wetbacks were not allowed in her house and they would kick my ass, right?

Well, about three years later, I became a surgical nurse, right? I go to Vietnam. I'm getting all these blown-up bodies. Her brother got killed in Vietnam, and I just thought what if he had come across my OR, right? I would say, "Oh, sorry, man. No room for White boys. We're going to kick your ass"? No, I wouldn't have done that. [laughs] But, you know, see? I don't know if you understand that little irony there.

Pérez Yeah.

[00:15:37]

Soto Thank you.

Pérez Of course.

[00:15:38]

Soto Because I'm thinking, like, we didn't care. And then actually is what created the problem where I resisted orders, is that we had had a company of Marines that had just got ambushed, and we had, like, thirty, forty non-ambulatory Marines on our medical ward. It was time for dinner, and the sergeant says, "Okay, there's *x* number of Marines. Each one of you has to go get *x* number of food trays and bring them back to feed these guys." No problem. I'll do that and bring a couple of extra.

The White boys, they took off. "That's a wetback and niggers' work," they said.

I go, "What the hell you talking about, man? There's White guys in there. We're taking care of them too. We're not discriminating."

So they took off. So then the guy tells me, "You have to go get all the trays."

I says, "No, no. You know who's part of this unit. You know who has responsibility. You need to get on *their* ass. I'll go and get trays and I'll get more than my share, but I'm not going to do all this."

So then he threatened me with a court-martial and blah, blah, blah. And I said, "You know what? Whatever you think is right, okay, I'm not going to do it." And he was a Mexican, and I think that's the reason he backed down. He knew that I was right. He knew that I was right.

But that was also a very critical point in my life. If you go up for court-martial in a combat zone, that's the firing squad. They can give you the death sentence, because in a combat zone, you're not supposed to be able to think. You're supposed to say, "Yes, sir." And I says, "No, I'm not going to be able to do this." So if you can defy that, then you can defy anything. [laughter]

Pérez Moving forward, did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:17:43]

Soto Yeah, yeah. When I was little, my mother—and I really don't know a lot of my mother's history, but I'm taking her out tomorrow night, she's ninety-four, so I think I'm going to hit her up on some questions. But she was very strong into reading and education, not so much to the point that you're going to be a doctor or a lawyer, but at least we were reading. And maybe the other part was that we were so poor that we had nothing else to do.

So some church guy came knocking on the door and sold her a set of Uncle Arthur books, and so they had a religious base and they had a positive "do good things" kind of a base. So she would read those stories to us and then we would take turns, the five of us, reading to each other. So we were getting programmed, right, by these little books.

But from there, I developed a real interest in reading. On 10th Street, we used to have a bus depot, the Greyhound bus depot, and I would go there at night and borrow books from their rack. You were supposed to pay for them. I just borrowed them. [laughter] It was more convenient for my pocketbook.

Pérez Would you like to share anything else about how it changed you personally?

[00:19:32]

Soto Probably because of—in my answer, I hit upon this one. Just because they called it the Mexican American Education Project, there were people who had a

definition of what a Mexican was, okay, and so if you didn't know and everything you said wasn't a *dicho* and you didn't know what a *dicho* was, you weren't a Mexican. And if you didn't know *Volver Volver* by heart, you weren't a Mexican. The only place where I was Mexican is that I could drink Tequila, so that kind of made me a Mexican. And I got tired of it. I got tired of it.

So that was another thing where I said, "You know what? I'm not here to compete with you guys, so just stay the fuck away. Leave me alone."

That was another thing that separated me from groups. I still do not work good with groups. I know what I can do. You're going to read it in the script. One of the big things—and this probably also comes from Vietnam—is who has your back. And just because you're Brown doesn't mean that I'm going to trust you. And when something has to be done—you probably experienced this in school when, like, how many people show up? And when they show up, how many of them really work? So I had to work all my life.

I ran away from home when I was in the ninth grade. I had a full-time job all through high school as a grocery clerk, and in between that, I squeezed in sports. Actually, I think I ran the mile [laughter] fifty pounds ago, when I was in high school, and I was good. I was good. And that's another thing I learned. When you're good, you're good, and you need to admit it and tell people.

When I went to work at Tracy High School, everyone would say, "Soto, you can't run."

I said, "Put your shoes on. Put your shoes on. We're going to see." So they learned right away that if they're going to try to put me down, they need to back it up.

But I pretty much separated myself from the majority of the people in the projects and I did my own thing. I also realized that you know what? There's is a lot of shit to do out there, so we don't all have to be together. We just need to find your place and do what you enjoy doing, because you're going to do a better job.

In the program, in '70, '71, '72, they were having riots at Sac High School, and at this time we were beginning to train. I think the majority of the people in the Project became teachers or educators in some form or another, so they didn't have a lot of people that they could relate to on the staff or go to for help. So they came to the college. There were, I don't know, 100, 150 people in the Project, and in front of a whole group, they says, "Man, it's really dangerous at our school and we really need some help from some adults. Won't any of you volunteer to come out?" Nobody would raise their hand. I raised my hand, and so I went out.

Now, prior to that, I was premed because following my medical experience, and I went up there and I started working with these high school kids and I loved it. I loved it. So I started organizing walkouts. I got into four high schools, and I could make one phone call and the next morning they would walk out.

Pérez Was this in 71, did you say?

[00:23:50]

Soto It would be like '72, '73, because I think I left in '74 and went to San Francisco to work on walkouts and riots in schools over there. So, yeah. Matter of fact, one of my former students is going to pick me up when I'm done here. She's like, "I can't believe I'm going to dinner with you."

I'm like, "You're going to pay." Nah. [laughter]

But it was good. It was good. When I went to San Francisco, I had an opportunity to work at elementary schools. I did not like those little *changos*. I wanted to smack 'em. And then I went to junior high, and junior high, nah, I didn't like them either. And I went to high school, and high school kids, you know, they're beginning to see the world, they kind of think they're adults, and you can kind of talk to them and kind of guide them, and I liked that. So I changed my career, and in three years I got my A.A., my B.A., and my teaching credential. Then I went for a master's degree there and completed that.

Then this girl, because you know how Latina girls are, broke my heart [laughter], so I had to leave town. I went to San Francisco, and I documented that in a poem called *I'll Wait, I'll Wait, I'll Wait*. But I didn't. So I went off to San Francisco. I elaborated a little more in the script. I'm going to say the majority of the teachers that we had, and I don't want to blame them 100 percent, but I don't think they were ready for us and I don't think that we got maybe what we needed.

Pérez Is this in regards to the Education Project?

[00:26:02]

Soto Yeah, yeah. And the things that I needed to do, what I needed to do, I just researched them or I just put it together myself, and I think some of that skill came from when I worked in surgery, okay, you had to know what parts you were working on; you had to know what major blood vessels you might cut; you had to know what organs were there; you had to know what instruments you had to use; you had to know what kind of needles and what kind of sutures on your way back out. So you had to do a lot. I mean, when I went to OR training in Oakland, man, I was

spending a lot of nights going through medical books just [demonstrates] learning that. So I learned.

Then my two years in the Philippines, I knew, I knew I was coming back. I knew I was coming to college, and I spent my time.

There's a funny little thing that my buddies would say, "Hey, Soto, man, it's payday. Let's go out and get drunk and visit some girls out there."

"No, not tonight."

Okay, so next month payday, "Hey, Soto, let's go out and have some beer and see some girls out there."

"No, not tonight."

So, finally, one of them says, "Hey, Soto, are you gay?" [laughs]

I says, "No." I says, "In addition to preparing for college, 80 percent of my paycheck is going home, so I really don't have a lot of money to throw away." That might be one of the other things that maybe people don't like me. I get totally organized about what I'm getting done. And from working in the OR, you have to think two, three steps ahead. If something doesn't work, you better have a backup plan, because if not, you're going to have a dead person, okay? So when I'm working on something, I'm ahead. I'm ahead of the game. I'm already thinking ahead. And your task, you better keep up with me.

Pérez You kind of talked about how you began organizing walkouts and stuff. Is there any other personal things you initiated or help initiated in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:28:33]

Soto Well, at Sac High they created a class, they call it Ethnic Studies, but the teacher was a coach, so I basically took over the class. There weren't any textbooks, so I used newspaper articles, so I would bring in newspaper articles, I would Xerox them, but I would look for articles with issues that were affecting or impacting our community, then I would present it to the students and get a reaction from them. Then I would break it down and say, "No, this is really what's happening. This is how you need to look at it."

We had one professor at Sac State that in a social studies class, he did that. He introduced—he didn't do it as systematic, I guess, as I did, but he had us bring in articles, and it was it was kind of part of—if we had a little break in class, he'd say, "Okay, who has an exciting article?" It wasn't really part of what we had to do.

Now, years later, I ended up becoming a counselor, a high school counselor, not a teacher, and years later when my students came to me, they said, "You know what? Teachers are talking shit about us, about Mexicans in general. How do we fight them?"

I says, "Well, you need to be ahead of them. So you look at your textbook and you see what they're going to cover, and then you need to get the information."

They go, "Mr. Soto, you know a lot. Why don't you teach us?"

Well, remember I got a teaching credential? So I have a teaching credential and a life community college credential. So I went to my friend at the adult school and I created a Chicano Studies class, and the high school students could sign up and take that class.

Pérez What year was this?

[00:30:28]

Soto Oh, this was after ’76. I didn’t do anything like that. When I got to San Francisco, I was a counselor for twenty-one schools, so in San Francisco what I did is that I visited every one of the schools, and then in talking with the teachers, I basically asked them, “Is anybody having difficulties?”

“No, everything’s okay at my school.”

So I then took the ten schools that were having a problem with students, and I split it in half. So I spent morning at one school on one day, afternoon at another school another day. So by splitting it up, I could get ten schools. And then if the other teachers, all of a sudden they had a problem, I told them, “Just call me and I’ll come over,” and see what I would have to do.

So a lot of it mostly was just talking to parents. The teachers didn’t speak Spanish, so I would go and find out what the problem was, go to the people’s house and talk with the parents about their little *travieso* or *traviesa,* huh.

Pérez [unclear] *traviesa*.

[00:31:51]

Soto Yeah, more likely. [laughter]

Pérez Can you talk about some other organizations you were involved in?

[00:31:57]

Soto I’m not really a joiner, okay, but, of course, I started MEChA in Delta College in Stockton. Was I involved in any groups? I don’t think I was really involved with any groups at Sac State. In San Francisco, we started the Latin

American Teachers Association and got involved with that doing a lot of stuff, got involved with MAPA.

Pérez MAPA?

[00:32:36]

Soto Mexican American Political Association. You just got an F in Chicano Studies. [laughter] American GI Forum. I would go to a lot of stuff and they would always want me to join, and I would just say, "No, I'll just sit in a corner."

The one where I really got involved is I went to Tracy, I got involved in a group called Tracy Latin Athletic Club, and I was very instrumental in developing it into a more professional organization and doing more things.

In Stockton, well, Stockton is where I got involved with MAPA. I don't know. You know what? I wasn't so much for organizations, but I have been on almost every social organization in the county of San Joaquin, so like United Way, Juvenile Justice Delinquency Commission, WorkNet. There's a lot of them. There's a lot of them. I don't even keep track of them.

But it's an interesting question, because recently I started putting together binders. I downsized from my big house, because old people are supposed to have little houses because they're not supposed to go up stairs and down stairs. [laughter] So I downsized. I no longer have kids at home, so I downsized to a small house, and I put a bunch of stuff in boxes. And I started going through them, and I was really, really surprised, a lot of the things that I found. I have the original copy of José Montoya's curriculum, you know. Whoa! Now it's something.

But I spent more of my time, my number-one objective was counseling, working with my students, okay? That was number one. Number two was presenting at conferences. Give me a topic, I'll talk about it. And that was usually like on a weekend, so that didn't interfere with anything. And then the other one was getting involved in a lot of committees, because if we're not there, we're not heard. If we're not heard, then they do what they want to. It's like when I went to graduate school, it's one of me and 100 of them, and so it was a lot of times just the one there. So I get kind of angry sometimes with young people that think the world started when they got involved, and they're trying to tell you what to do. And I tell them, "I did that fifty years ago already. You need to catch up with me. I've already been there."

Pérez How would you say these changes impacted your personal relationships with your family, peers, and significant others?

[00:36:23]

Soto I think there's a lot of people that are not as well informed. And I'm not any smarter than anybody else, okay? I just read books rather than go out and get drunk. So it's not to say that they're dumb and that's why they don't understand. It's just that they don't take the time to read. So when I look at something, I want to know as much about that as I possibly can because I'm going to go out and get into debates, discussions, and try to push mine and what I might think a more *raza*-oriented response to that. I want to be able to defend myself.

A lot of times, especially in Tracy, people would invite me to come and talk just because they thought they were going to shoot me down, but when I could respond—and this is one of the things that I always told my students. I says, "You

need to read. You cannot be somewhere and someone's talking shit and you say, 'Oh, you're talking shit,' and then you have nothing to offer. And you can't tell them, 'Can you wait a minute? I've got to go home and read a book so I can come back.' You've got to know. You have to know what it is you want to defend or what you want to promote. Otherwise, it's not going to work."

Pérez Like you said, be ahead.

[00:38:02]

Soto Yes. And I don't mind taking the heat. I'm like you, I get nervous, I get nervous, but I'm there to fight.

Pérez Can you describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived?

[00:38:18]

Soto Here in Sacramento, my life pretty much consisted of going to class and working with the four high schools, and I tell you, I'm really proud of that, because I do run into former students who are working in government buildings, who are doing some great things, and they recognize me, and I'm going, "Thank you."

They go, "Yeah, Mr. Soto, you came to our school and, shit, nothing was the same again." [laughs]

I say, "Good. I'm glad. That's the way it's supposed to be."

But I would say that most of my work and most of the changes were in Tracy, and when I went to Tracy, I didn't just take on a school; I took on a town. And when I went in for the interview and they were having riots, I knew that they needed me, okay? You need to know why you're there. If you think it's because they like you,

forget it. [laughs] Because they're going to say, "You know what? We just fired you." But you need to know why you're there, and you need to let them know that you know, so that if they want to mess with you, it's going to go worse for them.

So I was there to, number one, put an end to the riots, which took five years, five years, and in that time period, I also learned that if I wanted to do something and make some changes, I needed to give myself a time span, and then I needed to sit and reevaluate what I was doing, if I was on track or maybe needed to change my tactics and my goals a little bit.

So one of my first goals, in addition to putting an end to the riots, was to get Mexicanos in large numbers to graduate from high school. One of the first things was that they had a whole building. They had remedial math, remedial English, remedial social studies. Everything was remedial. So when the kids came to my office, I would say, "What do you want to be?"

"Oh, I want to be a lawyer."

"Really? In remedial English. How is that going to happen?" [laughs] And so I'd tell them, "You know what? You need to get out of that."

So I started pulling them out and putting them in appropriate College A-through-F in those days.

Then they called me into the office. "Hey, Soto, what are you doing? Don't you like these teachers?"

"No, I have nothing against those teachers."

"Well, you're closing down their program."

"Maybe we didn't need that program."

The same thing happened for another class we had, called FE Slab [phonetic]. It was two hours of cooking, and it was like 90 percent Chicanos. I asked them, I says, "Why are you guys in this class?"

"We get to eat." [laughs] And it wasn't like they were starving. It's just they were always eating.

So, again, the head counselor called me in. He says, "Hey, the teacher says that you're out to destroy her program."

I said, "I'm not out to destroy her program. I ask every kid that comes into my office, 'What do you want to be? My job as a counselor is to get you there. Your job is to listen to me and do what I tell you.'"

Because the other thing I would do is that if the kids were not doing their homework, I would go out at lunchtime and I would, "Why are you lying to me?"

"I'm not lying to you."

"Yeah, you are. You told me you wanted to be—," blah blah blah, "and you're getting Fs. How can that be not lying? So you need to take care of business. Pick those things up."

So in that same time period, I made a contract with ten institutions of higher education, including some universities, some state colleges, some community colleges, and some vocational schools, and I went out. I was driving to San Luis Obispo, because that was the top place to go for computers and engineering in those days. I was going to UC Berkeley, I was going to UC Davis, talking to people and getting people that were willing to stick with me for ten years. I said, "It's going to take me ten years for me to change mindsets in this community."

And so they said, “Yeah, we’ll do it.”

So this club that I got involved in, Tracy Latin Athletic Club, I talked to them and I says, “Hey, how would you guys like to have another activity benefiting the community?”

“Yeah.”

So I invited these college representatives. They were all *raza*, all right, and that was part of the plan. They were all *raza*. They didn’t necessarily have to be bilingual, because I wasn’t going to lay that trip on them, but it would help. They would come to Tracy around noon o’clock on a given day. They would meet at my house. One of the things for them was that they would get to bond with their colleagues from other institutions, and they would just have a good time.

Then they would come back to the high school, fifth and sixth period, and I would set them up in the cafeteria, and the White students got to experience a role reversal. Now you had White kids asking a Mexican how they could get into college, right? They’re like, “What? Mexican recruiters?” So they would do that.

Then, well, I also opened it up another hour after school so anybody from the community could come in, parents, anybody that wanted to come in and learn about colleges. And then they would come to my house and this club would barbecue for all these recruiters. Then in the evening, they would go back to the high school and we would have a Bilingual College Night, and that’s where the parents could come in and people that didn’t speak English, and they’d just turn them loose on these recruiters.

It began to create some changes. One of the spinoffs is that I created the Hispanic Family of the Year Award. Now, in order to be a viable candidate, you had to have one of your children graduate from college and another one in college. It wasn't going to be so easy that *mijo* went to college. No, no, no. *Mijo, mija* had to graduate and you had to have another one along the way that was going there.

Tracy has H.J. Heinz and we also had Holly Sugar, which are national corporations. And a couple of our families made corporate newspaper headlines. The corporate, like Holly Sugar, I remember specifically, sent me a copy of their national newsletter that highlighted the family that had been made Family of the Year because of their kids. The families, you walk into their house, right there in the front room is this big plaque. "Family of the Year, that's us." [laughs]

Pérez Moving forward, you kind of mentioned how maybe the youth that's involved now think they might know everything, but can you elaborate more on what you think are current or future challenges for the Chicano community? [00:46:34]

Soto Well, I think what happened is that in '69 when El Plan de Santa Barbara came out, there was a cadre of people across the state and across the country where there was large populations of *raza* that they were getting involved. Maybe they didn't have a Plan de Santa Barbara, but they were getting involved and doing things on their own. I think the unfortunate thing is that we never institutionalized from colleges to the high schools and made it like an FFA.

One time I sat down with our FFA teacher because she was pro kids. She took our non-English-speaking students to an FFA conference, and they won the speech contest in Spanish, okay? So I knew "I need to get this girl on my side."

So I wanted to look at the framework that they were using to create a national organization. And we never, even till this day—I mean, look, Assemblyman [Luis] Alejo is barely pushing legislation through for Ethnic Studies K-through-12, and he's just pushing it through. It hasn't become a reality yet. And how many people at the K-through-12 level are even looking at it as something we can do? So we never got that information there, and it's really sad that students had to go through high school to junior college or four-year college to realize that there is something that talks about us, and you can even get a degree in it. So it's too bad there.

So in terms of the leadership, I don't know, I don't know. The other day, I went to Los Angeles, actually went to see a movie. [laughs] It was a play, *Ramona*. Are you familiar with *Ramona*? You familiar with Helen Hunt Jackson?

Pérez No.

[00:48:38]

Soto Another F. You know what? Two Fs. What the hell. Talking about next year's generation.

Ramona was a book written by Helen Hunt Jackson in like 1890-something. There's this *mestiza* and this *indio* that fall in love. It's almost like the *corrido*, *Un Indio Quiere Llorar*. You're not familiar with that one either?

Pérez No.

[00:49:09]

Soto *A que la*! What are we going to do. [laughs] Well, it's *banda*—see, I'll only get a C, then, because I forget the *banda*'s name. There's two songs that are really good. One of them is *Un Indio Quiere Llorar*, and the other is *Sangre de Indio*. Yeah, take notes. [laughs]

So where were we with that? Anyway, if we're really going to get anywhere, and some of the presentations that I'm making now, I'm talking about why it is critical for you to have Ethnic Studies in your professional curriculum. You've got to know our population, man. We're hella mixed. I don't mean by races, but we're Mexican Americans, we're Latinos, we're Chicanos and now there's more and more. If the Latinas outnumber the Latinos in college, right, who are you going to play with? So we have Latinas marrying *Negros*, we have Latinas in large numbers marrying White boys. Okay? And some of that is, like, there's no way they're going to marry a Mexican. They already went through that with their father or whatever bad experience they had. But, yeah, we have a lot of work to do. Especially our psychologists and our sociologists, they especially need to look into the dynamics of what is happening with us. We need some fixing and women need some fixing.

Pérez Well, is there anything else you'd like to share?

[00:51:06]

Soto In my twilight years, I've taken to writing. *Maestro* talked about these little groups that thought they were the voice of Aztlán, and if you didn't write like them—I had José Montoya as a teacher and Esteban Villa as a teacher, and I know some people that just tried to copy them, and on them it sounded like shit. Be yourself.

I had an experience in high school where I figured out much later the reason I got into Honors English is because I had read a lot. You take a test and you're a reader, you know all those words, okay, so you score high. And so I was the only Mexican in this class, Honors class, English, with all these White kids, and we had to write a poem, and so I wrote one and I did it on a *pachuco*, and I even broke one of my sister's *cadenas* to make the little chain, okay? And I took it to class and they all laughed at me, including the teacher. "What the hell is that kind of shit? What are you writing about?" Right? So in the good ol' Soto traditional pattern, "Fuck you. I ain't writing no more." So I didn't write again, not till maybe thirty some-odd years later. And then when I did write, I write what I called ventilation poetry. You know what ventilating means?

Pérez Yeah.

[00:52:44]

Soto Okay. Because, like *Maestro*, I have a lot of anger. I especially have a lot of anger about Vietnam. One of my first poems was a poem called *Los Pobres Fight*. I witnessed this scene in Los Angeles from a three-story building or something, and I got hella pissed and I just [demonstrates] had to start writing. So I've done that, and most of my stuff was kept in a binder because I thought like, "Who the hell cares? So I'm just going to write it for me."

When I became a counselor and started talking with my students, and especially girls keep a diary, right? "Oh, Mr. Soto, I write poetry too."

"Yeah, okay."

I said, “No, bring it in. Oh, this was the best stuff I ever read.” I said, “I wrote something. Let me share it. We’ll share.”

And so I started sharing with my students, and that was a way of connecting with them and kind of getting into their feelings and just working with them, and based on that, I also created a counseling tool called self-esteem and identity formation through literature. Number one, you have to know our literature, so you have to be *extremely* well read in Chicano literature. Because students would talk to me, and I’d say, “Hey, let me loan you a book.”

And so what happened, especially in one school, the English teachers came to me one day and they go, “Soto, we’ve tried to get these kids to read and they never read. And now they’re reading and all their books have your name on them. What’s up with that?”

I says, “Interest, high interest. You missed the main point about reading. You have to give them something they’re interested in.”

And they accepted the books. They says, “Mr. Soto lent you the books. We’ll accept it as a part of your English classwork. So I started that.

I always encourage my students to buy books and create their own little Chicano library at home and read it and share. And also through—like one time we were covering the Zoot Suit Riots, and I was telling the kids about it, and I said,” You know, you should ask your grandparents.”

And one kid went home, and next time she came, she goes, “My grandpa went in the closet and pulled out his drapes. He still had his suit!” [laughs]

Another time I took a kid home and he says, "*Pues, maestro, que aprendieron hoy*?"

I said, "*Pues estamos hablando de los braceros*."

"Oh, *los braceros, yo fui uno de esos*."

And his daughter and her son, "*Abuelo, tu fuistes bracero*?" They didn't even know that he had been a *bracero*. And here the kid was watching this—I had this video or DVD, and he asked if he could borrow it. I said, "Sure. Just get it tomorrow."

So a lot of stuff was coming back home, and I think a lot of things people have kept inside because it's either been labeled negative as part of those negative stereotypes, or we've only gotten one side of it, and, of course, we always get the bad side, and it's another stab at our esteem. So by bringing it out and bringing out the real cause of why those things happened, we put a positive light on it.

So I think that probably one of the most beneficial things about the Chicano Movement and kicking down doors and getting in shootouts was the fact that we opened up colleges. In the last fifteen years, there have been like thousands, literally thousands—including women—books, studies, dissertations. I mean, I can't keep up with it. There is so much, so much. I try to get as much as I can, but there is so much that is coming out. And the sad thing is I have this five-thousand-volume library and museum, and I can't find a place to house it. So when I die, it'll probably go to Goodwill.

Pérez I hope not.

[00:57:33]

Soto You know, I offered it to a Heritage Center, a Mexican Heritage Center in Stockton. I've always tried to get—and you young people need to do this. Anywhere you go, you need to carry a Chicano book. How can you promote our history and our culture and tell people that you're proud and you can't even carry a book? But you know how many Mexican houses I go to, and what's her name, that *Negra*, what's her name? Oprah [Winfrey].

Pérez Well—

[00:58:18]

Soto Moving on, forward. No, that's what it is. Moving forward. Moving forward. [laughs]

Pérez Moving forward, I'd like to really thank you for taking your time coming here and being able to let me interview you. It was a lovely interview.

[00:58:32]

Soto Can I read one poem?

Pérez Of course.

[00:58:33]

Soto When by choice you

choose the avenue of poverty

as opposed to poverty choosing you.

And I ask them, I says, "What does that mean?"

And I tell them, "You know what? I didn't choose poverty."

My dad being killed when I was three chose poverty for me, okay?

So when by choice you choose the avenue of poverty

as opposed to poverty choosing you

just look at what my mind can contemplate

the wrath of human fate

the poor and hungry children running to and fro

and all the "we so grown up" being all that we have learned

of cleanliness, of self-respect, of pride for what we own.

But do these people, this poor and lonely wrath, not have pride of their own?

It boggles the mind to stop and think that filth and ill and torn and poor

are sometimes pride that's worn,

the vicious cycle on its way from birth to death not take

to be, to breathe, to continue on with this human fate called life

as bread, the mixing of and question that,

not races, I do say, but the ignorance of intellect and the lack of social grace.

Then hate [unclear] of all "have-nots" for the hate of those like you,

if hate don't kill, then don't you fret,

for the human wrath then will.

Pérez Thank you.

[End of interview]