

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Petra M. Valadez

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Mark Anthony Piñon
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Transcription by Technitype Transcripts

Piñon Please state your full name.

[00:00:10]

Valadez Yes, I'm Petra Valadez.

Piñon Your birthdate?

[00:00:14]

Valadez Yes, February 26, 1944.

Piñon What is your marital status?

[00:00:21]

Valadez I'm widowed now eight years for my second husband, Alfonso
Gonzales [phonetic], and we had two sons.

Piñon Two sons. Can we get the names of them, please?

[00:00:29]

Valadez It's Mark D_____ Gonzales and Andre T_____ Gonzales.

Piñon Where were you born and raised?

[00:00:36]

Valadez We were born—the ninth child of Ramon and Maria Valadez, and all ten of us were born in Sanderson, Texas.

Piñon What did your parents do for a living?

[00:00:52]

Valadez Okay. There in Texas, he had a *salon de patinas*, a skating rink, but in 1946, we came, when I was two years old, we came to the Salinas Valley and we settled in the little town of Soledad, and we lived in two rooms. We rented two rooms, and it was a government camp. In fact, my father and brothers took the chains off of the walls because it had been a German prison camp, and that's where we lived. We lived in two rooms, and they were long barracks. Then the women's restroom and the men's restroom and the wash area was in a separate barrack in the center of the camp, and it serviced all of the rest of the camp.

Let me see. What else? My mother dearly washed every single day and hung the clothes. Then she took them from there all the way to where the clotheslines were, and the clotheslines were all around the periphery of the labor camp.

Piñon Is there a reason why you guys moved to Salinas?

[00:02:01]

Valadez I think there was an older daughter, my father's first daughter, by then was married and had traveled to Soledad, and she said, "There's a *lot* of work here, Dad, so come on, come on and bring the family." So the rest of us just followed.

Piñon So how many brothers and sisters do you have?

[00:02:23]

Valadez Well, we're six sisters and four brothers.

Piñon Will you please describe your experiences as a child or youth in your family and neighborhood?

[00:02:34]

Valadez Oh, sure. When we first arrived from Texas, right away they had a *lot* of work, because in the Salinas Valley, it's an agriculture belt, and so everything, the s_____ beans, that means weeding beans. And, oh, I don't know, carrots, tomatoes, there was garlic and strawberries. There was a *lot* of work that farmworkers could participate in. Because we started work as farmworkers as a family, then there was always a lot of work, and what would happen is that we had large buses that would come to our area, our neighborhood, pick us *all* up and take us, and this happened before it was daylight. Then that same bus would return us as it was getting dark, we were home.

What happened was that we had *really* wise parents, because when the rains came, we had enough to eat. I *never* remember being hungry, ever in my entire life. So my parents then had enough to eat, so we didn't have to follow the crops like a lot of other families did. We stayed in our two rooms.

What ended up happening was that my parents saved a lot of money, and soon we were able to get housing, a house, a real house, there on the same camp, but it was a real house. Then pretty soon, they saved some more, and then they had a house further out not in the camp, and that was really a nice blessing. My father and brothers, older brothers, added a room in the back of that little house and made it for us girls, because we were still a whole bunch of girls, so it was really a wonderful experience that we had, that we were able to live outside of that camp. And I lived in

that little house until I was twenty-one, when I became a teacher and moved to Los Angeles.

Piñon Does that house still exist?

[00:04:40]

Valadez I think it has been remodeled. It's still there at 284 Main Street there in Soledad, but I know that there's been a lot of changes in that town now.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about my childhood as a farmworker, because it was significant for me in the fact that it was my beginning, and because it was such a beginning, there is an old picture of myself and my little sister in a tomato box, and a tomato box is only that big [demonstrates], you know, as I remember it. We're sitting in this thing. But by four, they had already taught me to turn over the tomato plants, and, of course, when you turn over tomato plants, the worms jump on you, the caterpillars, and so we had the stench of squashes caterpillars on us, and they're green on the inside. They're black and yellow wooly on the outside, but they're green on the inside, and that stench was all over us.

What got me was also the fact that the *el viento*, the wind, in the Salinas Valley, there's a *lot* of wind, and although we had scarves and scarves and scarves and scarves, still you always had your teeth full of guck because of *la tierra*, and then we had sand fleas, we had *piojos*, we had then the wind was there, the dust. There was enormous amount of discomfort. And then on top of that, if you were in the tomatoes, you had the worms. If you were in the carrots, the carrots would gum under your fingernails and you'd bleed, and you'd have to handle the carrots while you're all bleeding and you've got these carrots, so you're in pain. The callouses that

developed, I mean, the knees, the back, and all of this by the time I was twelve years old. Yeah, it was a tough experience.

But also what ended up happening, I started school. My childhood at school, oh, my gosh, that was a horrendous experience. In first grade, I didn't know English, and I remember the teacher said something to the effect of something, but I heard her say something, but I didn't understand it. Well, when I came out of the bathroom, she had obviously told us that the bathroom toilets weren't flushing, so not to use them. Because I didn't know, I came out and she whammed me. She spanked me so viciously that I was traumatized. So then I didn't want to go to school. What ended up happening was the girls told me afterwards what had happened, so from then on, I got a *terrible* fear of school. I was disgusted with school and I didn't want any part of it.

But what ended up happening is that I didn't learn to read until fifth grade, and how that happened was because I was nine years old by then, and they had patterns—in school, my mother gave us permission to go and learn sewing right there at the same school, but it was in another classroom, and they had patterns. This pattern you'll take a picture of later on, but this pattern, they explained what it was we were supposed to do, and it said "Stitch five-eighths from the edge." By golly, I knew what that meant because the drawing and the illustration were there. That's how I learned. So I went kind of backwards on that one, and that's how I learned to read.

So my experiences were hard all the way through twelve years old, but when I was thirteen—this is significant also—when I was thirteen, I was picking up 50-pound sacks of carrots, those same carrots that we were topping, so you fill up a *tombo* [phonetic], a big cylinder, and it has a sack on the bottom, and you fill it with

carrots, and that's 50 pounds. Then you lift the sucker, you throw over the cylinder, and you have a sack, and that sack was worth eleven cents. Now, for me as a child, as a woman child, that was enormous, because I know was earning like any other brother or sister or father at that point.

It was also very good that I had that, because in that same year, I was now an eighth-grader, and although I worked that summer in the fields, I came home, it's dark, and I'd cut a dress and sew it up, and then I had a dress. So in the week before I went to eighth grade at thirteen, I made five dresses. That's significant, because I had learned how to—the energy that you put into work is no more than you give as a child, but if you have something more that you want to accomplish, you're going to do it, and I lived that at age thirteen, and that was good, yeah, very good.

Okay, you hear me fine? Okay.

Piñon So can you please explain to me if you have friends who had the same experiences as you did?

[00:09:48]

Valadez Sure, *all* the children, all the Hispanic children there in our surrounding. We didn't know we were poor, as a matter of fact, honestly, because our mother was a homemaker. She had home-cooked meals and we never felt like we were at a disadvantage. In fact, we were darn lucky because we were a big group, and there was always somebody around me. I'd fall and scratch my knee or anything, there was always somebody around. It was a good—and then they sang. All my brothers played the guitar and carried on. Oh, my gosh, everybody had a good time. And on Sunday was the day of rest, and we went to church.

Oh, and I need to tell you another thing that happened to me when I was four years old. Although I didn't read until I was nine, my father was receiving *La Prensa*, which was a newspaper that we had there that came to us in the mail, and he received it at our house. So we were able to read in Spanish. In there was a cartoon of "Felix the Cat." Doggone it if I didn't spot that cat. And my father taught me how to read in Spanish, and then pretty soon I was reading *him* the cartoon of *las aventuras del gato Felix*. So what the heck, you know? Yeah, I had it hard at school, but I had it okay at home. I was prized at home.

Piñon That's good. Were you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:11:24]

Valadez Yes, I was a Fellow. I was now earning a master's. I had had three years of teaching in Los Angeles area, and one of the reasons that I did come to the master's is that I got arrested and they lifted my teacher credential, so then I had to wait until I went to court and cleared my credential, because when I became a teacher, I was told, "You get arrested, you have no more credential." And sure enough, I got arrested and spent the night in the jail, and there went my credential.

So I had to quickly look around. Senon [M. Valadez] was able to tell me about this project, and I immediately applied, was received, and that's how I started. When I came here, I was warmly accepted and received by my peers, but the professors, I'm sure, didn't know what the heck to do with me, because I came in with a lot of anger.

Have you ever been arrested?

Piñon No.

[00:12:22]

Valadez Well, it is an experience that will last me forever. But what they do is they spray your private parts and cut your fingernails so that you don't bother anyone and nobody bothers you.

Piñon Wow.

[00:12:34]

Valadez Yeah. And then they toss you up on the bunk and good night.

[Spanish] And there is more. You know, it's a dehumanizing experience.

Then what happened, one of my boyfriends was a Brown Beret. Well, the next day, he came and he bailed me out. I showered, I went home and showered, and my poor sister was disgusted with me and scared. "Don't go again, Petra!" Sure enough, I turned around, went right back to where I had been arrested. Oh, my gosh! I was livid!

Before, I was a safe Mexican daughter. After the arrest, the devil could have stood in front of me, I would have kicked his ass. I was *disgusted*. Nobody, don't mess with me, because now I'm there. I've reached that. And it changed me. The whole one night changed me forever, and I'm not quiet now. If I see an injustice, I'm going to speak up. Come hell or high water, it's not going to affect me anymore. Yeah, I've grown quite a bit.

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

[00:13:48]

Valadez My colleagues and I were all experienced teachers, and if I had had bad experiences as a teacher, can you imagine them? Because they came in from *all* the valleys of California. I mean, wow! And some of them were administrators, and they had some terrible stories about their experiences. So it was an awakening. It wasn't just Petra that had been through—you know, when you teach, it's like a roller coaster. You take the good and the bad, the terrible principals, wonderful principals, good teachers, *horrible* teachers, racist teachers, and we had everything.

That was just the beginning. What that year and all that experience and all that learning of a master's did for me is that at first it started healing all the anger, all the anger that I had lived thus far, and it also helped me to understand how it is that children perceive us and see us and react to teachers. It wasn't just Petra that lived what I lived with my teachers that I had as a child, but now I was hearing other teachers and all the experience that they were having.

Plus we had the wonderful experience of living with a family in poverty, and that opened your eyes also, because here was a family, a single head of household, a mother that was learning English in adult school, and she had three children. Boy, those three kids, she didn't toe the line any stricter than my mother did, and she was producing wonderful children alone in a foreign country, learning the language. She was getting her schooling. By the way, those three kids, one of them became an M.D., a medical doctor, the girl, and that was significant to me because she then went back to Tijuana and married a doctor there, and that's where she is practicing. So this is a poverty family that I lived with for a whole week, and then here's this daughter that's evolving. The other two did well also. They did phenomenal work and they have

stable jobs, and they grew and developed. And the mother [Spanish]. She's also working now, and I don't know what she started working in. I think she's working in the franchise department of one of the state offices up and down, and I don't know what city that is.

But it's enough to tell you that there were enough experiences with my colleagues and in what they put us through that was wonderful, and it healed me and it opened my eyes. Not only that, but it sharpened my eyes to what being a change agent is all about, because you can be a change agent where you work, like with my teachers and principals, but you can also be a change agent with the families that you're servicing. You know, a teacher comes to visit you in the home, you're going to be awakened to all that person is and what she's doing, how she treats my son or daughter. Yeah. And I had Russians, Ukrainian, I had East Indians, I had Urdu, I had Anglos, what we call the native-born or American-born. So I had them all, and all of those families responded well. Why? Because I was really true to the child, and that child was first and foremost the *most* important person. Yeah, they live where they live, sometimes very humbly, sometimes really chaotic, but it didn't matter. That child was all about what I had to focus on, and I did, yeah, and I did.

Piñon Do you still have contact with some of them?

[00:17:47]

Valadez Uh-huh, with some of them I do, and now they're men and women, and I love that. In fact, there was a beautiful kid who was a little person. Okay, I'm a short person, I'm just 5'2", but this little Russian boy came to me, a Russian, came to me and he wasn't to my shoulder yet. Oleg had this *phenomenal* little head for math,

but he *hated* English. Oh, my gosh, I didn't know what to do with that child, but I said to him, "Look, I'm going to work with you after school, so tell your mom not to come for you," because she didn't trust the system, the bus system. Here's Oleg, said, "Miss Valadez, I want to go home. I'm sick and tired with talking to you. I don't want to look at you." I mean, here's this little kid, okay, seventh grade. Do you know that by the time the eighth grade year ended, that little kid was *so* phenomenal in English. I said to him—I gave him as a present that film where Tom Hanks comes out in *Apollo 5* [correct: *Apollo 13*].

Piñon Oh, yes.

[00:18:45]

Valadez I gave him that video and I said, "*Mijo*, keep up your math, keep up your English. You're going to be an astronaut."

Well, he went home and he got his [unclear] head. Oh, wouldn't you know it? The following year, his mother dies of cancer, and I didn't know she was already ill. Well, that did it for Oleg. Anyway, he came one day, this beautiful kid came one day and said, "Miss Valadez, I can't study. I can't think. I can't do anything. I'm going to have to give up on this dream that you had for me for being an—." Do you know what he grew up to be, years later? He became a paramedic. He's lifting people of all walks of life, and every time he meets up with Mexicans, he says, "I love them even more because I remember you, Miss Valadez." Now, talk about being a change agent. You think of a Russian, big Russian man that now is as tall as that door, and he's helping our people. And I never expected something like that. Why? Because I shared

my love with his kid, right? That's just one. I mean, I've had other kids come to me now who became registered nurses, they're in the area of operating brains.

Piñon Wow.

[00:20:00]

Valadez You know, these are *phenomenal* kids that have gone on and doing all kinds of wonderful things. Why? Huh? This is junior high. They're learning English. They come to a new country. I think that if a teacher reaches out to them, where would we be if we had more teachers that reached out to us as *raza*? That's what the master's did. It opened my eyes to it all.

Piñon So it sounds like you've been influenced in your career path and life works.

[00:20:30]

Valadez I saw the possibilities. I saw *enormous* possibilities. That's what came about as a result of that, the enormous possibilities. It didn't matter my background, my accent, because you can still hear an accent. I tried as hard as I could to professionalize myself, but also to expand, and it takes a lot of maturity as an adult to reach out to children who are disenfranchised, who don't want to study, they talk, they laugh, they carry on, they'll do every kind of thing. In fact, I ruined one of my knees because those kids, junior high, seventh and eighth grade, were scooting their desks around. Well, you know, you have them so I can walk up and down the aisles. [Spanish] Man, they'd move those desks, and they're big kids, they're 6'2"! Whew! How am I going to lift a child that's 6'2"? Well, I did! I moved that desk right back. Well, by sixty-five, I was finished and so was my knee. [laughter] Anyway, that is my

reality. But it didn't mean that I didn't love that darn little kid, you know, as hard as he was. Oh, [Spanish]. But that's what it did. It opened my eyes to the possibilities of what could be, okay?

And by the way, I also lifted a lot of *pantalones*. You know how it's the fad to have *los pantalones* way down below? I said, "You come in my classroom, you better pick—I don't want to see any underwear. If I see your underwear, I'm going to pull that pants up, and I'm telling you ahead of time, so don't get your feelings hurt. I see your underwear, I'm pulling your britches." Whoa! Twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-year-old Chicanos, "Man, I'll be darn if she does that to me." Oh, yeah? [Spanish] Oh, they were disgusted By the end of the year, they pulled up their pants just like I had asked. "Okay, now we're ready to learn. We're good now." See? It works. [laughs] Okay.

Piñon Very nice. Did your study of cultural anthropology influence your involvement and participation in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:22:38]

Valadez In the Chicano Movement, the Chicano Movement was huge. Oh, my gosh. As soon as I became a teacher and went to Los Angeles, I had no idea all the racism that was into the schools.

Piñon Can you please go more in depth?

[00:22:55]

Valadez Oh, my gosh. At UCLA, I first landed in a situation where there were poverty pockets. In fact, that's what led up to the arrest that I got. The Brown Berets had already begun, and on weekends when they weren't taking classes, they were into

the mom-and-pop stores there in East L.A. I lived and worked in Pico Rivera, which is next to Montebello, which is next to East L.A. They're all connected.

And what ended up happening is that my Brown Berets brothers and sisters would go, and I was just a couple of years older than they, but I was already credentialed and I was working, and they were mostly students. And what ended happening was that on the weekend, because many of the parents that lived in the neighborhood didn't have cars, they'd up the price on milk, bread, eggs, *tortillas*, the staples, and these were the owners or the people who were running these mom-and-pop stores.

And, man, the Brown Berets were in there. I mean, they had studies. They had everything to do, but they were in there checking on the prices, so that we did that. When it was time for the income tax, you could see the lines, because they had canvassed all the people that were doing taxes in the neighborhood, and they'd say, "Well, all right, you can do this, but, man, there's got to be one night when you're going to be open, you're going to do it free." Oh, my gosh. This is the actions of the Brown Berets.

And when I started that, I had a boyfriend that was a Beret, [Spanish] Juan Ortiz, and Juan Ortiz would then—I'd get out of work, and he'd either come over to my house, because I had always a lot of papers to correct, or on Saturdays he'd play with me, with my students, we'd play soccer [Spanish].

Well, then he said, "You know what? I want to pull you into some of *my* things. So you come with me." And Juan was already a veteran, so he was older than

the others. He had already been in the Army, and he came home and he had that chance to study, and, by golly, he studied.

So what ended up happening is that they accepted me. The Brown Berets were then my—oh, and then when all that happened with the blowouts, okay, the blowouts happened because of a dear soul [Spanish]. This man of mine, he was just ten years older. You know who I'm talking about? Have you had a chance to read about Sal Castro?

Piñon Yes.

[00:25:35]

Valadez Well, Sal Castro, like I said, was ten years older than I and was in the high schools. Remember I'm at the elementary. But after school, I was secretary/treasurer to a group of educators. We were called the AME, Association of Mexican American Educators, and in that association were a lot of principals and teachers, and it was a big group, and I was secretary/treasury. Well, what ended up happening is that they would tell me about all the [Spanish] that were happening to Sal. Poor Sal. Oh, my god. It seemed like—it was like an onslaught of anger that was directed him. How *dare* he [Spanish] the boys and girls to do the walkouts? How *dare* he? The teachers, the principals, the administrators, the police, you know, they were *all* on him, and it was *horrible*.

So what happened is that when I heard and saw and finally met him, *pobrecito*. Talk about somebody that hasn't slept, didn't eat right, was drinking too much, the man always had—he was constantly hounded by a whole bunch of women that wanted to date him. That was another—oh, made me mad, because it was like

they wanted the glory of the [Spanish], but none of his pain. I'm not going to go after that. But recently he died, and he died and I just couldn't believe it. It was like a part of me had ripped out of me, because he was instrumental in helping me cope with what I was living.

Now, remember all of this is going to lead up now to the fact that I got arrested and when I got arrested. But after the blowouts, what ended up happening is this association, this AME, told me, "Petra, we need a teacher that'll teach Saturday school."

Well, I went over there and I taught Saturday school. Saturday school was teaching Spanish and leadership to children five to fifteen. Now, picture that. And the only people that would help me were not other teachers. I tried to get other teachers to come and help. You think they would? What ended up happening is that I'd give a twenty-minute lesson, and then a Brown Beret or two would come and they'd do a follow-up activity, and then another group would come in and do another follow-up activity, and then I'd come back and circle back.

Well, to make a long story short, I got *very* close to these Brown Berets that were helping me, and when it was time for me to go as a third-year teacher to a Nuevas Vistas conference, I wanted them to come in and be with me. Well, they didn't allow them. In fact, I didn't know that there was a cop that was posing as a Brown Beret.

Piñon Wow.

[00:28:24]

Valadez Yeah. So he signaled me as a leader, and sure enough, when we did our civil disobedience, we clapped a clap [demonstrates], well, I got three claps out, and I had this arm twisted behind my back. Somebody lifted me with that arm like that, and away I went.

There was another person in there that I love dearly also because of that arrest, is [Spanish] Montezuma Esparsa [phonetic], and Montezuma Esparsa got up from his chair because he saw me get arrested *otra vez*. He had just been arrested, he'd just gotten home, he had just managed to say hello to his mother, [Spanish] *otra vez* arrested again. *Pobrecito* Montezuma. Montezuma went down, by the way, to become a cinematographer. Oh, my gosh, *pobrecito*.

But, anyway, to make a long story short, I [Spanish]. That's why I got arrested. I did a civil disobedience. I lost my credential, and that's what ended up.

So all the walkouts, all the hassle with the police, the hassles with the Brown Berets, they had to go underground after that, after the Biltmore 13. All kinds of terrible things happened, and it didn't stop. Even after I left and came up to Sacramento, the Chicano Moratorium continued. You've heard about that, eh?

Piñon Yes.

[00:29:45]

Valadez The Chicano Moratorium was a *horrendous* experience. Why? Because if our kids weren't succeeding in school, sure enough, give 'em a gun and send 'em off. And, yeah. [Spanish]. Oh, this is a terrible—I get indigestion every time I think about those years, because they were *hard* years. They were *horrible* years.

And that's why I came to Sacramento for this master's, and I was upside down. I was angry and disgusted and frustrated.

After I left, I went to UCLA. Now, at UCLA, talk about racist teachers.

Andale! And, see, the thing is built in. Now you're going to do doctoral work in a racist environment?

Piñon Wow.

[00:30:33]

Valadez Okay. So, yeah, yeah. Backbone. That's what I developed here in the master's program, backbone. It healed and then developed a backbone, because for the rest of my life, including UCLA, I had to have a backbone in order to be and do what I needed to do in life, see? Yeah.

Piñon May you please explain what the Nuevas Vistas conference was? You had mentioned it.

[00:31:06]

Valadez The Nuevas Vistas conference was for all teachers in the Los Angeles County area, so all the various school districts sent a representative from each of their schools, and I came in representing Pio Pico, and Pio Pico was a public school. I used to bring apples and oranges to my fourth-graders. By then I was in fourth grade, fourth-grade teacher. There was no Breakfast for Niños Program.

Piñon Wow.

[00:31:37]

Valadez None. And why? Because there was an administrator who was taking from Peter to pay Paul. He was taking from the Breakfast for Niños money to put it

into the P.E. departments. And I didn't know any of this. They just said, "There are no monies for this, so you want to feed your kids, go ahead, keep on going with apples and oranges." Wow! And I couldn't find monies for it.

So what ends up happening is that I made a statement. When I got arrested, then I made a statement that I thought it was so unfair that my children, who were fourth-graders and they're as tall as I am, didn't have a breakfast. It was a poverty pocket, and a lot of their mothers were prostitutes. It was a really hard life. Anyway, there was a lot of, a lot of turmoil in those years. But, anyway, that was one of the factors also that made me do what I did with the Brown Berets.

Piñon Wow.

[00:32:36]

Valadez By the way, those same prostitutes, mothers, when it was time for my court appearance there in Los Angeles County, they were the ones that came. None of my fellow teachers came.

Piñon Wow.

[00:32:48]

Valadez Only the mothers and their children came, and this was a year later. Then when it was time for me to get my credential back, they were there also. So I want you to know that that's—talk about being a change agent with those mothers, huh?

Piñon Yes.

[00:33:05]

Valadez You see it?

Piñon Yes.

[00:33:06]

Valadez Yeah, living it is an amazing experience, yes.

Piñon Wow. What are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:33:21]

Valadez In our valley, because it was an agriculture belt, we had a lot of people coming in from Mexico, from Guadalajara and Michoacán. These were Mexicans. We also had a lot of people coming in from Texas, *los Tejanos*. We also had a lot of people coming in from El Via [phonetic]. That's Calexico, Calexico area. And then we had the locals. [Spanish], oh, my gosh. We had fights. Oh, my gosh. And it could have been over a girl, it was over who had a better car. Who cares? It doesn't matter. What matters is that they were [Spanish], and there it was a problem because the judge that was there was this terrible person who—let me show you, tell you.

I don't know how it happened that one day I did not go to work in the fields, and I had knowledge, I knew that this particular family, the two sons had been put in jail, and that they were going to appear in front of this judge. I asked Mother for permission and she said, "*Vas*, but you're not going to stay anything and you're going to behave. You're not going to get in trouble."

I said, "Okay."

Well, I got there, and sure enough, they said that the locals said that these guys had jumped them, and it was a lie.

Piñon Wow.

[00:34:49]

Valadez It was the other way around. And because they spoke English, they said this to the judge, and the boys said—I don't know what he said. [Spanish]. And since I couldn't talk, I didn't say anything, *verdad?* But they blamed them for the fight. Well, they charged them hundreds of dollars, and since the family didn't have the money, they tossed them in jail. Not only did they toss them, but when the mother saw the two of them being dragged away, she got her purse and started beating the cop. *Vamos* if they didn't arrest her and take him. Well, when that happened, the father wasn't going to take that, and there goes the father.

Piñon Wow.

[00:35:27]

Valadez So the whole family ended up in jail. Oh, my god! If you can imagine, this is what I looked like when I was eighteen [demonstrates]. [Spanish]. And I was a sophomore already in college, and I ended up telling that judge that I had seen no justice and that they didn't understand and they were not to blame. They had not started the fight, though I wasn't there. These guys had lied. The locals had lied and said untruths and blamed them, and that I had seen no justice there. And I said, "That's terrible that you didn't even give them a chance to defend themselves. You had nobody here to translate for them."

And then the judge asked me, "Well, why didn't you speak up?"

I said, "My mother told me not to talk here."

"Who's your mother?"

"Maria Valadez."

“Do you want to come and work for me?”

I said, “No.”

Piñon Wow.

[00:36:28]

Valadez Oh, my god, I was livid. That’s what I did and that’s what happened. Ay! [laughter] Remembering! [sighs]

Piñon What ever happened to the family that got arrested?

[00:36:43]

Valadez They didn’t want to come back to this valley. They worked what they did and they never came to another dance, and they didn’t come to that valley anymore, and I never saw them again.

Piñon Wow. How did other Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Latinos react to the term *Chicano* and *Movimiento Chicano*?

[00:37:11]

Valadez There was an awful lot of resistance, an *awful* lot of resistance, especially from the older. They called them Mexicanos. *Yo soy Mexicano*. Well, it’s all very good, so are our parents, but we’re born here in America, so we are a little different. They couldn’t quite accept it. There was an awful lot of people, an awful lot, not just parents, community leaders, so-called community leaders, they were just—they saw us a rebel-rousers. When I told them that I was a teacher, “How can a teacher call yourself Chicana? That’s derogatory.”

And I said, “No, it’s not. It’s who I am, and it has to do with how you think and who we are and what we are all about, and we’ve got to succeed in this country.

I'm not a Mexican." They'd probably kill me if I went over there now with my voice and with my writing and with what I'm all about. I couldn't survive in Mexico. So I'm not a Mexican. I am a daughter of Mexicans. I grew up as a daughter, until I got arrested. Then I changed. But it was very hard, and it was met with a lot of resistance, uphill resistance, constant. In fact, it's probably still there

Piñon Wow.

[00:38:38]

Valadez In fact, a lot of my friends still call themselves Hispanic. "*Yo no soy Chicana. Yo soy Espana, Latina.*" Well, my goodness, okay. Until people become educated, it's very, very hard, and if they don't want to open their eyes, they're not going to do it. They're not. Now as the generations come on and people change, they see us now in a different light, but in those days, it was horrible. It was horrible, yeah, including our own mothers. Gee, she had all the saints marching for me, for us. She's always been someone to pray, but, man, when I went home and told them that I'd gotten arrested and I couldn't teach, that I was going to study with Senon, then she felt a little better that I was going to study, because at least I wasn't going to be in Los Angeles, and I never did return to Los Angeles. I did a year later at the university, but I was not as—in fact, my husband then took me to the—when the moratoriums happened, I left. He physically took me out of the country so that I wouldn't be there, so that I wouldn't get any more arrests, and I felt bad about that.

Piñon When did you start considering yourself Chicana?

[00:40:04]

Valadez When? In the year before I got arrested, my fourth year, they had already started the caravans to bring food to the people in Delano, and we were also a group of students that were going into the various prisons, women's prisons, to go and talk to women who were incarcerated. Those were two big turning points, the caravans and the visits to women's prisons, that brought about a chance. Also I had continued to work. Though I was teaching, I continued to study and I earned an advanced degree in classes in health, and because by fourth grade some of our boys and girls were starting to take drugs at Pio Pico, they asked us to look for dilated eyes, and that also opened my eyes to a whole different world that I hadn't been exposed to before. That also added—because when you go to see the women in prison, they have children, but for love of that husband or that man, their children are elsewhere now and not with them, and that was a tremendous blow to me to see not just one or two, hundreds, hundreds of women incarcerated without their children. Can you imagine their children? See?

Piñon Wow.

[00:41:40]

Valadez Yeah. Eye-opening, yeah.

Piñon Had you heard of the Civil Rights Movement at that time, at the time of the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:41:52]

Valadez Uh-huh. When I was at UCLA, I was a consultant for what they called at that time—oh, what did they call it? Because we went into the various areas. I went into Texas. It was a thing where it was like a Head Start, but it was dealing with

children who were disenfranchised or poverty pockets, and they wanted consultants in there to make sure that the curriculum and the teachers in Texas, that the curriculum and the teachers were doing what they could for Hispanic children. And they sent me to Texas because I spoke Spanish.

Well, needless to say, I ran against a brick wall, because I was told, “You are not welcome here. You are here on your own recognizance.” And I had to drive from where I landed at the airport all the way to the little town of Dimmitt, Texas. Dimmitt, it’s D-i-m-m-i-t (sic), Dimmitt, Texas, and that was horrible, because I had to travel about 30 miles by myself in a car, alone, over this stretch of land, and anybody could have taken a rifle at me and nobody would know.

So I did that for about a year while I was doing my doctoral work at UCLA, and then I quit. I said, “My life is worth more. I love my parents. And I want to help, but for *what?* This is no-man’s land.” Yeah. I saw a child who had a cold, and for lack of \$10, that doctor was not going to see him in Dimmitt, Texas.

Piñon Wow.

[00:43:49]

Valadez And that cold went into his lungs, developed pneumonia. Because he wasn’t able to breathe, developed mental illness, cut off his oxygen supply.

Piñon Wow.

[00:44:02]

Valadez For lack of \$10. How *arrastrados* can they be? Do you know what the word *arrastrado* is?

Piñon No.

[00:44:09]

Valadez It's a terrible word that says they are the lowest of the low. What's a word for *arrastrado*? Anybody?

Senon Valadez The lowest of the low.

[00:44:17]

Valadez The lowest of the low.

Piñon Wow.

[00:44:19]

Valadez Yeah. This was a school district and they had monies, and there was money coming in, but you think they'd give \$10 for a child?

Piñon Wow.

[00:44:30]

Valadez And I saw that child. You know, he was on a little bench. In fact, I said, "I want to go to the house where this little boy lives," because Spanish, the teachers told me.

"Yeah, go ahead."

And the little child was just like this [demonstrates] on a bench. It was like this [demonstrates]. That was it. And he was a little kid, first or second grade.

Piñon Wow. Was this one of the only life-changing experiences that you witnessed there?

[00:45:01]

Valadez Oh, no, no, no. There were more. The beatings, the children. If you don't behave, you get beaten. There was a little boy that was beaten right outside the

door of the classroom, and that little boy wept and wept and wept and wept. Nobody went out. Spanish by the door.

Piñon Wow.

[00:45:18]

Valadez And that teacher had hit him and hit him and hit him, Spanish. [sighs]

Can we take a break? Can we take a break? Shall we do that now? Do you see it?

Piñon Yes.

[recorder turned off]

Piñon What were some of the organizations you were involved in?

[00:45:45]

Valadez After the master's, I did a Project 30, in which we tried to keep thirty children that were elementary and junior high from dropping out of school. That was it. It was a federal program. We were housed at the Washington Neighborhood Center, and it was an excellent experience. Of the fifteen in elementary, we lost one. A sixth-grade girl got pregnant. But of the junior high, only two made it to high school.

Piñon Wow.

[00:46:15]

Valadez And of the two that made it to high school, only one finished. So it was very, very disheartening, but that's what happened with that particular group.

The other that I did was also participate—I was an analyst. I worked with the Legislative Analyst Office and I did AB 1244, which was a bill to see what childcare

was like in the state of California, AB 1244. I did that for about a year and a half, and what ended up happening was that I had a chance to go up and down and see what childcare was like. Needless to say, again the servicing of Hispanic families was almost nil. It was largely Anglo or Black, and it was very, very hard.

What else I did was I did a lot of fundraising. We were averaging, my husband and I, Alfonso Gonzales, an attorney, and I were able to do about five large fundraisers per year, and here we were able to bring money in. Some of the people we had, we had Pichacon [phonetic] from San Diego, we did fundraisers for him; Tom Bradley, the Los Angeles mayor; Bob Montoya, also from Los Angeles area; M_____ Navarete [phonetic], the school board. There was Eva Garcia, Marion Lasano [phonetic]. These were school board people. We did two for Cesar Chavez, and we did Julia Nava. There were many other assemblymen and senators that we did fundraisers for, and to one degree or another, we were out there trying to do the best that we could to influence and help as many as we could.

We figured that if we did people like this at the state level or at the county level or at the city level that we did for Joe Serna, then we could possibly influence how it goes. It takes great money to put somebody in office, and litigation is very, very expensive also. If you take somebody to court, it also takes—so we capitalized and we siphoned off of attorneys and doctors here in Sacramento. We went and talked and helped, got help from some of the *judíos*, some of the Jewish population here in Sacramento. So I got around and we did a lot of—how do you say—canvassing, networking, so that we could get monies from these groups, and we did. We were able to do five large fundraisers per year, and that was significant.

Okay, besides that, I want you to know about something that happened also. My success all along, don't think I did it by myself, by the way. I had wonderful parents. I mean, as hard a living as we had, we had a lot of brothers and sisters and they all helped with money, not just in talking to us or talking to me, but they helped economically, they housed me, they were able to do enormous things for me. And when they did that, it showed me of the person that I could be.

When you're in the trenches, when you're studying for your exams, you don't think how successful you're going to be [Spanish]. No, your first and only priority is getting through school, get through school, get through school. You get to that level. Start again. Get through school. Another year, another year. [Spanish]. But you never, ever see the end of it, and it takes time. It does take time. But all the while you're doing it, you're also a son, you're also a brother. In my case, I was not just a Chicana, not just a change agent, but I was also a sister, a mother, a daughter, and I had to understand all my friends. I didn't want to lose track of them.

But there's hundreds upon thousands of women who don't have somebody that they can talk to. For that, then, I also did a time when I did a thing on television, and on television I was able to be a voice for a lot of things, so I did a television program, half-hour, Channel 40, in which we talked about situations and cultures of the house. What happens when you have a mother lording it over the child, when you have a father, when you have brothers and sisters, when you have your street friends lording it over the child? There's a lot of stress on kids. So we'd talk about issues, health, the beatings that a lot of the women get. I mean, it's standard procedure. Some women are not happy unless they're beaten.

Piñon Wow.

[00:51:11]

Valadez How can that be? How can that be? Why is that in our culture? That's an ugly cancer to have. We talk about that. We talk about the fact that there's very little money. How do you go about making ends meet? You see, we need help in a lot of areas.

I did that for about a year and a half until my second son was born. Then when that child came, then I was able to do work at the school. I was a teacher aide and an art docent and that kind of thing.

I also was part of—Robert Matsui was one of our representatives here in California, and when he died, his wife, Doris Matsui, has now taken over, and for a long time I was part of the Central Committee with the Democrats here in Sacramento. So I've done an awful lot of hats. I've worn different hats, but I've done a lot of things.

Now, before I forget, I also want to tell you about things are better. Things are better, because if you go to Soledad now, the chief of police, the judge, the board members, you look around to all the various people running Soledad, and they're all Hispanic, they're all Chicanos. It's phenomenal! How the heck did that happen? You know, what a transformation.

It doesn't mean just because I say to you I've been a good teacher and I became a master teacher and I had accolades and people coming into my room and clapping the hands and saying how wonderful, no, you know there's still a large group of people that we call the Cohort 3s, just like that, Co-h-o-r-t-s Cohorts 3, and

these are children born in America, they're largely Hispanics, but there's also Black and Whites in there, and these children have not learned to read or write well. In fact, they're *far* below basic or below basic. These are the children—we are not going to have to look to Libya for subversive activity. We've got homegrown Cohort 3s, and these kids are angry. Those kids that are now seventh- and eighth-graders, they're angry. Yeah, they're mad that they haven't been able to learn, and we've got to stop that.

When I was still teaching, these children came about, and they were the ones getting into fights. These are the ones that are being siphoned into gangs. They're eight years old. They haven't learned to read, but, boy, and they hate being home, they'll watch TV, but as soon as they have a chance [snaps fingers], they're on the street. And who's going to pick them up are the gang members. These kids are all becoming gangs, and they're all part of the Surenos and the Nortenos, and not only that, but at the school I was at, the last school I was at, they were aligning the Blues, your 13s were the Blues, Spanish, and they were connecting with the Crips.

Piñon Wow.

[00:54:29]

Valadez Connecting with all the other gangs. That Blue was carrying them through. See, they still have to live in that neighborhood, so *every* day, as soon as they cross the street—these are seventh- and eighth-graders, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. And we have to tell our kids, our parents, “Circle in through the entrance and pick up your child on this side of the street. Do *not* get your kid across the street [Spanish].” And there was nothing we could do. [Spanish]. So, yeah, the Cohort 3s

are a horrendous problem, and that group is growing. It's a huge number right now, but it's growing.

Piñon What neighborhood was this?

[00:55:12]

Valadez This is called P_____ Farms Junior High, but they're all over the state of California. You need to do some research on the state of California. The Cohort 3s are horrendous, American-born, born here in America, and they speak only English, and it is terrible.

Piñon Wow.

[00:55:31]

Valadez Yeah. [sighs]

Piñon What significance did the activities or organizations created play in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:55:45]

Valadez What organizations?

Piñon The organizations that you took part of. Like, what significance did they play? How are they influencing the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:56:05]

Valadez I think more than anything, the awareness that this whole town of Sacramento has come about now, we don't have as much visibility, because I am now a homebody and I am doing other things with my sisters, with my sister and brother, who are older, but more importantly, I see that now there's more openings and better possibilities for Hispanics. The Chicanos that we lived and that grew up with us is a

group that is aging. However, those kinds of things that were set in place and set in motion continue. Unfortunately, like with me right now, I'm doing a Neighborhood Watch, I'm the only Hispanic in the Neighborhood Watch.

Piñon Wow.

[00:57:02]

Valadez That can't be. There's also an association called BRECA, which is also overseeing various neighborhoods, and BRECA is Butterfield, but again it has to do with home ownership and who lives there, again I'm the only one there.

Piñon Wow.

[00:57:21]

Valadez Why? This is the year 2014. Still the only Hispanic. Long ago, I was the only Hispanic at my school when I was twenty-one, and here years later, still the only Hispanic. So there's an awful lot to be done. There's a lot of awareness that has to be done. People have to be educated. We have to include these kinds of things in so many areas. The police, for example, do the police know any better? Do teachers know any better? Do they know Hispanic? Do they know our Chicano culture? Do they? See? There's a lot of work to be done at all levels. Teacher training, my gosh. There's just an enormous amount of work that has to be done.

So what was started in motion is good, but there's still an awful lot that has to be done, and I think that for those of us that did what we did when we did it, it was good. I know that the children I have touched hearts with, the parents that I have done work with, the communities that I've serviced, that I've helped, including Russian and Ukrainian, these people see me now in the store and then they come up and they

hug me, they carry on. I walked into a hospital and here's these several nurses that came up. So how does that happen? How do people finally stop being afraid of Hispanics? We are, some of us, [Spanish] *Indios*, you know? We are, some of us. We look like we look. We're just a little different, different shades of color. But what we need to do as a whole is go forth.

I have a son who is now a law professor.

Piñon Wow.

[00:59:08]

Valadez And he's *Indio*-looking. Luckily, he is now in a place where he's making strides, and his classes do carry this message, because though he never felt Sal Castro, he knows his mother did, and I made sure that that kid knew what I was up to. The one that is mechanical engineer, on his free time he's out there doing things with people, you know? So it goes beyond us. It's always in the making. This is something that—but we still need a lot of voicing of the Chicano and the Chicano experience. Part of our culture and personality, how can we ever forget?

My mother one time told me that I was the best, we kids, us children were the very best that she could have, because she was the best of what her mother had. And so it goes. Our children then are the best that we can produce. It goes for you the same thing. I'm sure you have that in your heart. Each child is different and we come with different gifts, but if we each think and believe that there's large possibilities that each of us can do, then let's do it.

When I walked into that judge's courtroom when I was eighteen, I never thought I was going to speak up, because I didn't know what I was going to see. But

when I saw what I did and I felt what I felt, I had to speak up, though I had been admonished, “Don’t do it.” See, I’ve had a whole bunch of years where they had told me that, see? Do you understand what I’m saying?

Piñon Yes.

[01:00:49]

Valadez Yes. All right. [sighs] [laughs] Okay.

Piñon Describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted the life here in Sacramento—you did mention some events—or where you lived, any other area that you lived.

[01:01:10]

Valadez Those scholarships that we gave away after the fundraising, we gave scholarships away, and those were all Hispanic kids, and that went on until the last year when it stopped. We all got older and we all decided that we couldn’t do fundraising like we used to do. We couldn’t. And in the years that it was good, it was done. Now we’ve got to organize ourselves so that we can find monies through legislation, because that’s an uphill battle. Legislation is an area. But if you change policies, if you infect, get the ear of a legislator, rub shoulders with him, so to speak, lay a foundation where they can come to you, because there’s people that have called on me for my teaching experience, and I like that. These are lobbyists. So I need to make sure that whoever is in charge, whoever we elect, make sure that you connect with them. There’s nothing to it. They’re human like us, but they need to be educated. They need to be made aware, and we have to voice it, and that’s what becoming educated is all about. It’s not just getting that little *título*, that credential or that

degree. It's what you do with it. It's the character of who you are, the willingness that you have to speak up.

All the days of my life, I will never forget I had a chance to be educated. It's been hard. It's been tough. I've lived my seventy years. I've lived my years as a teacher. I also buried a fifteen-year-old child.

Piñon Wow.

[01:02:57]

Valadez Two weeks after he left my classroom, Carlos was dead, Carlos Hernandez, fifteen. His mother couldn't take him anymore. She sent him to Mexico. He was dead in two weeks. My student.

Piñon Wow.

[01:03:15]

Valadez So there's an awful lot. It takes all of our maturity. I chose to be a change agent in the classroom. I chose that. That's my blessing, heartache in my life, that I chose that. I chose curriculum and instruction. It takes every bit of ounces to have your backbone and to do all the work that's required of a teacher, yeah.

I thank you. I thank you for this opportunity. This has been wonderful. It's been hard, but it's been wonderful.

Piñon Thank you.

[End of interview]