

A TEI Project

Interview of Alberto Ramirez

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (March 20, 2009)

Collings

Jane Collings interviewing Alberto Ramirez in his office, March 20, 2009. Why don't we start off at the very beginning? Tell me when and where you were born.

Ramirez

I was born October 15, 1984, in Culver City.

Collings

Oh, in Culver City, okay. So you're not from the Long Beach area?

Ramirez

Well, I was there for a little bit and then came back to Wilmington. I was in a hospital over there, yes.

Collings

Oh, I see. But you actually grew up in the Wilmington community?

Ramirez

Yes. Yes. I told my mom and my dad, "Why Culvert City?" They're like, "Oh, that was the closest hospital for our insurance." I was like, "Okay." But yes, I was born there and then immediately brought back to Wilmington.

Collings

Straight back to Wilmington.

Ramirez

Straight back to Wilmington, so it was about a day, my first days on Earth.

Collings

Okay. Tell me something about your parents.

Ramirez

Big influences on my life, obviously. I'll start with my mom.

Collings

What is her name?

Ramirez

Maria Ramirez, Maria Concepcion Ramirez. My mom is an immigrant from the State of Mexico, Chihuahua, Delicias, Chihuahua. She came to the U.S. I would say in 1970, '71, when my mom and my dad got married, and then they moved from Ciudad Juarez, which is obviously the City of Juarez, to El Paso, Texas. Then from there on, my mom had six kids, three boys, three girls, moved to L.A. in the late seventies and now she's divorced. She divorced in about 1999, 2000, and now she's a community rep, a school liaison to the community, essentially a community organizer at Banning High School in Wilmington. So she works with parents, works with teens, the youth, making sure that kids complete school, they don't drop out. If there's issues going on with at home, drugs, abuse, a lot of different types of abuses, she's there to help mediate. I mean, she did put six kids through college--

Collings

Wow.

Ramirez

--so, in an environment where it wasn't really conducive. Wilmington's kind of, it's tough, and basically my mom's been a very powerful symbol, energy in my life. I mean, she took care of us when we were sick, made sure that we did our homework, very strict, very strict, damn strict. [laughter] But it pays off, because you go, "Mom, thanks, Mom. I understand why you said 'No' when we wanted to go to this thing or that event or that party, and just brought down the hammer." But, yes.

Collings

Now, your mom went to college, right?

Ramirez

No.

Collings

No, she didn't?

Ramirez

No. She went to, I guess in Mexico it's like their form of high school, but because it cost money over there--there's no real public education in Mexico. It's pretty much like, well, if you have money. You have to buy the books, you have to buy this and buy that, and I know from stories that's why my mom and my dad pushed us for education, was their dreams weren't fulfilled, because of money and because of real dire straits. My mom wanted to be a nurse. I remember she was telling me that. She had wanted to go into science and medical, but it just cost so much money in Mexico. In Mexico it's every person for themselves, how much money you have and who you know, a little bit like

the U.S., but over there it's like the wild, wild West. My mom just told me there was no going up the social ladder unless your parents were wealthy or you come from the ruling class in Mexico.

Collings

Right. Now, she met your dad and got married before she came here, so they came together?

Ramirez

From the stories I heard, my mom and my dad met at a party in 1967, '66, '67, so they were like seventeen--ai, yi, yi--and from there they started going out. My dad had a 1965 Chevy Impala--

Collings

Oh, that's a great car.

Ramirez

Oh, yes, it's awesome. I love that car. Yes, it's an interesting story about the car. I will tell about it later. But actually, my dad's from Wilmington, so my dad is actually from Wilmington. He went to El Paso, Texas, because he also had family in El Paso. And he happened--it's like, what's it, serendipity? It's like how things work out, because my mom and my dad just met up at a party, my dad from Wilmington. He was actually born in Long Beach, so it's really funny. And he just went to El Paso just to visit family and decided to go to a party, and my dad's like, "Oh, my god. Who is this person?" And then it was pretty funny. I was like, funny guy. I think at first my mom was not even interested. Just don't tell anyone that. No, but I think they started going out and the rest is history with that.

Collings

So her family was probably pretty happy that she got married to this American guy?

Ramirez

Oh, he's actually Chicano.

Collings

Well, I mean American citizen.

Ramirez

Yes, Americanized Mexican, third generation, yes, that's funny. There's so many ways you can look at it, but, yes. I mean, I guess for my grandparents, they were just more concerned about my mom. It's like safety, who is this person? It was this more traditional values feel.

Collings

They didn't know his family.

Ramirez

Yes, they didn't know his family and sort of like, "Who are you?" Actually, no, I think they did know the family some way, somehow. I guess to describe my

dad it would help paint the picture. So my dad was born in 1951 in Long Beach. His father passed away in 1964. He was a longshoreman, a very hardcore union man, very much for the rights of workers and for people. He was described as this: very strict, but what was the phrase, everyone eats or everyone starves. Either we all work together or we all fall together, and I can see that in my dad. I can see some of that sometimes in my dad.

Ramirez

And then my grandma was the one that, she came from wealth. Yes, she came from like, old, old, old money, which came from El Paso, Texas. My grandfather, he came from poverty, poor, poor. Married my grandma, and he went up the social ladder through work, through the union, through entering the middle class in the 1950s and early sixties, and that played a big role, because my grandma's family hated him. They were just like, "Oh, he's a--," as they say, muerto de hambre, starving of hunger. He's a poor peasant piece of crap. And I think my grandma obviously loved them and said, "You guys don't know what you're talking about. He's a great guy." And from the stories I've heard, he was a great guy, very strict apparently. So with my dad growing up in Wilmington, he went to Banning High School. From his experience, he derived a lot of his energy from my grandfather. He made sure that he spoke Spanish, that they spoke Spanish in the house, then in the outside world you can speak English, whatever. Education was number one, education, because my grandfather knew very little English and was a little ridiculed. I mean, come on, 1950s?

Ramirez

And then that's sort of like a lot of my dad's personality and energy comes from my grandfather. He really looked up to him. But when my dad was thirteen, he died of black lung, so my grandfather died when my dad turned thirteen. He was working on the docks and he, I guess, had black lung, water in the lung. He couldn't breathe and died--

Collings

Because of all of the pollution.

Ramirez

The pollution, yes. Interesting how life works.

Collings

Yes.

Ramirez

Twenty years before I was even born, he died in Harbor City at Kaiser, and from there, that pretty much sent everything kind of downhill, because my dad then went through his teenage years without a father. A stepfather came in, an alcoholic, abusive in all the ways, and it just kind of derailed the whole family. Let's put it that way. What's really interesting is that when my grandfather died--and this is, like, my theory--Dad just opened the doors to a lot of perversion,

because there was no real structure. Everything was chaotic, and that in a sense pushed my dad to El Paso, because essentially what my dad did tell me was, he's like, "I want to get out of Wilmington, not so much the town, but just because of the abuse, domestic violence, the alcoholism." And he went to El Paso and lived with, I believe, my great-aunt and my great-uncles.

Collings

Oh, he was actually living over there.

Ramirez

Yes, for a little bit, and then met my mom, and then my dad would come back to Wilmington just to check up on Grandma, his mom. It was just like no stability, just chaos and everyone for themselves, and I think when my mom and my dad got together and started dating, going out, and then heading into the direction of getting married, I think they wanted to create some sort of like protective world of their own, try to figure it out. But I look back and I go, "Oh, my god, they were kids." It's like they're sixteen, seventeen, and then they got married like at twenty, and I think it was kind of like what is it, building the house on sand or something like that? I think they rushed maybe into things, and didn't address issues, both on my mom's side and my dad's side. I mean, which family doesn't have issues? But I think they were very extreme cases, my mom coming from a household with alcoholism, but then it was like, work hard, but then the contradiction of you work hard and then you lose your paycheck to alcohol.

Ramirez

There were issues that were never brought up, and I think that sense of like, "Well, we'll deal with it," or that denial ultimately ended their marriage in 2000. So I think all that, it played a role in our lives in all six kids, because my parents were very much for, like, education, very much like, "Work hard," but at the same time, in their extreme ways of trying to protect us it was like, "Don't experience life. Just education, work hard, go to school and that's it." And I think they did their best to give us the opportunity of what they didn't have, and it paid off. I do tell them, like, "You guys did a good job." It's kind of weird, kind of like giving an evaluation to your parents, like, "Ah, you know, you did a good job." I don't know about this, but there were some things that were a bit of a contradiction, and we were just kind of like confused about it. But, yes.

Collings

So were they giving you, like, messages about education and studying hard that were in direct contrast to messages that your friends and that the community was getting?

Ramirez

Yes. I think in elementary school I struggled a lot, because out of the six kids I was the one with the trouble. As my dad would say, "I don't want you to fall through the cracks," because I know the other siblings would get the honor roll, the presidential award certificate, and I was like always on academic probation.
[laughs]

Ramirez

Well, but you were being recognized at least.

Ramirez

I was being recognized, yes, but not for the bad stuff. It was like, "Alberto has a problem with focusing," or, "Alberto--," as one of my teachers once said, "He has the face of an angel, but horns like the devil." [laughs] That was just, oh, no. Well, I'm left, but my grades weren't that good. I mean, for me it was really hard to just get the material, and I think that kind of affected my self-esteem, because I felt very like dumb. I was like, well, damn it. My older siblings have, like, straight A's. They're like excelling, and my younger sister, she's excelling. I'm the dumb one. Damn it. But actually what really helped me was just the family unit saying, "Hey, come on. You can do it," and pushing yourself, "Push yourself."

Ramirez

I think not until like I got into the eighth grade, that's when things got better. I entered the magnet program, and it's just for me, I work better if you give me a lot of things to do at once.

Collings

So you started the magnet program in eighth grade?

Ramirez

Yes, yes. My mom put me in the magnet program, because she was just like, "You know, the regular classes, something's not clicking." It just seems there's a big difference between the regular classes and the magnet courses. I think it's just the resources and the money. And in Wilmington Middle School, yes, I still remember my mom said, "You're going to magnet," and there were resources, more stability, and that's where the grades started going up and stabilizing. Actually, it was a very big contrast.

Collings

The magnets sometimes focus in a subject area. What was the--?

Ramirez

For me, not until high school. I got into science, math, engineering, science achievement, MESA. Go MESA. We got our first place medals in the science olympia at [unclear] high school.

Collings

Congratulations.

Ramirez

Thank you, thank you, thank you. But I think in this whole journey, like, I remember in elementary school and middle school, planting tomatoes and cilantro and celery--not celery, lettuce. And lettuce, it was terrible, just did not work out. But everything else worked out. I had a lot of tomatoes.

Collings

Now, did the whole family have a garden, or was this just your idea?

Ramirez

Just my idea, yes. But it was cool that my mom and my dad did say, "There's a plot of land, and if you want to plant something, go for it." So it was nice to see things grow, and things worked out. Like tomatoes, tomatoes are good, and I think building something, creating something, seeing something grow was like, wow, we can grow things and then cook them later. Well, I didn't cook them. I let my mom use them. And then also I would recycle plastic and aluminum.

Collings

Was this something you'd heard about at school?

Ramirez

Something at school, yes. Actually, it was my aunt. My aunt was like, "This can--." And I remembered this. This was in El Paso, because over there they recycled the glass bottle in Mexico. They don't throw it away, and if you throw it away it's like--

Collings

"What are you doing that for?"

Ramirez

Yes, it's like a fine. And actually, my aunt played one of the biggest roles, because she sat down. I was like seven years old and she's like, "You know, this can go to these landfills. They end up in the street. But you can make money off of it, but you save the planet and you can put money in your pocket."

Collings

So she was actually talking in that kind of language?

Ramirez

Yes. She was just like--because I was like, "Okay, I guess." And she's like, "This can hurt the planet." And I was like, "Okay." And from there she was just saying, like plastic, glass, and aluminum, and this was in El Paso, Texas, in front of the [J.J.] Newberry, Newberry or Woolworth's. It was somewhere out there.

Collings

Yes, I remember J.J. Newberry.

Ramirez

Yes. So it's just like those are anchor memories you don't forget, and from there on, coming back to Wilmington I was like, "I've got to save the planet. My aunt

told me." But there was that room. I think that's where my parents were like maybe this will help him focus and not get in trouble, whatever. But from there on, I carried that into middle school and high school, and in high school it became more the science, engineering, learning about cars and motors and then also the environment, because growing up in Wilmington you see the refineries. You'd see the port, you'd see the trains, you see the trucks, and you think that's normal.

Collings

Right.

Ramirez

I remember what really stands out in my mind about this campaign, the Clean Trucks Program, the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, and L.A. [Los Angeles] Alliance for a New Economy, is that I remember waking up every other month and having green phlegm burning, and I was just coughing the stuff up and I'm like, what in the hell is going on? I remember in elementary school on Gulf Avenue, like I had to be taken out of class because my eyes were burning, runny nose. I remember Miss Gall, my fourth-grade teacher, she was just like, "Man," she's like, "I don't envy you. You've got bad allergies." And I still remember my brother from Banning High School picking me up. He's like, "My mom said we've got to pick up Albert." And they gave me Triactin or some sort of allergy medicine that just knocked me out. It helped, but just I felt like someone just knocked me out.

Ramirez

Even in high school, like the allergies were still there and the bronchitis was there, and then antibiotics, and then going to see Dr. Kreger , who was an awesome doctor, unfortunately passed away, just saying maybe moving out of Wilmington or finding some other location. There was just no sense of relief, and the bronchitis, constant lung infections and the allergies that would last not for a few days but a few fricking weeks. And then literally opening the door and I could see the flare-ups at the refinery, opening up the other door, the back door, and you could see the cranes of the port. It really, like everyone talked about it.

Collings

Yes, I was just going to ask you.

Ramirez

Yes, everyone talked about the pollution, and it's like, okay, we're talking about it. What the hell are we going to do about it? And it was just there, like it's like the pollution is there, but what do you really do about it? It wasn't until I was down with Loyola [Marymount University] and started working for LAANE [Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy]--I went from the hotel campaign--

Collings

The justice for janitors? Oh, the fair wage?

Ramirez

Yes, living wage, Hilton LAX. I remember a few folks were talking about this ports campaign and I was like, well, that's cool. And they're like, "Yeah, we're in Wilmington." I'm like, "Oh, that's so cool that you guys are working on that." I would give them some names. And the opportunity came to actually work on this campaign, and I was like, "Yeah, sure." It's come full circle. Now the same folks that are causing all this pollution, there's some policy that can actually curb the pollution. It's a sense of justice, because they're just like, man, you miss all these school days, especially elementary school.

Collings

Your grandfather.

Ramirez

My grandfather, twenty years before I was born dying of black lung. This is a time when they would tell the Mexicanos, "Hey, go shovel asbestos," in the fricking hold of a ship. I don't know, like the only respirator was, what, a handkerchief? So all that played a big role, and you don't think about it until you actually stop and think about it, and you put the pieces of the puzzles together, and then you're just like, "Wait a minute. My grandfather died of this stuff. I grew up in Wilmington pretty much my whole life with bronchitis and allergies." We know that now there's a Clean Air Action Plan, Clean Trucks Program that addresses the refinery pollution, train pollution, the truck pollution, the ship pollution, and the longshore machinery pollution. Well, hell, why not? This is something pretty cool.

Ramirez

Working on this campaign, it's awesome, because it's like I don't want other folks in the future to go through what we went through in Wilmington and the San Pedro-Carson area, where it's like you wake up and you have this like tightening of the chest and runny nose, watery eyes and infections, and I think we can do something to fix that, because this thing has to end. You can't have people constantly sick from industries' externalities of wealth and power. It's like, no, we need a balance. So that's where this is awesome. It's an awesome campaign.

Collings

Yes. You're doing exactly what you should be doing.

Ramirez

Yes. It's almost like things work out for a reason.

Collings

Yes. Did any of your other family members have these health problems?

Ramirez

Let's see. Christina , yes. Christina, she's the eldest. She turned thirty-seven. She has allergies, just really bad allergies. My sister Patricia, she's thirty-five, she also has allergies. Actually, she has really bad allergies. She had them growing up. Robert , no. I mean, he does have allergies. Gilbert allergies. Me, allergies, bronchitis.

Collings

Nobody had asthma?

Ramirez

My cousins had asthma. My cousins had really bad asthma, my cousin Daniel. Carlos, no. Daniel had severe asthma. My grandma has severe asthma, so, yes, the asthma and allergies were just prevalent. But they weren't like seasonal allergies. These were like the allergies from hell, like two weeks of like you want to pull your eyes out. You want to rip out your skin under your eyes and nose. But a lot of it was the allergies, bronchitis, but I remember my cousin Daniel. Now, that was something with the asthma. It was just like the machine, the humidifier, the air filter in the house, and this is literally on Gulf [Avenue] and Wilmington Boulevard and Anaheim Street, which is like about half a mile away from the port. So you're talking about severe proximity, close proximity to all the pollution. I mean, that's some heavy stuff.

Collings

Yes. Now, you mentioned your family doctor and how great he was.

Ramirez

Yes, Dr. Gary Kreger.

Collings

Yes. I mean, when you guys would go in there, would he ever mention anything about what might be causing this?

Ramirez

I mean, I think he understood the situation where he's like, he was our family doctor. He passed away, unfortunately, of a brain tumor about six years ago. But he would just say like, "Here's the medicine. Take it easy. Here's some eye drops," because there was this like burning, stinging. But yes, it was--

Collings

But there was never any discussion about what the cause of this might be?

Ramirez

No. It was just kind of like, "Maybe you might want to find somewhere else to kind of live." But I mean, he knew the financial situation where it's like, "We can't do that." I think that conversation was in 1998. Actually, I still remember that, because that's when we lost our insurance, in 1998, 1999.

Collings

What kind of work was your dad doing?

Ramirez

My dad worked for Northrop Grumman Aerospace for eighteen years, and then they laid him off, ex-aerospace.

Collings

At the end of the cold war?

Ramirez

1998, yes, a few years later when everything was being cut back or sent back East or outsourced. I remember him saying, "Damn outsourcing. God damn outsourcing."

Collings

Oh, really?

Ramirez

Yes. He would cuss a lot.

Collings

He was kind of on the early side of that.

Ramirez

Yes. He started at Northrop in 1981 and was done in 1998.

Collings

What did he do over there?

Ramirez

He was an industrial electrician, so he did a lot of [unclear].

Collings

It sounds like it was a good job.

Ramirez

It was a good job, yes. Prior to that, he worked for entertainment.

Collings

Oh, really?

Ramirez

Yes. Like all these rock bands from the seventies.

Collings

Are you kidding?

Ramirez

Yes, in El Paso, Texas. So actually my mom and my dad got married in Juarez, lived in El Paso for about nine years, and for those nine years my dad actually worked at the civic center. So he worked rock concerts, like Alice Cooper, Elvis, Chicago, Boston, REO Speedwagon--

Collings

Gosh. Oh, wow.

Ramirez

--like all these bands, Journey, Cheap Trick. He loved Cheap Trick.

Collings

Oh, really?

Ramirez

Yes. And then from there, aerospace. He really wanted to go into theatrical acting, entertainment.

Collings

Oh, really? Oh, how interesting.

Ramirez

Yes. That's the sad part is I guess he--I mean, not sad, but because of situations, just situations, financial decisions and unexpected stuff, it's like he had to make that decision, what I want to do and what is needed.

Collings

Yes, of course.

Ramirez

I think that's where I saw my dad kind of put his dreams aside for everyone else, and then now I tell him, "You know, dude, do what you want to do." But yes, the aerospace was something that my dad just did for the medical benefits that were pretty good, until things just started being outsourced and they started cutting back more hours, to the point where they just said, "Here's your pink slip. Thank you. Bye-bye."

Collings

So living in Wilmington and having all of these health problems, was there really no place else that you guys could move to? Or did you just all feel comfortable in Wilmington and really kind of want to stay?

Ramirez

It's interesting, because this opens up a bigger conversation. I'm trying to--

Collings

Because Wilmington seems like a real community.

Ramirez

It is. There's different dynamics. I mean, you have the influx of immigrants into the community. Then you have like third-generation Latinos, second-generation, first-generation. You have like this constant influx of folks entering Wilmington. I think for my dad--my grandma owned the property and would have my dad--my uncle, my aunts lived there, but I think that [unclear] a more bigger issue. There was money to be utilized to move us out of Wilmington. [THIS PORTION OF THE INTERVIEW SEALED]

Ramirez

And I think when I look back, what is that damn cliché, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger? I always joke with this, "What doesn't kill you eventually will kill you." [laughter] We'll eventually get caught up with that, but a lot of people, however, sublimated for sometimes like my dad or my mom not being there, or the siblings, because everyone had to deal with their own battles. We call it the civil-war years, the war years, between 2001 and 2005. My sister had

a baby. She moved on with her life. She bought property, is trying to stabilize her life. My other sister is finishing school. My brother's trying to go back to school. Everyone's in their own battle, and now looking at this campaign, looking at, as my math teacher would say, Mr. Yamaguchi at Banning High School, "Mental toughness." If you can handle those situations, where you're living in the trailer, there's no money for freaking food, there's no this or that, it's like you can do it.

Ramirez

Now looking at a campaign like this and working on the issues of poverty and pollution with the truck drivers, everything is clicking. Everything makes sense. Everything that I--like for me, my thing is it was like one big training session, fifteen, twenty years of training, and I feel when I look back, I appreciate it, because it makes you appreciate things more genuinely, and that mental toughness, like--and that's the thing, though. I learned I ain't no superhero. I'm not Superman. I've got to get that thing out of my head and learn to say no and make sure my health is okay, so that's where now I'm addressing my health, because now at twenty-four it's like you compress all this information of the last decade and a half, almost two decades, and you go, "Well, you know what? There's some things I should take care of, address, and let go." And that's where when I look back I tell my mom, "I understand why." I tell my dad, I go, "I understand why." I even tell my grandma, "I understand why, and I'm not holding this against you, but I can't be around you guys." My mom, yes, I can obviously talk to her. But I think with my dad and my grandma and my dad's side of the family I'm like, "God bless you guys," like, "God help you guys." But I think that everything shaped me in that experience, and it's an interesting experience, yes.

Collings

Yes. I mean, were there people at high school, like you mentioned your math teacher, that were sort of like mentors for you?

Ramirez

Oh, yes, oh, yes, yes. Mr. Yamaguchi, that guy, God bless him. He took care of us. He took care of the students that had situations going on at home, and it was like you don't talk about it too much, but there's that, you know what's going on. And he would feed us. He would back us up. I mean, he would give us rides to our house, to students. Like he was a very selfless person. Also Mr. Stan Caldwell, he was my A.P. government and A.P. history teacher, and he was also there, like very much, like very jokingly but very like, "Just focus, do well in school," type of thing, but definitely I've got to say Mr. Yamaguchi. He came in and said, "You know, there's something going on," because he's like, "Oh, the Ramirez family," like that's the perception that we had, like we were the

Mexican Brady Bunch. And what I mean by that was Mom and Dad and the kids was a perfect family.

Collings

That was the image of the family?

Ramirez

Better believe it. Everything was perfect. I actually did like that, because I was like, oh, wow, we're respected.

Collings

Everybody came to school well dressed and--

Ramirez

Yes, open house. And that was the thing, because like in the nineties, God, I look back in the nineties, it was like my mom and my dad went to open house, like it was a holiday. It was like Christmas. It was like Jesus is coming. Everyone put on your best clothes. We're going to First Cafeteria. [laughs] But open house was all hands on deck, and that consistency of going to open house and people going, "Oh, the Ramirez family, ora, la Ramirez family, oh, education da, da, da." And I fell into that, my comfort, like that shield, but then in my mind I'm like [unclear] you guys know, there's some stuff happening behind the scenes. But it was a nice thing, though, to have that family unity kind of like a union. That's why--

Collings

Oh, interesting, yes.

Ramirez

That's another thing I shared with my girlfriend was--and then I start breaking down crying, because I'm still like, "Oh, I miss those years," because it's like you had Mom and Dad, you had the six kids here, and everyone was like, "Hey, what's up? How you doing?" Everyone was kind of together. The Christmases were pretty cool. The Thanksgivings were good. When you highlight the positive, good memories, it was nice, but then there was other stuff. But with the union--and this is where working on the docks actually with the longshoremen for about two years--

Collings

You were?

Ramirez

Yes, as a casual. I got in through a postcard, thank the Lord. It was a sense of family, a sense of unity, and it's true what they say, like when there's no father and kids grow up without a father figure or a mother figure, the gang on the street becomes the family. Not saying that a union is a gang, but it was like, for here the sense of the driver--I joked with them, like, "Oh, you guys are my tios," or whatever, like my uncles, but they're there. And sometimes you're passing through and maybe you have a thought in your mind, and they're like,

"Hey, what's wrong with you? What's going on?" And it's like, "Well, I'm thinking about this and doing that." And it's like, "Well, you can do this and that." But it's like that family. Everyone works together.

Ramirez

And I will say this, a big factor that played in this is also my uncle, my Uncle Carlos, because he's a union guy, a longshoreman, and I remember as a child, I remember when I was ten years old I went to a liquor store and I bought donuts. I bought, I think it was like those eight white powdered donuts. I was coming back and I was like I had all these donuts, and I was like I ate one, and then I was thinking of like just throwing them away or just whatever. My uncle's like, "Well, did you offer to your cousins that they would like to have a donut? Because maybe they didn't eat." And I was like, "Oh, yeah." I was like, "Do you guys want a donut?" And one's like, "Yeah." He's like, "Albert, when everyone brings to the table and everyone shares, everyone does well. But when everyone hoards, when everyone holds onto theirs, sometimes people may be hungry." He was just talking about that shared philosophy--

Collings

And he was in a union.

Ramirez

He was in a union, longshoreman, ILWU 13.

Collings

Was this your father's brother?

Ramirez

Yes.

Collings

And so his father had been the longshoreman?

Ramirez

The longshoreman, yes. And stuff I read from my grandfather's letters--I found them. I recently found a lot of my grandfather's stuff. He would give a lot of money to my great-grandfather. Our real last name isn't Ramirez. Esquerra is our real last name. My grandfather was adopted by the Ramirez family when my great-grandmother was killed. He adopted Ramirez and came to the U.S. during the Mexican Revolution. So it's like I read some of the stuff, and he would give a lot of money to my great-grandfather to grow crops, beans, frijoles. It was like, "Okay, all right, Dad. You've got it down. Whatever you need," like just giving. And I go, "Wow. That's so cool that there's some sort of anchor character," anchor personality, some sort of anchor historical figure in the family, where I think that there was some sense of working together or just being real, versus fronting and being all tough and I don't know, just not being perverse in the sense of like, I'll do something for you, but you owe me in the

future. I think for him, from what I was reading, "You're cold? Here's my jacket. You need money? Here's five dollars."

Collings

Well, those are sort of the family values of the village.

Ramirez

Exactly. Of the village, yes, and I think that just kind of disappeared in a lot of the offspring of my grandparents on my dad's side. On my mom's side, my grandfather was in the bracero program in the fifties, and they still owe him money.

Collings

Really?

Ramirez

Yes, so look into that.

Collings

Oh, yes, you'd better.

Ramirez

He worked on the Washington Monument. He was also very much working class, worked--he was a carpenter, and he was a master carpenter. He did awesome work and--

Collings

And this was the sort of well-off family?

Ramirez

No, this was on my mom's side. That was just more poverty. You worked, you worked, but you're working for peanuts. If not, you're not even getting paid. So that was on my mom's side. I think for my mom's side it was just very much financial hardships. There was no precedent for education. I think for my mom it was like, yes, she wanted to be a nurse. She wanted to go into some sort of like medical field, but that dream just wasn't a reality, because there was no money. But on my dad's side, my grandma's side of the family, that was old money, owning a railroad, owning markets, owning social clubs in the 1910s, twenties and thirties and forties and fifties. Unfortunately, my great-grandparents had like sixteen kids.

Collings

Wow. That's a big family.

Ramirez

Yes, that was massive. I know like three died at birth, and the rest, though, it was--I think that's where my dad saw the contrast between having wealth and having no education and entitlement and this arrogant approach to life, because my great-uncles and [great-]aunts, not that I'm knocking them, but there was this sense of like, "We have all the money we need. We survived the depression. Our tummies are filled. We don't need no education, and we'll work

for no one." And this arrogant entitlement attitude was their undoing, because ultimately they never dealt with their issues, [unclear] their alcoholism, drug use. They blew all their money on stupid things, on stupid toys, and ultimately bankrupted the whole family. It literally, like they--

Collings

Literally, yes.

Ramirez

Literally. And there's remnants of the old money through property, and I can see the pollution within the family, the toxicity, this arrogance that, "Well, I've got great-grandma's money," and then like, wow. You see those things in the family like, that's what's funny. That's interesting. So you only hope that ends. But with all that it's just those things play a role, and those things played a role in my life. There's different paths you can choose, and I like this one because I'm just like, you know what? I'll say this. There was a time when I actually went back to this property where my dad and my grandma and my uncles lived, and that was actually my grandfather's property, Roberto Ramirez, the first. The place hadn't been pruned in years. The grass hadn't--I said--what brought me happiness was pruning the trees, cutting the grass, cleaning up the property, because I go, "If I have a son, and I had a piece of property or maybe a car, maybe a classic American car, and I had a grandson that I never met, but said you know, Grandpa Alberto--," maybe it was kind of crazy, but I'll take care of his stuff. I'll take care of his property. I'll take care of his cars, something like that. I would rest in my grave.

Ramirez

And I think I did have one dream of my grandfather, and this was at Loyola Marymount, because I started organizing workers at Loyola, janitors. I was told off by a janitor. He told me off, straight up. He's like--all in Spanish--

Collings

This is how it started.

Ramirez

This is how my labor journey started. My Chicano studies professor, Dr. Richard Espinosa, graduated UCLA, good, good guy, real cool guy, sunny. He had a video documentary class, and he's like, "Go out there in the community, find something that's wrong and document it, film it and show it. Write up a paper." And I was like, "Okay." And right when I left, I was wearing my Zapata T-shirt, oh, such a rebel. I basically walked out and a janitor told me off, right out in front of the restroom.

Collings

What did he say?

Ramirez

He's like, "What the hell are you going to do? Do you know who that person is on your shirt? What are you going to do with your education? What the hell are you doing? Chicano power?" And I was like, gulp, "Oh, my god." And he's like, "Do you know what's happening to the women here? They're being sexually harassed-- Do you know what's happening to us with our wages? You guys have Cesar Chavez Day off. We don't even get that day off." And he just like gave me both barrels, the third degree, but it wasn't done in a way to belittle me. It was to agitate, rinse, and repeat.

Collings

Why do you think he spoke to you?

Ramirez

Maybe it was the shirt. I don't know, maybe because he was just kind of like--I don't know, but I will say this. My Spanish was horrific.

Collings

Your Spanish was horrific?

Ramirez

Yes, because we didn't speak much Spanish, because all our cousins spoke English, and we were like kind of a sense of, "I don't speak Spanish," because we're not--

Collings

You didn't speak Spanish at home?

Ramirez

It wasn't really pushed. As a matter of fact, it was kind of like, it was there. My older siblings spoke Spanish, but the younger you go into the family, it was less and less apparent. A lot of my friends didn't speak Spanish. As a matter of fact, mocked Latinos and immigrants. But they were dark skinned, but they spoke like, "Oh, my god." And it's like, "Well, wait a minute. You have the [Spanish word], you have the cactus right here on your forehead." And it was made fun of, like, "Oh, they're [Spanish word]," the immigrants, "but we're third-generation, we're second-generation." That stood out, and that played a role at Loyola, because there were years of, I guess, trying to help these workers out, organize, and--

Collings

What was the ethnicity of these workers?

Ramirez

All Latino, Mexicano, one from Guatemala, and they were predominantly all undocumented.

Collings

I see.

Ramirez

And that was a big challenge, because here I'm Chicano, third-generation, and I remember there were a lot of people that spoke real good Spanish, and we're all about the Movement. Some helped in this campaign. We created Students for Labor and Economic Justice and the organization that we had at Loyola from the victory we had. But there were a lot of folks that in previous years that were like, "Yes, si se puedes, da, da, da," and would critique my Spanish. But then I'd be like, "All right, A-hole. Help me translate. Help me organize." "Oh, no, man. They're all fine. They're illegal, man, don't you know?" And I'm just like, "You assholes." I go, "You're the fucking first people to say 'For our people, speak Spanish fluently.'" And I'm like, "Here I'm struggling my ass to help organize these workers," and we would have meetings in the basement in the University Hall building with all the workers at twelve-freakin-midnight, and I'm like, what the hell am I doing?

Ramirez

But a good friend of mine, a lot of good friends came and helped. We built a coalition. I was starting to organize all the clubs on campus. I would pull one leader from the black student union, from MEChA, from the Asian Pacific Student Association, from the frats, from the college Dems, from just different Gay-Straight Alliance. I just said, "Look. These workers are being oppressed on the campus of social justice, and we go to other countries to preach the name of the Lord and to help these poor little people? Sounds like a latte liberal." And I'm like, "We start here on our campus, and we fix the problems here before we tell anyone else how to fix their problems."

Ramirez

And after I think about a year, we won. What we won was we did a video documentary and we exposed it to everyone, and I told the administration, "I have a documentary here, and I will show it to everyone." And they're like, "Well, there's no need." And then the Loyola newspaper started writing articles, and I said, "I'm going to push the button. I'm going to press play. All right, I'm pressing play, and the whole school is going to be watching it." And pretty much everyone was just watching it, passing out the DVDs, and people were pissed that workers were being forced to work more than six hours but were being paid for six, so they didn't qualify for healthcare, the whole thing, no healthcare, blah, blah, blah, blah. Chemical burns, Windex or Clorox, and sexual harassment.

Ramirez

Then what happened was we got some phone calls from the higher-ups. Father [Robert B.] Lawton, the president of Loyola, I had a meeting with him. And the thing is that people quickly attack, and I'm like, "No, no, no, no. Don't attack the people that have the power to change things." So people were like, "Oh, F-this, F-that person." I'm like, "No, you don't get anywhere." And I told the

newspaper, I said, "I have faith in the institution here that they're going to address this problem. I have faith that they're going to hire these workers." The workers were independent contracted. Sounds familiar. They weren't employees, they were contracted. But we won.

Collings

Now, did that make it harder for undocumented folks to get those jobs?

Ramirez

No, they got the job. That's what makes Loyola such a bad-ass school, because it sticks to its guns of social justice. That was the time when they were doing raids. That was the time where workers were being, undocumented and some legal workers, were being deported, repatriated, yes, back to Mexico or Guatemala or Juarez, whatever. And Loyola, Father Lawton and the leaders there said in a meeting, "Alberto, there are things about these workers that we can't talk about." Because I had meetings, and I was like the little liaison between the workers and management or whatever it was. Father Lawton goes, "Things about these workers that I can't talk about," wink, wink.

Collings

Wink, wink.

Ramirez

And he's like, "Okay." I'm like, "Okay." Then he offered me water. Real cool. He liked this one band, Vertical Horizon. Anyway, but these workers were now employees of Loyola. They got their eight hours. They got their Cesar Chavez Day, and they got uniforms that said Loyola Marymount, and tuition remission.

Collings

Wow, tuition remission? That's huge.

Ramirez

Tuition remission for their kids. So that was such a cool victory. That was such a long journey, because I was taking eighteen units, I was playing music in a band--

Collings

Oh, really?

Ramirez

Yes, still the Reactives. We're called the Reactives, great band. My brother is the lead singer, I'm the bass player, and my drummer is an environmental guy. It's such a funny thing. My brother is a UTLA teacher, lead singer, fourth grader, pro-union, pro-worker, pro-education. I'm me, and our drummer is an environmentalist chemist for the U.S. Navy. He makes sure that biowaste and all this stuff is neutralized, that he protects the water and is a drummer. It's such an interesting--everything works out. We call it the energy. It's like everything just works out together.

Ramirez

But going back to Loyola, there was just so many--the workers were calling me, freaking out, saying, "We're paranoid, we think the management's going to fire us." And I'm just like--my girlfriend's like, "When are we going to go out?" And I was like, "God damn it!" No, but she helped me out a lot. She did the flyers, and my girlfriend was really a very strong ally, friend. Behind every woman is a strong spine, and beside every male is an ego [laughter] that needs to be checked. But it was nice to have a lot of--see, the sisters, it was interesting, because I had to deal with my own patriarchy situation, because I created Students for Labor and Economic Justice, which grew into this huge thing, and the newspapers were always going after me. But my friend Melissa Escobar, now [inaudible] since she got married, she did the video documentary. I did the interviews, and my girlfriend did more of the media propaganda stuff, and I was getting all the limelight. I was getting all the notoriety, all the like, "Oh, so what do you think about the workers?" and da, da, da. "What do you think about this," and, "What's your opinion on this?" and [unclear].

Ramirez

And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no. Don't tell me. Everyone has helped. I have a whole team," and it was like very strong women, young ladies that were just very tough, and what I mean by that was they would talk to the workers, they would talk to management, they would talk to students that would say, "Oh, you damn illegals taking these jobs," da, da, da.

Collings

Who was saying that?

Ramirez

Some conservative students.

Collings

Students, okay.

Ramirez

Students, yes, and some workers on the main campus that were like, "Hey, man, I heard these are illegals." Matter of fact, a close friend of mine told me this, and I will never forget it. I will always remember what he said. "You know, Alberto, you are putting these workers' lives in danger. It's going to be your fault if they get deported. You know they're undocumented. I don't know why you're even touching that. You know they're going to get deported."

Collings

Because you're bringing all this attention.

Ramirez

Exactly. "And you know what, Alberto? If they get fired, that's your ass on the line." And I was like, "Thank you. Appreciate--."

Collings

But it's kind of true, though, isn't it?

Ramirez

If it's true, yes. It's true. But I'm like, "Thank you for reminding me. I'll be back." And then it's funny that when you win a campaign and things work out, and people are taking pictures, and awards are being given out, Cesar Chavez Award, I don't want it. You do things and then you die. You do things and then you shut the hell up. You don't get awards. It's like, "Oh, I knew we can do it, man. All right, yeah, man. Si se puedes, man."

Collings

Oh, the same person would say that?

Ramirez

Same person, and I was like [whispers, unclear], because it was like all these people came out of the woodwork saying, "Yeah, man. All right, bro. Yeah, brother. Yeah, fuck yeah. We won, man. We won, yeah, we won. We won this campaign, yeah." And I'm just like, I'm going to have me a beer. I'm out of here. I'm going to have me a [unclear], or maybe a Budweiser, since they're union. I like Budweiser. People hate me on that. But it was just funny, because you look at the people around you like, "I appreciate your support," but then there are others that are like, "Yeah, si se puedes, we did it," and I'm like, "Get the hell away from me."

Ramirez

But I had a dream about my grandfather, never had a dream about him. This was the night we went public. My stomach wanted to explode. It was gas. We were going to show the DVD, the documentary. It was called "Dirty Work," and I remember I was like, "Oh, please God, help me, because I don't know what the hell I'm doing." And that night I had a dream. I was in the Longshore Hall, like one big hall, chairs going all the way to the back. And I remember walking to the podium and there was a guy that hit me with a cane, and I saw a picture. I saw my grandfather. He was wearing a hat, one of those brim forties hat, but it was very old. So he was like in his eighties or seventies. He was just hitting me, he's like, "Stand up straight," and then he's like, "Talk loud. Be confident." And then the last thing he said, "I like the shirt that you have with the little ship on it." And then I went on the podium and then the dream ended [snaps fingers].

Ramirez

And then the next day we went public, and the rest was history. A few weeks later it was my birthday, and my girlfriend was making this e-vite card, and it was funny, because for those weeks I was telling everyone, "Hey, man, my grandfather talked to me." And everyone was like, "That's so cool." And he said, "The boat with the shirt on it (sic). I don't have a shirt--." I go, "I work around boats." Oh, and he told me, "Wear your longshoreman's shirt, so I wore my green longshoreman's shirt, ILWU. And I saw--I was looking, I was asking

everyone, "What do they mean by the boat on the shirt?" My girlfriend went to my photos, well, my mom's photos to make the e-vite, and she put the baby picture. It had a boat on it, a little sailboat, and it was like a blue shirt, and it was me taken at Sears, and it had a sailboat on it. And I was like, "Oh, my god." It was so freaking weird. He was like, "I like your shirt with the boat on it," and there was a little boat. And I was like, "What the heck?" And everyone's like, "That's the shirt," because I was like stuck on it. I was like obsessed with it, because I'm like, "He told me." And then I found it, and my girlfriend put it on the invitation. And I was like, you look at it and you're like, "Huh. I think this is from my own personal file." But whether it's people alive or people that passed on to the next thing, I think everyone has shaped this journey, these last twenty-four years. [laughs]

Collings

Okay. [End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (April 2, 2009)

Collings

Today is April 2, 2009, Jane Collings interviewing Alberto Ramirez in his office. We left off last time with your discussion about organizing the janitors at Loyola. I just thought maybe we could backtrack a little bit, and you could explain the group that you formed, Students for Labor and Economic Justice.

Ramirez

Sure.

Collings

Now, that group was formed specifically for that campaign, right?

Ramirez

Yes, yes. Going back in time to about 2005, back in 2005 I was taking a Chicano studies course with Dr. Richard Espinosa, and he basically told students, like, "Go out there, find something--,"

Collings

Make a difference.

Ramirez

Exactly, "And videotape it." And people were like, "All right. Well, I'll go to East L.A.," or, "I'll go to South Central," or, "I'll go to--," I think someone went out to Juarez, Mexico.

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Ramirez

So people really went all out, and I was like, okay, well, I've got to figure something out. I went walking to the restroom and a janitor, custodian just

stopped me and said, "What are you doing wearing that Zapata T-shirt?" And then he started just kind of not picking on me, but just pushing me. He was just kind of like, "What are you going to do with this education?" da, da, da, da, and he explained what was happening at Loyola.

Collings

Now, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but did you find when you were organizing janitors later that this particular individual was--

Ramirez

He was a catalyst.

Collings

He was a catalyst. And was he helpful going forward?

Ramirez

Yes, yes. So that's where, I mean, Students for Labor and Economic Justice didn't even exist at that moment. But he was just telling me all the horrific stuff that was happening, the problems with payroll, the problems with being outsourced, contracted and how it was a contradiction to Loyola's social-justice mission statement.

Collings

Did he articulate it that way?

Ramirez

Yes. He was saying, he's like, "Oh, you guys get Cesar Chavez Day off, and we can't even get Cesar Chavez Day off, and you guys are always going to, like, these events or other parts of the country or the world to save folks in the name of Jesus," and da, da, da, "and there's issues on campus."

Collings

What was his name?

Ramirez

His name was Julio Gomez, a Long Beach resident, and he's working there for six years. So what I did was I'm like, "Okay, fine. I'll do a documentary on you guys." And I kind of stuck to this philosophy of like, we've got to fix our own home first, before we tell other people what to do. And immediately we had to team up with partners, so I teamed up with Melissa Escobar, now Melissa [inaudible]. She got married. And we just started interviewing, not drivers, janitors--

Collings

Not yet.

Ramirez

Not yet, we're going to in the future. We started interviewing the workers, and we started doing like B-roll showing the juxtaposition of Loyola's wealth and beauty and just the mission statement and the stories of, not the drivers, the janitors. Sorry, sorry. I keep thinking that, because we have another event

Saturday with the drivers. Anyway, but with the janitors, we basically started interviewing them, stories, and then we put it together, and then we put it on a CD. It's called "Dirty Work." We showed it in our class, and then from our class it really impacted a lot of people's perspectives on the students and stuff like that. And basically, it's something that really pissed off everyone in the school, especially in that class, because everyone's like, "Wait a minute. We're all about social justice, and there's this problem?" People would go, like, "Oh, these are faceless people, people that don't speak English." It was something that like I had never heard students saying that, and we got students' perspective on this on tape, or on DVD.

Ramirez

We showed it, and people were like, "How do we get involved? What's next?" Then I remember I had a couple of copies, and I was like, "Well, I should give this to the school administration," and it was challenging at first, because they were just like--I remember I ran into the President, Father Lawton, a real great guy, but I remember he was just like kind of telling me, "Well, students tell me a lot of things that are wrong at this school, or that are going wrong around the school." He's like, "Do you have any evidence?" I'm like, "Yes, I do. Here's a DVD." And he's like, "Just give this to my secretary, do whatever reports. Send it to her and I'll review it and she'll review it."

Ramirez

So a few weeks went by. I got an e-mail phone call from our student affairs vice president, and she called me into a meeting, and she's like, "Oh, my gosh. This is not good." I'm like, "Yes, this is not good." It was kind of like, "Well, we'll take care of it." And I'm like, "Well, I'm having conversations with these workers and--."

Collings

Were you having regular meetings with them, or what?

Ramirez

Yes, in the basement, in P-2 parking lot, and the workers were becoming more and more, like, agitated, more like, "We want this problem to be resolved."

Collings

Was this the first effort that they had made to--

Ramirez

There were previous efforts. There were other students that tried. But I think it was more like, I don't know the whole story, but students have tried to organize, or tried to get rid of the outsourcing and have them hired by the company, which would be Loyola, but I guess things didn't work out. So I was like, "Okay, how can we further buffer the workers from maybe being fired or picked on or whatever?" I mean, things like that happen.

Collings

You mean during this campaign?

Ramirez

During this campaign. So I was like, "Well, we have all these, like, fraternities, sororities. We have all these social-justice organizations and cultural organizations," so with the DVD I was like, "We have this huge flat-screen TV in Club Commons," and I'm like, "I'll show it there." Because what happened was prior to that, I think from the meetings we had it was like I was being told, "Don't show that DVD."

Collings

You were being told by the administration of the college?

Ramirez

Yes, kind of like, "We'll take care of it, we'll take care of it. We know what's going on. We'll take care of it." And I was like, "I have faith in you guys, but--"

Collings

Were they just saying, "We'll take care of it"? Or was there discussion of specific demands at that point?

Ramirez

They were basically saying there were compromising situations with those workers.

Collings

Meaning their undocumented status.

Ramirez

Yes, undocumented. And I was like, "Well," I go, "I don't know. I don't know. That's on you guys." But I knew. It was just like, okay, I think from the conversations we were having it was like, "Let this go and we'll figure it out." And I'm like, "Mm, no." That probably--

Collings

It's probably a brush off.

Ramirez

A brush off. So at that moment I was very impatient, because I was getting phone calls from the workers, and what I said, I was like, "Okay." I told Julio and also Andrea--she was from Guatemala--

Collings

Another one of the janitors.

Ramirez

Yes. She was actually the one that was willing to speak up. The guys were just like they didn't want to talk on camera, and I was like, "Come on, guys. You guys are the loudmouths, and the women are now on camera talking about what's going on, the problems of being worked for seven hours, being paid for six, if they don't get the eight hours they don't qualify for healthcare, issues

with the chemicals, sexual harassment," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And the guys were just saying like, "Oh, yeah, we're going to do this, this, and we want to do this." And then when it came to kind of pushing they're like, "Oh, no, no. Well, I don't know." But the women, Andrea and the other ladies were just like, "Screw this." They're more vocal.

Collings

Why do you think that--can you think of a reason?

Ramirez

I think that Andrea and the other folks, their story of how they came into the U.S., the hardships, the--her mother passed away during this documentary, and her one complaint was she was always getting pushback from her supervisor bosses, because she's like, "I'm trying to take care of my mom. She's sick." And she was kind of like at a point where she didn't care. She was just like, "I've been through worse entering this country and been through worse home-wise, taking care of someone that's passing away. This is just another thing that I'll just take on." And the example was, she spoke. She spoke up. And the guys were just like talking a big game, but there wasn't that much of a--

Collings

Well, I mean, of course they're all providing for families.

Ramirez

Yes. Yes, it was just kind of like because the guys were just like this kind of toughness, and I was like, "Well, Andrea spoke up on the documentary." It was just interesting. But I think for her, she had so many responsibilities, and she could have easily said, "I can't get involved. I could lose my job." But she's like, "The hell with it, let's just do it." And we spoke to her, we interviewed her in front of the University Hall building like at midnight, one in the morning, and it was amazing her testimony.

Collings

So do you think that was the most powerful interview of the--

Ramirez

Oh, yes. She said what was happening, and then we [unclear] aside from the workers, the student component. I went to speak to all different organizations, trying to build a coalition, so I talked to the Black Student Union, obviously MEChA, obviously Asian Pacific Student Association, I remember I spoke to a College Republican at the gym, and gosh, it was just like other folks that were just kind of like, "All right. So what do you need? What's going on?" And I said, "Look. We're going to have a display of 'Dirty Work,.' It's an expose on what's happening." We showed it. We had about seventy people crammed into Club Commons, and it was just awesome, because everyone was like taking notes, figuring like, "Oh, shoot, this sucks." And then the next steps were, okay, we did the petition, petition was written up, and then we started getting students

involved with this whole thing, and then from there we gave the petition to Father Lawton. Father Lawton received it. It was about 590 signatures in about three days.

Collings

Wow.

Ramirez

It was like students saying, "This is wrong. Please hire these custodians and janitors." And then we followed up, and then the newspaper, "Loyolan" newspaper writing an article, and it was awesome because they're very sympathetic. They could easily have said, "Well, that's life." But it was the mere fact that they were being contracted, that they didn't get the perks that LMU workers would actually get. So it took about a year, nine months to a year to see what happened, and what happened was I graduated in '06. I got a phone call in July from the worker, Julio Gomez. I remember I was at Acapulco Restaurant, and I was like, I looked at the cell phone, I'm like, oh, this is Julio. And I was like, "Hey, Julio, what's up?" And he's like, "Hey, guess what I'm wearing?" And I was like, "Well, what are you wearing?" He's like, "A uniform." I'm like, "Okay." "An official LMU uniform." And I was like, "All right, that's great. Right on, man."

Ramirez

So they got incorporated as now employees. They get tuition remission for their kids, which is awesome, and the healthcare. They get Cesar Chavez Day off, which was on Tuesday, and just like as an employee.

Collings

Yes. Are there any other employees, like cafeteria workers or something like that, that--

Ramirez

Are in that situation?

Collings

Yes.

Ramirez

Yes.

Collings

Still at LMU.

Ramirez

Yes. It's scattered now. I think LMU's policy is like continuing with the subcontracting, which is sad, because there are--Students for Labor and Economic Justice is now doing research on other employees that are being hired as independent subcontracted folks.

Collings

So the Students for Economic--that's the group that you formed, and it persists, continues?

Ramirez

Yes. It is now self-sustaining, self-running, because Students for Labor and Economic Justice [SLEJ] was just basically all the different activists and leaders in different organizations on campus that just joined forces, so it wasn't just Latinos, whites, blacks, Asians. It was everyone. It was amazing. I was like, that's pretty cool.

Collings

Yes, yes, it's wonderful.

Ramirez

And basically, aside from that, UNITE HERE!, the hotel-employees-restaurant union, also asked for SLEJ's support with the living--well, not living wage, but-

Collings

They came to Loyola and asked your organization for support?

Ramirez

Yes. It was so weird. I mean, they were totally separate--

Collings

How did that happen?

Ramirez

I got a phone call from Steve Strong and Angie, no, Andrea, no, some other lady, and I was like, "Yes, sure. Let's talk," because she's like, "Oh, there's something, the New Century Campaign, the hotel worker rising." I was like, "Okay, cool, right on." And from there I was like, sure.

Collings

What did they want from your group?

Ramirez

One, like, being aware of what was happening three miles away from the school; two, how students can help with the organizing, with the community support for the workers, and then from there, like endorsing us and connecting that connection. So it's good. We had workers from the Hilton LAX talk to the students. It was just so interesting how things just worked out, you know, serendipity. But we did a delegation. We did a march around the Hilton LAX to the Westin and back, so we had about seventy-five LMU students in April '06 go out there and say, like, "Hey, LMU, not only are we addressing our labor issues at school. We're also supporting outside labor issues, because of our social-justice mission statement. That's what we're being taught. We should actually act on it." And it was great. It was awesome. We have it on video, that as well, so it was just really interesting. And I look back and I was like, wow, I can't believe I was 200 pounds. [laughs] I was huge. Seriously, the freshman

forty. [laughs] Freshman fifty. But it was awesome, and so SLEJ is the main-- it's still running, and they're working on the Sodexo food service. They're doing their little research. It's something that one day we would like to expand that to LAUSD, to other universities. It's nothing where people pay dues or pay anything. It's free, and it's just like workshops on how to protect yourself if you get sexually harassed at work, or how do you protect yourself if you get injured on the job, just like informational, educational.

Ramirez

I think their slogan now, because now it's in its fourth generation, because I went to one of their meetings a month ago--it's interesting. At this point it's all pretty much female. There are some guys, but it's just really interesting, because it kind of fluctuates, like the power, the president or the co-chair, It's one year a male, then female, male, then female.

Collings

It's set up like that, is that right?

Ramirez

It's been set up like that, yes, because they have ownership of what it is, and we've had a Mexican American president, a white president, an Asian president--

Collings

You mean, is that revolving as well, or are you just saying it just happens

Ramirez

It just happens, because it's so like everyone wants to join together on this, and I think that's the beauty, seeing it in the meeting. I was like, wow, this is really, really cool. What else?

Collings

Now, do you feel like that group naturally evolved out of the mission of LMU, or that group was like seeking to, say, like improve the mission? I mean, because I know that--

Ramirez

Kind of like watchdog?

Collings

Yes. Was it trying to sort of improve LMU, or was it evolving naturally from the mission of the--

Ramirez

A little bit of both.

Collings

Because Catholic organizations can have a social justice component.

Ramirez

Yes. Well, it's a little bit both. I think that I always had this vision of, like, even though a mission statement or one can say, "Oh, yeah, we're for worker rights,"

it's a little like as I say woody-woody. It's like all talk. But to have some sort of entity where--we were actually joking about that at our last meeting, where we have emergency business cards, like SLEJ will come in and if you have a problem, we'll back you up.

Collings

Like Ghostbusters? [laughs]

Ramirez

Yes, yes, something like that. There's like a signal, a bat signal or something. But it's a little bit both, like a watchdog group. It also did evolve out of the social justice mission statement, because it's like here you have all these like organizations on campus, like to save this or to get involved with this, or go to this country, or go to different parts of the world. I'm like, "We need something that's labor, economic focus," and I think with different ideas from different backgrounds of different folks--there are some students that were well off. They came from upper-middle class, upper class, that were just like, "I've seen these workers. What can I do?" I can't relate with them, because I probably make," or their parents probably make, "five, six times more than these workers do. But I want to get involved."

Ramirez

I think that was a guy named John Weems. He's kind of like hippie-ish, and he was just kind of like, "I'm well off." He's from Texas, and he was just kind of like, "But I care. I want to get involved." And it was a little bit of everything that evolved from LMU's social justice mission statement and also like an oversight of the labor issues on campus.

Collings

Yes. Now, how significant was the fact that--were all of the janitors undocumented, or just a good proportion?

Ramirez

Out of the twelve, I think there was about nine, yes, a big number.

Collings

And so you were suggesting last time that was sort of a stumbling block for some people in terms of--but not really significant?

Ramirez

For some. There were a lot of people that were concerned that we were kind of like opening up a can of worms. There was a lot of pushback. A lot of folks were just like--I remember this one person was like, "Well, Alberto, you're going to get these guys fired, deported," and you know all the raids that were happening in '06, '05, '06.

Collings

Were the janitors concerned about that?

Ramirez

I think one was. Everyone else was just like, "What have we got to lose?" because it's now like--I think it would be different if it was maybe like at UCLA or USC, or I don't know, because there was the cloak of social justice, and if something horrific were to happen I would say, "I want my money back. This is a crock of--." I think there were a lot of great folks in power at LMU that were helping me say, like pushing me in the right direction to the right folks. And I think Father Lawton got it, because I spoke with Father Lawton, the president of the school, and he was just like, "I know things about these workers that I can't share with you." And I'm like, "Well, I have information on these workers that I can't share with you." But we kind of knew.

Ramirez

And the workers had lists of things that they would like, and it wasn't nothing like huge. It was just like Cesar Chavez Day off, an eight-hour day, health benefits, that was it. And it was just like, wow, that was it? And I think that, yes, there were more concerns from folks that--and this is funny, because these people--because at that time my Spanish was kind of like not that good, Americanized, American. There were people that spoke fluent Spanish, and they were like, "La Raza, si se puedes, MEChA, whatever." And I believe in that, too. But it was like, "All right, guys. Well, stop knocking on my damn Spanish and help me out," because I had to speak to janitors that spoke only Spanish, and I was like trying my best, but it was those folks, or certain folks that were like, "You're going to get them deported," da, da, da, da. And then when we won they were like, "Oh, we always knew you could do it." I was like, "You a-holes." But it wasn't like the organization, it was just like one or two people that stood out on mine, where they would push me to the side and say, "You're going to get these fricking Mexicans deported." And I'm like--

Collings

Were they worried about them, you mean?

Ramirez

It was more like a very, "I hope you're successful, but good luck." And it was just really interesting. So it was one of those things where it's like when I look back, there was a lot of risk.

Collings

Definitely.

Ramirez

There was a lot of risk. But when we won, people got awards.

Collings

Really.

Ramirez

Yes, so I'm glad they got awards. [laughter] Anyway, but yes, so it was a positive experience. It really opened my eyes to the labor-and-immigrant-rights

movement, so it was something that was really helpful to shape my view on everything.

Collings

Now, has that group had any involvement with like what you're working on now?

Ramirez

I think it's more like something--it's more L.A. based instead of Long Beach based, and it's at Loyola Marymount--

Collings

Yes, not really.

Ramirez

--so the location is a bit of a distance. But the same concept where students get involved with campaigns of labor, and in this case environmental, I'm kind of utilizing that frame model in L.A.'s high schools and Long Beach high schools, and it's working. I had a presentation with the Teamsters and Turtles at Poly[technic] High School. They had about forty students on Tuesday, and we did an hour presentation on this campaign.

Collings

Which high school?

Ramirez

Polytechnic High School in Long Beach. I was amazed, because I know like students are natural organizers, and the reason why I say that is because I always tell students, "Have you ever thrown a party? How do you get people at this event? What is it?"

Collings

That is a really good way to--that's a great starting point.

Ramirez

Yes. They know it. They're like, "Oh, well, you need to make a flyer, and you need a location, and you need something where you can just like have everyone gather around something that we can get people focused on," so this is really like natural organizers, and they got sixty students, and now those students got the flyer to come to tonight's meeting. So just like, they ask hard questions, because there were some students that were like Young Republicans. These are like fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-year-olds, and they were just kind of like, "Well, how does this hurt industry?" And I'm like, "Well, it really doesn't. It's actually helping the good companies that are doing things the right way. We're trying to help them." And they're like, "Well, can't some people--if they don't like their community, they can move out." And I'm like, "Well, do you mean the people around you? Your fellow peers?"

Ramirez

And it was just interesting, because the other students were just like, "Hey, come on. We can't move out. This is our community. We don't have the luxury of wealth." It was just interesting. You could see the class dimension, the race, class, and gender dimensions in that discussion on Tuesday. Anyway, but the same from model is being used that SLEJ has, and it's just really cool, because student organizing I think is different from community organizing. It's like a division of it. I mean, it still is community, and it's very different from worker organizing, but they're similar in, well, they need a committee, you need a base of people, and you need some leaders that can move a base.

Ramirez

I think with students, one component I always say is, "Did you do your homework? Did you eat?" because it's like the most revolutionary action is actually doing your homework and getting B's and A's, hopefully A's, because students don't vote, students don't drive. But they have a lot of idealism. I mean, some people lose it. Others hold onto it. Some become more realistic, but still hold onto idealism, or some people just go into hardcore realism, "We're all going to die, and that's life." But I think with students, they really want to get involved and improve the community, improve the environment, and I think also with students, they're not talking about labor issues. They're not talking about unions. They don't hear that in LAUSD or in Long Beach Unified School District. That's like an afterthought. That's more like, "Oh, you'll learn it in college." And it's just kind of like, "No. Let's teach these students about, yes, money, yes about business, economics, government, civics. But let's also talk about their rights that whether they become a worker or management, they'll know how to treat a worker, or they'll know how to be a worker with knowing about their rights."

Ramirez

So it's kind of like not everyone is going to be a truck driver or a janitor or a doctor or an attorney or an actor or whatever. Some people are going to go into the business management area. Fine, that's great. Right on. Social mobility. But if you know how to treat your workers with respect, and hear them and not be an a-hole, then management and labor and unions can work together and just have a cooperative system, instead of waiting till the last moment. I kind of call it like preventative medicine. It's like, "Oh, my god, we need to organize these workers now [snaps fingers]." "Well, some of them don't know what a union is." "Oh, damn it. Well, what the hell? How come no one told them about unions when they were younger?" It's like, teach the students about union, what a union is, and if they want to join a union or not, whatever, but at least they have that concept of what it is when they're like maybe twenty-two, twenty-three, because I guarantee you, if you go to movie theaters, if you go to some sort of place and you ask the worker who maybe is a seventeen-, eighteen-,

nineteen-year-old, "Do you know what a union is?" "I don't know." That's scary.

Collings

Which is odd because kids are so group-oriented anyway.

Collings

Yes, but that's the thing. If you interject the philosophy of what union is, injury one injury all, like working together, helping out each other, supporting one another, at the same time being responsible in like, I don't know, if things aren't working out with your union, well, you keep them on check, like just having a system of like check and balances, you would have a generation that students go [snaps fingers], "Oh, shoot. There's something going on with this worker campaign. I'm not going to cross this picket line, because I know that people are really asking for something that may be just a five-cent increase on the wages," I don't know, stuff like that. But I think really working with the youth in Long Beach and Wilmington, it's like I'm like, wow, they get it. They're not stupid.

Collings

Well, a lot of them have--don't they have like family members that are in unions?

Ramirez

Some yes, others no. Some of them, they know about the big unions, like ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] or pipefitters [union] or stuff like that, but a lot of these students--not too many. There are some that, yes, they go, "Oh, longshoremen. Yeah, they're on the docks. Yeah, they make good money." That's it. But really, what's the democracy of a union, what are the functions of a union, what are the things that destroy unions? Corruption, greed, absolute power corrupts absolutely, and anti-democracy stuff, so it's just kind of like really not even talking about unions, just community organizing, and not even talking about that but just basic organizing. Students can build a base like that [snaps fingers], very quickly.

Collings

They may start hearing more about unions with all of these cutbacks at the LAUSD.

Ramirez

Yes, and in Long Beach.

Collings

And in Long Beach as well, yes.

Ramirez

It's that consciousness of, like, organizing, finding out, "Can we work together? Can we build a coalition? Can high school students and college students--," and

it's done before. But I think the high school students, what I saw on Tuesday, I walked away and I was like, wow.

Collings

Now, what is your practical purpose in going and speaking at high schools?

Ramirez

Basically, a few things. Relating to this campaign, we're talking about clean air. We're talking about truckers. We're talking about policy, so this can relate with environmental science, government, civics, economics for the business. A few things--like students obviously are learning, finding their identity. When students gravitate to something and hold it as their own--for example, some students have asthma. Some have lung problems for short illnesses. Their parents are working a horrific amount of hours. It's all interconnected, because I tell students, "We all want clean air, right?" "Uh-huh." "We want clean trucks." "Uh-huh." "Well, we need employee rights." "What? What the hell is that?" And I think when you walk through with students, they're like, "Well, my cousin is a truck driver," or, "I have asthma," or, "I don't have asthma, but I have really bad allergies all the time." There's always a shared story. Everyone's personal stories are always--we can interconnect them some way, somehow.

Ramirez

Even the ones that are like, "Hey, look. These guys shouldn't be in this country. I think they're illegal. I think the air is the way it is, and that's life." Even with them, neutralizing them, because those are the ones that can poison the minds of others. It's like, "Wow, okay. If you think in fatalistic terms, by all means do it, but don't mess these kids up." Students, again, want to get involved. I've seen it, where they're like, "I want to really improve my community. I want to clean up the air," or, "I want to stop people using plastics." And you incorporate the labor part, because the Clean Trucks Program is, one, clean up the air, two, part of the labor movement, bridging the gap, bridging it together, because that's why they call it Teamsters and Turtles. It's like these students were like, "Well, we should clean up the air and the water, and tell me more about this labor piece. How does that work together?" And when you bridge it and you make that connection, students are like [snaps fingers], "Okay. What can we do next? What can we do to help?"

Ramirez

It's like I've seen students like just there wanting to help. Of course there are some that are like, "Look. I don't care." That's fine. But sometimes those folks become the followers. They follow the leaders, and then they're so moved and they become a leader, and they start moving their own people. It's just interesting. It's not 100 percent guaranteed, that's my disclaimer, because I've seen other parts where it doesn't take off, and I think an issue with that would

be finding folks that have that shared story, and also overcoming the broken heart, jaded hearts of like, "Oh, pollution's always going to be here. Oh, we're all going to die," like that, broken heart. I call it the jaded heart.

Collings

Right. Kind of a nihilistic teenage outlook.

Ramirez

Yes, exactly. And I'm like, "Okay, that's your opinion. Next." But also with working with students and with the youth, you hear a lot of the stories as well, I mean, a lot of broken homes, a lot of drug use, financial problems, trying to go to college. I even had this one student who was homeless. His name was Miguel Mioquin, went to Banning High School, graduated last year, but he was able to mobilize students, organize. He was the president of the Ecology Club in Mr. Laura's class at Banning, and he was homeless. He was a homeless--

Collings

The whole family? Or he was just kind of on his own?

Ramirez

He was on his own. His mom was killed in a drive-by shooting--

Collings

My god.

Ramirez

--and his dad left with his girlfriend and abandoned the son and the younger brothers. The younger brothers were kind of like distributed with the aunts, but he was basically like, "Tough luck, kid. You're almost eighteen. Deal with it." He was living with some friends, and I remember we would have Harbor Commission meetings in Wilmington and sometimes San Pedro, and it was like a group of Banning High School students with L.A. Harbor College. I would drop off some of the students, and I was dropping him off at different locations, and I'm like, something doesn't add up. And I go, "I've been there, done that, too." I told him, "You're homeless, huh?" straight up. And he's like, "How did you know?" And I'm like, "I'm no spring chicken," like my grandma would say, because I told him, "I know how it is. I was homeless for a while, for about three months, and you get dropped off at different locations, right?" And he's like, "Yeah." And I'm like, "What happened?" He just told me some of the bad stuff that happened, and in this line of work we're not therapists, we're not counselors, but we're not cold-hearted. I think there's a balance of saying, "Look, dude. I've been through the same, and if you focus on your education, and I will say this, maybe get some help, counseling when you go to university or afterwards, it does help to talk about it. But right now focus on your grades." And homeboy got into U.C. Santa Barbara, but I think he's transferring to UCLA.

Ramirez

Here was another issue. He was undocumented. He didn't know he was undocumented.

Collings

How did he find out?

Ramirez

He applied for FASFA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] and they said, "Where are you at? You're not a citizen." And he didn't speak really any Spanish, and he was just like, "As far as I know, Mexico is over there, it's salsa, nachos, and sombreros." And he's just like, "But I'm American." And the financial aid is like, "Nope. You're an illegal alien. Where are you at? Where are you living at?" So I told him, "Dude, don't even jaywalk. It just changes." And it was interesting, too, because it changed his mind, because I remember when I first met him, he was just like, "Well, are these workers all of them illegals?" This is interesting. And then now he was [snaps fingers] like, "Oh, my god. I don't have my paper." I mean, he was very supportive. There was this little, little where in sentences he would say like, "Well, I mean, yes, there are, but the federal government is hammering down." He's like, "Okay." Because it was just like stuff that you would hear in the conversation, and then when he found out he was undocumented, it was like, "Oh, crap. I'm in that boat."

Collings

He's like on the other side of the mirror all of a sudden.

Ramirez

Yes, other side of the fence. But he immediately was like, "We've got to help out these workers. We've got to help improve--." I mean, he was the president of the Ecology Club.

Collings

Was that before or after he realized his status?

Ramirez

This was still before, but this was further--like it connected him with the workers in their situation. Some of the workers had issues with the legal paperwork, but not all, but it just brought that real-worldness to him. Instead of being in high school and in a bubble, it's like [snaps fingers].

Collings

How did he--because he had to pay out-of-state tuition then.

Ramirez

Out of state, and then he got a lot of grants, a lot of like just scholarships, like he was just applying everywhere and did some scholarship writing. But he was able to do it, but it was interesting to see him. He was just a natural organizer.

Collings

Right, right.

Ramirez

They know, students know. They know.

Collings

Now, do you find that you kind of can figure out who in the school is like a leader of, I don't want to say, like, a gang per se, but groups of people and reach out to those individuals? Because they, in turn, have influence over their own people? Or you're sort of coming in and dealing with students just on a more even playing field?

Ramirez

It varies. For example, you go to a school, you go, "I want to talk to a green club [unclear]," and if you hear--

Collings

So it's more like that, yes.

Ramirez

But if you hear a name, like, "Oh, talk to Bianca Talk to Bianca. Have you talked to Bianca? Oh, she's great," like I should talk to Bianca.

Collings

It's like people are telling you how things are run around here.

Ramirez

Yes. So I go straight to them, but at the same time I make sure I talk to their base and say kind of both communication, top down, bottom up. Also there are some cases where it's like there's no real entity, organization. The teacher might say, "You might want to talk to this person." And I'm like, "Okay."

Collings

Because they're kind of like a power broker among students.

Ramirez

Yes, yes, exactly. And others are like, you just meet them and you know, because they're loud at times, or very like cheery, happy, like, "Oh, right," like teen-spirited type of--anyway, it's different sensories. Sometimes you luck out and find one [snaps fingers] right then and there, and they're just like, "We're on it." Others take time, and some are just like they may be leaders, but it's really not on their agenda. They're just kind of like not interested.

Collings

Yes, can't help you.

Ramirez

And I'm like, "Okay. I'll find someone else that will." They're there. And picking and choosing your battles, because sometimes you can waste your time on some folks that are just like you know they can move a base of folks, but they're just not--it's not resonating to their personal story, I mean, period. And trying to push them to overcome like a fear, it comes to a point where you're now exhausting energy that could be utilized for other folks that are like, "Let's do it." That's something I've learned, because I used to be very much like, "But

I think I can push this person and motivate them." There comes a point where it's just like, you know what? This campaign is more than just you. And it's like you move on to other folks, and you will find other people. Every time I do a presentation, every time I do a visit, a meeting, a presentation, I always start off, I go, "There's always one in here that gets involved."

Collings

You say that, or you're thinking that?

Ramirez

I say that, and I'm also thinking that. I always go, "There's always one." I go, "Who wants to get involved?" There's always one. I go, "That's why I love these presentations, because that one stands out." Everyone else sees that one, and I go, "Let's work together." And then I always close these meetings with like, "Well, if you want to get involved, here's the sign-up sheet, here's my business card. If you don't want to get involved, that's fine, too. That's your American right." And then you see literally half the people leave and the other half stay, because it's very much like in our organizing--and it depend on organizers, because like LAANE has an awesome model, where LAANE has the book, the playbook of like, "Okay, this is Organizing 101. These are the steps," and it's very machine like, which is great.

Collings

And how was that playbook arrived at?

Ramirez

It's our organizing book. Our deputy director with our different organizers contributed to that, and it just helps kind of shape what to follow the parameters, like follow ups, phone calls, what a committee should look like. It's really helpful. But if you solely focus on that, it becomes very machine, and the extreme would be solely focusing on your instincts as an organizer and ignoring that. Then you become clouded and spin your wheels. A hybrid of both, using that and like the folder of ideas and suggestions--I have it somewhere. Oh, it's right back there, buried under paper. And your instincts, and balancing fifty-fifty, it's a great combination, because you know what you have to do mechanically, and then energy-wise, maybe spiritually, personality-wise, you add your own into it. And it works. It's a really great model that LAANE has developed. So, yes.

Collings

So what do you want from people when you go out and talk with them?

Ramirez

It's what we give and what they give back. We explain about the campaign--

Collings

The Clean Trucks campaign we're talking about.

Ramirez

Yes. We talk about the Clean Trucks Program, we talk about the plight of the drivers, the situation that's going on with the workers. We figure out how this affects them, if it's a leader of a teacher's union, if it's a leader of a nonprofit, if it's a leader of a parent group. Whether the rank and file is sick with asthma, the kids are sick with asthma, they know that their dad or brother or sister is a truck driver and suffering, and we're like, "Look. We know what's up. Can we work together? Can I talk to your base of people? Can I get your endorsement of this campaign? Can I get your support?" Basically that solidarity, that shared story, that's basically just bridging the campaign and having people take it on as their own, their ownership. And I've seen that. It's pretty cool. It's like, "Those are our brothers and sisters out there."

Ramirez

I mean, I remember Michael Day, the president of the Teacher's Association in Long Beach, a real cool guy, real cool, I mean, has really taken this campaign and has really taken it to another level with his teachers in Long Beach Unified School District. He came to an action once to talk to truck drivers. He got there and he was out there. We went to talk to Mayor [Bob] Foster, and Mayor Foster blew us off. It was a group of mom's, a Mother's Brigade--

Collings

The Cesar Chavez Mother's Brigade?

Ramirez

It was the Willard, Whittier or Willard. It was back in August. He got on the bullhorn and started talking to drivers. He's like, "Hola, amigos!" And we were like, "Amigos, sorry. Oh, man." It was just funny, but yes, because it was like, "Hey, girlfriend!"

Collings

A for effort.

Ramirez

No, it was--I know it was A for effort, but in translation it was like, "Hey, ladies, our female friends!" and all the drivers were like, "What?" But all the drivers were like, "Oh, okay, it's some white guy trying." But it was really cool, because he was like, "Amigos, sorry." He's like, "I'm a president of the teacher association in Long Beach, and we're here in support," da, da, da, da. It was just really cool, and then the drivers were like--it was cool. But when you see people take on ownership of the campaign and make it their own, I think that's a success, and aside from that, moving their base to a meeting, commission meeting, city hall meeting, writing a letter, e-mailing an official, going on a harbor ride along, which they go out to the docks and meet drivers. It's not even staged. It's nothing. It's real time, reality TV. They go out there, we see a driver and we do a "numbers don't lie." We ask the driver, with their permission, "How much do you make?" "Oh, I make a grand." "Okay. How much do you

spend on fuel?" "About 600." "Okay, and how much are your taxes, federal, state, parking tax, real tax," da, da, da, da, da? "Oh, it comes out to about another \$290." "Okay, so how many hours did you work, sixty hours? Okay. So you're making about 4.90, 6.50, 8.50, negative \$6 an hour, paying to go to work." So yes, "Do you have healthcare?" "No." "Do you have diabetes?" "Yes." Stuff like that.

Ramirez

And sometimes people say, "Well, what about that driver?" "All right, let's talk with that driver." Same situation. We see like different pay gradients. I mean, it's just amazing, and it's like people are even more like, "Wow. I need to get this and go back and share this with other folks." It's like people doing their part. And the reason we built a committee of like fifteen to thirty people is that if fifteen, thirty people bring ten people, that's a lot of people. If fifteen, thirty people tell other five people to send in a letter or an e-mail, that's a lot of people.

Ramirez

An example. We had a postcard drive, and we had 1250 postcards go out to the community, and we got 1250 postcards back.

Collings

My gosh.

Ramirez

And this was through our committee members, teachers, students, professors, really pissed off moms that their kids have asthma. They all went out and they're like, "We're sending this to the Federal Maritime Commission, the FMC, to say, 'Hands off on our Clean Trucks Program. We want it with employee rights.' Signed," da, da, da, da. And it was awesome, and we have this huge database, too. And when you see people do that, you're like, okay, I can sleep at night. I can die with knowing, okay, I did something that got people involved. But also maintaining that, because sometimes people build up and then they ease back, because everyone has their own lives, kids, family, work, and their own obligations, so we also respect that. Because when people say, "No, I can't," I know you can't. At the same time, I know down the road you will be able to, so it's respecting also the time and energy of a committee member and ourselves. If you're burnt out, you're tired and you become negative, it resonates with people you work with out in the public.

Ramirez

But I think also hearing people's frustrations, anger towards injustice, whether it's environmental, labor, health, you channel that and you say, "Okay, you're angry? Transfer that into a positive. Transfer that into an action or into a comment or into a letter or a phone call or an e-mail, instead of just storing it, because your anger is a gift."

Collings

Now, when you said that Michael Day was talking to a group of truckers, these truckers were not members of the Teamsters?

Ramirez

No, they're independent.

Collings

And so that's why you needed to get the message out to them, because there was not this unified voice speaking on their behalf.

Ramirez

It was about a hundred drivers at the Clean Trucks trailers by the NYK terminals.

Collings

Where they're selling the clean trucks?

Ramirez

Yes, they're selling the trucks, and drivers either--there's two lines, to buy a truck, or to apply to one, dump your truck, and you get \$5,000, and sign it for a company, to become an employee. So all the drivers went into line to become an employee, to work at the Port of L.A. with the concession trucking companies, like the good trucking companies that actually want to play by the rule, but want to--"Look. We know there's a problem. We're not going to fight to screw this plan. Look. If you want to become an employee, sign up." And then you have another line, "Buy trucks."

Collings

For the Port of Long Beach?

Ramirez

For the Port of Long Beach. Everyone went to the L.A. line, and it was really cool. It was really cool.

Collings

After--

Ramirez

After the rally, because during the rally protest we had a couple of moms and their kids, and as a matter of fact, the child was suffering from allergies. He had like severe allergies, and we went to Mayor Foster, and Mayor Foster just said, "I already talked to you guys. I have nothing else to say." He went to do his press conference, and we were just like, "Well, we have a letter for you." And he's like, "Give it to my secretary," and he just took off. And that was frustrating, because like people waited there for an hour, and what happened was that's where people were starting to say, "Well, I'm here in support. I'm from this community group. I'm Michael Day." And then drivers were saying their thank yous, and it was just something where we also had some folks from

Banning High School also say, "We're from Wilmington." So you had Long Beach-Wilmington people.

Ramirez

And then from there folks--the cops actually denied us from actually speaking, going to this event, because the mayor invited the community, invited drivers, but we weren't allowed to go in. It was just interesting.

Collings

Now, briefly state the difference between the Long Beach and L.A. Clean Trucks Program, and why is there such a difference?

Ramirez

So L.A. plan, drivers over the next five years will soon be able to work for a company as an employee. The Port of L.A. saw that there's a problem for the last twenty-five years, after trucking was deregulated, that this misclassification of truck drivers as independent owner-operators is a failed, broken system. They work for trucking companies, but they changed their title to licensed motor carrier, and they changed the workers' title from employee to independent owner-operator. With that you change the law, you change responsibilities, you put the onus on the driver and industry makes the money. It's a good--hey, they planned it out. They did it. And what we found out, the Port of L.A. found out, and our research at LAANE was like, "Well, these drivers are averaging nine, ten dollars an hour, working sixty hours a week. 90 percent are Latino, 90 percent are immigrants, 90 percent have no healthcare. It's a failed system, because it's going to fail if you don't hire these drivers as employees, because these drivers, one, can't afford a \$200,000 truck; two, maintain these trucks to 2009, 2010 etc. standards; and three, who's going to oversee all these 16,000 trucks?

Ramirez

There are model companies that hire their drivers, they have clean trucks, like Yellow Freight, UPS. Some are union, some are not. But there's a sustainable system to have clean air for folks in San Pedro, Wilmington, Long Beach, L.A., and hopefully one day Long Beach. So the plan isn't solely like the burden is going to fall on the companies in L.A. They're going to get money from the port to help out, and then the Clean Trucks fee. And a few things: those good companies are going to continue to be good companies, and these fly-by-night, the low-road companies, hole-in-the-wall, fax machine and horrible working standards for these workers, those companies are going bye-bye, and we're happy to see those companies go away, because we don't need them to hurt our communities, to hurt the good companies, to hurt the workers and environment. I can sleep at night going [snaps fingers], "Good. You're not hurting us anymore, because you don't care. You don't live in this community." So that's the L.A. plan in a nutshell.

Ramirez

On the Long Beach side, it's a continued broken system, and with the leadership of Mayor Foster and the harbor commissioners, they wanted to keep the status quo, where drivers are responsible to buy a \$200,000 truck, LNG-CNG, which Mayor Foster was pushing hard for alternative fuel. You're going to have a continued cycle of poverty and pollution, and we call it foreclosure on wheels, where drivers are going to, according to the [unclear] and the "Los Angeles Times," four out of ten drivers will have their trucks repossessed, because they can't afford the payments. The plan basically says that these truckers can use that clean truck in the Port of Long Beach for five years, and after five years they have a balloon payment of \$14,000. Sounds familiar, right?

Ramirez

And then the port rules are saying that--excuse me. I'm sorry, let me take that back. For seven years they have to make those payments, and then after seven years is a balloon payment. They can use that truck for five years on the port only. After five years, they have to get a new truck.

Collings

Oh, my god.

Ramirez

So that means they're going to have an old truck payment, a new truck payment. It's chaos. It's like Armageddon. It's a failed system. There's no thought process. These truckers are going to have clean trucks. They're going to go to Wilmington. They're going to have them jerry-rigged. They're going to have to do things to make those trucks run. We know it's a failed system, and it doesn't really address the poverty and pollution, because you're going to have trucks that, yes, look clean. Yes, after a few months they're going to start breaking down. And yes, a few months after that they're going to be just as polluting as an '89 Freightliner or a Peterbilt. So it's like Long Beach just saw the bottom line and their argument was, "Well, we need clean air. We need clean trucks on the road, and if we go with the employee model, we're going to get sued by the American Trucking Association." And guess what? They're getting sued anyway, and they're getting sued not just on the employee piece. They're getting sued on the whole Clean Trucks Program, the concession model. I mean, if they can, they would wipe the CTP [Clean Truck Program] off the books.

Collings

So the idea is that L.A. can fend off those suits more effectively than a little city like Long Beach. Is that the basic problem?

Ramirez

L.A. said, "We're going to address," with the leadership of Mayor Villaraigosa and also [Councilwoman] Janice Hahn, they're like, "We're going to fight like hell. The hell with this. You want to go to court? Let's bring it on, because we have community supporting this Clean Trucks Program. We have workers supporting this, environmental health. This is the right thing to do." And industry is fighting tooth and nail to destroy that plan, because they don't want their business model of exploiting workers, polluting the communities, to change. If they could, they would pay these workers five cents an hour. I mean, come on. I mean, if Long Beach would have followed the plan of L.A., yes, they would have been sued, but it would have been a joint effort of protecting the Clean Trucks Program. But Long Beach said, "Oh, we'll skim it down. We'll put the bare bones." They're still being sued. So it's like, be sued now or be sued later.

Ramirez

But we kept saying to the Port of Long Beach and Mayor Foster, "You're going to get sued anyway. You're going to get sued." "No, we're not going to get sued. L.A.'s going to be tied up in court." And the industry sued L.A. and said, "We're including you, Long Beach." And Long Beach got stabbed in the back. And now it's at a point where it's like, well, "We told you. We told you, Mayor Foster. We told you, harbor commissioners of Long Beach, that you were going to get sued no matter what." And that's unfortunate.

Collings

Yes. Now, is there any political campaign to get a new mayor in?

Ramirez

Well, the election is next year, so I think there's already some names being thrown around. I don't know specifically which one, but I think there are good candidates out there. I think Tonya Reyes Uranga, Councilwoman of the Seventh District, which is in the Diesel Death zone, she gets it; very solid, very strong councilwoman, just tough, really great person. She gets it. She understands the plight of the drivers. She understands the problems with the pollution in the community. She eats, sleeps this. Whatever. And I think personally, if she was in there, I think Long Beach would be an awesome city. I mean, she isn't afraid of addressing the hard questions. Like she gets it. But there are others which we really hope they don't get the mayor seat, because, quite frankly, they just don't care. They don't care about people on the west side of Long Beach. They don't care. That's their problem. Some of these guys live on the east side of Long Beach. But they're fools to think that pollution doesn't travel past Cherry Avenue.

Collings

Yes, that's right.

Ramirez

So I think it's going to take a lot of different components to improve Long Beach, because I think Long Beach is twenty years behind L.A. in the labor movement. I really think that.

Collings

Well, let's hope it doesn't take twenty years to catch up.

Ramirez

Oh, no. Hopefully it takes a few weeks. [laughs] No, I was just kidding. I see a few years, but I don't see twenty years. I think in a few years, with community organizing, with outreach to schools, with outreach to the right political, progressive-minded people that really care in seats of power, Long Beach can be a really great model of socioeconomic justice and actually addressing the tale of two cities.

Collings

Well, there's a lot of activism in Long Beach.

Ramirez

There is, there is. It's just it's very squashed by the machine that runs Long Beach. But there are ways to take the driver out of that machine and put a different driver into the machine and rework the machine. Or you can get a wrench and just throw it in and see what happens. But I prefer less destruction and just more like interjecting into the system of Long Beach. I think that the school systems are the gems of Long Beach, because like the school systems are like number two in the nation. It's like the model educational system, and if we can interject in that--I call it the veins and arteries of Long Beach, which is like the school systems, the elementary, high school, and the college system, you can literally change the whole mindset of what environmental activism is, social justice, economic justice, health justice.

Ramirez

I mean, it's a very interesting world at the "Press-Telegram," for example. There's a lot of antagonism for Teamsters, da, da, da, but there are a few people in there who are like, "I don't care. This is a good campaign," and then pushing back on people, neutralizing people that are just like, "This is a union thing. Unions are bad. Workers can find another job. They can pick up another job to make the payment of the truck." But really developing those leaders in Long Beach, saying, "No. We actually talk to drivers, and we actually live in these communities. You don't speak for us. Sorry, we all can't live in East Long Beach by Cal State Long Beach," where it's very nice, where the air isn't that bad.

Ramirez

I think what's really interested is if you split Long Beach literally in half, it's like wealthy white folks, and then as you go more westbound you get more

poverty and people of color, and then you have pockets of wealth here and there, protected by green bluffs and courtyards.

Collings

Right. You have the Aquarium of the Pacific, and the Queen Mary.

Ramirez

Yes. You're going down the street and the more you go towards 5th, 4th, 3rd, 2nd, 1st Street, Ocean, it gets extremely wealthy. As you go away past 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th Street, it goes into poverty.

Collings

Now, are those wealthy areas, have they made their money off of the port? Or is that just unrelated?

Ramirez

Real estate. Real estate. Port, real estate, real estate.

Collings

So your efforts going out into the schools then is part of--

Ramirez

It's one component.

Collings

It's a movement to sort of accelerate the rate of the labor awareness and organizing in the City of Long Beach?

Ramirez

Yes. If you talk to middle-school students and high-school students, if a majority of those high school students go to Cal State Long Beach or Long Beach City College, you're developing like a pipeline system. But that's one component.

Collings

So is that like a stated mission, that that's what you're doing?

Ramirez

Yes. I think that's like 50 percent. The other 50 percent is like obviously neighborhood councils, neighborhood associations, doing the door to door, the good old-fashioned--there are some electronic online stuff, like Facebook, My Space, but that's a tool, but it's not a strategy. It's helpful, but it takes everything. It's not just one thing. It's like twenty things, and you have to do those twenty things right. [laughs] [End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (April 9, 2009)

Collings

Jane Collings interviewing Alberto Ramirez in his office, April 9, 2009. We have a number of things to talk about, but I just wanted to ask you starting off, when you decided to learn Spanish, how did you go about it?

Ramirez

It was an interesting journey. I guess it's weird to explain to people that my mom only spoke Spanish. My dad spoke English and Spanish. My friends spoke only English. My siblings spoke Spanish and English. But for me, most of my friends were like Filipino, some black, some Latino that were already like third generation and the Spanish was filtered out and English was filtered in. The thing that really forced me to speak Spanish and really helped me, because I look at it as a benefit, was working with the truck drivers. You had no choice. And also as I was working with the community, targeted the first generation or immigrant community, it's like, how are you going to communicate? You've got to speak Spanish.

Ramirez

I mean, at the same time I actually helped talk to some of our drivers in English that are like, "What is that word?" "Okay." "What is that word?" But I think just practicing and really getting lingual. Of course, you first learn some of the Spanish words that the truck drivers use, and you're just like, "Oh, that's what it means." And it's stuff you don't want to say.

Collings

The swear words.

Ramirez

The swear words. But I mean, they're really cool. Like the truck drivers are like, "Digalo como asi," say it this way. It's like you're changing it kind of weird, but it's just like the drivers have been really helpful, as well as the community helping to strengthen the Spanish. Because I remember those home videos from 1987, '88, when I was like three years old. I was actually speaking some Spanish, and it just--once I went to elementary school, middle school and high school, it was gone. But definitely this line of work--

Collings

So you recovered it sort of organically.

Ramirez

I recovered it.

Collings

You didn't go to a class or anything.

Ramirez

No. No, it was street. You've just got to do it that way, and I'm very happy because I get to like communicate even more so to folks that I want to have a conversation with.

Collings

Right, okay. I was just wondering how you decided to approach it when you realized that you needed it.

Ramirez

Yes, like, "Huh. How do you say that word?" Yes.

Collings

All right. Did you want to start off talking about LAANE, or would you rather go straight into the discussion about the Teamsters?

Ramirez

I think we should talk probably about LAANE and then how it plugs into--

Collings

Okay, that's good then. So what is LAANE?

Ramirez

Wow. That's an interesting question. No, LAANE, okay. Textbook--so LAANE is L.A. Alliance for a New Economy. It was co-founded by Madeline Janis in 1993, and basically it was this situation where in the early nineties labor was rising up in Los Angeles. It really focused on janitors, immigrants, the unions, the labor movement embracing immigrants, versus saying, "You guys are taking our jobs," and really just focusing that times are changing. There's a big influx of immigration, and the jobs of manufacturing are gone. It's over. The party's over, and now it's becoming more service sector, more retail.

Ramirez

I remember someone from UNITE HERE, [inaudible] Smith saying, "You can take a manufacturing job and put it in Mexico or China, but you can't mix a drink in other countries and ship it back." He's like, "Those are the jobs of the future." So Madeline and her starting LAANE, LAANE was a critical component in gathering up and drumming up community support, and from that it evolved into policies and the research for the policies, and then organizing for the research and the policy, and then so on and so forth. So the structure of LAANE and the beauty behind it is, and the message is, working with communities, grassroots, bottom up to strengthen the middle class, to really bring in livable communities, healthy communities, political justice, environmental justice, and economic justice to low-income, predominantly communities of color in Los Angeles, through policy, through research, and through organizing. So that's pretty much what LAANE does.

Ramirez

LAANE has really awesome just systems of cultivating organizers, creating policies that work, like the Clean Trucks Program or a community benefits agreement, what have you. Then we have our policy analysis and our researchers crossing the T's and dotting the I's. Organizers move the bases of the community, find the leaders and say, like, "This is something we can drum around." And then our directors give us guidance and say like, "Talk to these folks. Be cautious of this. This is where we're aiming at," because we always need a director to remind us, what are we fighting for? Because things change. Policies, campaigns change by the hour, and I think that's where LAANE has

this awesome system. I mean, it's awesome. That's how I can describe it, because I'm like, "Man, this works."

Ramirez

And we've had a lot of victories, on the living wage, Santa Monica, I think it was SMART, the Clean Trucks Program in L.A., winning contracts at the New Century Campaign, the Wal-Mart, blocking Wal-Mart from destroying Inglewood, the construction campaign, they did awesome work with the CRA. I mean, stuff like that. And I think Madeline's vision is something that I think of utopia, but I mean, I think of it more like the American dream and making sure that it really comes through, and I think LAANE is very critical in the labor movement.

Collings

Yes. So how does LAANE identify what campaigns that it's going to be involved in?

Ramirez

It goes into a committee, and I'm not on those committees. I wish I was. It would be cool. But basically, it's like the Teamsters, for example, are like, "What change do we need? We're thinking of organizing port drivers." And this probably happened in 2004. They approached Madeline as well as our deputy directors, and that conversation started to happen. It's like, "Can we really do this? What are the power structures? What's the power dynamics? Where are their challenges? What are the weaknesses? Is this something that's feasible? What are the laws that say on this? What's the history of this injustice, and is this winnable? Is this something that we--?" because it costs money. It's an investment of time and energy, and will this really help out drivers and the communities?

Ramirez

And I think LAANE is very like, "We want to focus on campaigns that target a broad base of community people that are being affected by economic, environmental, or social injustices." And also, "Will this help lift drivers out?" And I think obviously they choose campaigns that will strengthen the middle class, will highlight exploitation, and will actually change policies to better the community. So I think LAANE has this system of choosing campaigns.

Collings

Now, how do you go about using the LAANE manual? Because you were saying that their sort of manual for running a campaign was really well structured.

Ramirez

Well, I can talk about the organizing. LAANE has this amazing structure system that is like 50 percent of your daily routine, and the other 50 percent comes from your instincts, your intuitions, your gut. And balancing those out

and making them dance, to say, usually yields a positive result, which is leadership development of community leaders and mobilizing the base, because numbers don't lie. If you have two people at a meeting, it's like, okay. But if you have like maybe twenty people, fifteen, twenty, that's strength in numbers. Basically, we build committees, community committees of community leaders and activists that have bases of people that they can mobilize, and that their bases see their leader as like, "Okay, this is something that my leader is taking an interest in," such as asthma or labor riots or environmental justice, what have you, and we usually build a committee of fifteen to thirty people, and depending on the campaign, the needs and the outcome of what we want the committee.

Collings

So you organize these groups around specific issues and campaigns, without the expectation that they'll stay a group beyond that particular issue?

Ramirez

We are not a membership. They know that this is a campaign, and it varies, because some campaigns are like--

Collings

Long.

Ramirez

--five, six, seven, eight years. Some are like two years. Some are one year. So it's sustainable to the point where the campaign is there, but at the same time, we need to have that committee of people to see the oversight, to see that the policies are followed through with, to see that things just don't fall off the wagon once everything is passed and everyone takes the pictures and everyone is signing the documents to pass this initiative, policy, what have you. But the expectation is that the committee be the face of the coalition or the campaign, that they talk about and they connect it to their own personal experiences of injustice and how, in essence, they have the backing--or the community backs the policy or the worker or the initiative, as well as those policies and the workers respond back to the community and have that dialogue.

Ramirez

It's kind of like the committee is the voices of the injustices, and they just help relay the message to the powers that be, and when there's a need to mobilize twenty, thirty, fifty, a hundred, two hundred people, five people, then we would call upon our committee at the time and say, "Hey, there's an important meeting. We need some folks there to maybe give some testimony on how asthma and truck drivers and air contamination affects their lives. They need to hear this." The most interesting thing is like today we found out--sorry, it was about two days ago, or yesterday we found out that the Long Beach Harbor

commissioners are having a community meeting Monday at 8:30 in the morning.

Collings

And this was not widely advertised?

Ramirez

Oh, no.

Collings

And it's really a convenient time, isn't it?

Ramirez

Exactly. So those are the situations, those are the circumstances that we work under, and we tell this to our committee of community leaders, of teachers, professors, activists, neighbors, parent-center leaders. "You want to see--don't take our word for it. Their meeting is at 8:30. Do you really think that's a convenient time for working people, or with moms, or fathers with kids? I mean, come on." And they're just like, "Wow. I can't believe my own city would do this." "Well, believe it. And we now have to mobilize." So that's why today is a bit of a crazy day.

Collings

Yes. How do you get the word out to people?

Ramirez

Call them. We go to the meetings. Sometimes we just drop in and say like, "Hey, this is an emergency," e-mail individually and then e-mail blasts, and [unclear] phone calls saying like, "We need you." It's a series of things, like call them, e-mail, e-mail blasts. I mean, now there's something called Twitter, and then you put it on Facebook, so it's changing. But really, the face-to-face conversation is critical, but in these situations, like today is Friday, and it's Monday. You can't visit people. But you prepare for these situations. You prepare people saying, "At call an emergency, mobilization, rapid response." And they're like, "Well, when would that ever happen?" "We don't know."

Collings

Today.

Ramirez

Yes, yes, exactly. So you have to prepare. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail, so that's where it's like it takes time to develop leaders and stuff like that, so it's something that we're just conscious of.

Collings

Now, have you faced that situation before, where you had to--

Ramirez

Oh, yes.

Collings

And how many people would tend to show up?

Ramirez

Last year was the Long Beach vote on the Clean Trucks Program, and we gave a four-day notice, and the meeting was at one o'clock. It was ridiculous that they did that meeting at one o'clock, but with the drivers community and our coalition members, we ended up getting about 200-something people, and that's just rapid response. But it's sad that when local government does those things, it's like undermining our democracy, and there's a lot of people that die in wars for us to have democracy, and for local government to piss on that, that sucks. And it's really disrespectful to community, it's disrespectful to the key players, but it works conveniently for lobbyists, attorneys of big-box corporations. It works out perfectly, because they get paid. But community--moms have kids, parents have kids, they have to work two jobs, and that's really, 8:30 is a convenient time for community. Sorry, I'm being sarcastic, but it's very disrespectful, and ultimately it shows that the community isn't a priority. So it's very disrespectful, and it's sad.

Collings

Do you find any commonalities in terms of background among the community members who choose to participate in these kinds of things?

Ramirez

Yes. A lot of war stories, a lot of like their personal challenges that they've overcome or they're going through. It's not much of a weakness as a strength. They're saying, "Like you went through this and you went through that. Help. We know, and I know you can overcome this." They overlap. Like one of our community members has three children with asthma, Alisa from the Long Beach Community Partners Council, three children with asthma. But she doesn't know any truck drivers. There's no truck drivers in her family. As a matter of fact, she's like, "These truck drivers are causing the pollution," when we first met. I was like, "No. These are the circumstances."

Ramirez

Others are more like educators, professors, that are more like, "I want to know--we studying it and we're researching on this, but I want to connect with the folks that are being impacted." Teachers, they have asthma. Some don't have asthma. They see the students, the high school students or the middle school students have asthma, or they work in a heavily polluted, contaminated area in West Long Beach. So it's all overlapping. Some don't have kids, don't work in Long Beach, but live in Long Beach, and some have all of the above, husband is a truck driver, uncle's a truck driver, dad's a truck driver, child has asthma. She lives in West Long Beach; all of the above.

Collings

Right. But in terms of like spurring people to activism, I mean, rather than being sort of more passive, which is actually more typical of the American

population, is there anything in the background of the people who get involved that makes them tend to be more activist?

Ramirez

Seeing their kids almost die of asthma attacks.

Collings

Yes. So it's like sort of a personal--

Ramirez

Oh, it's personal. It is personal. Being disrespected when they say, "We need to stop expansion, and we need to figure out technology to clean up the air." And they're like, "Thank you." And it's like community people just feeling anger, angry, this anger and frustration. It's like, okay, that's normal, but let's channel that to some sort of action. But really, I've seen it where in some of their interviews it's like their child or children are like constantly having bronchitis, asthma, almost dying of asthma, going to the emergency room, constantly using the machines, the Albuterol. It's almost like they're like, "Where do I sign up? How do I move on with this? What do we do?" And it's really like almost a life-and-death situation.

Collings

Do you think that there would be that much opportunity for organizing communities if children were not affected? And particularly for organizing women.

Ramirez

I think that a lot of the moms suffer from asthma, too, so it connects to them. But if the children weren't there, I think it would still be a priority because of the safety of all this area community's health, and I think also just kind of like, "What's going on? What's this policy that affects my house?" I think with the women with children, they put their health to the side and say, "My kids." But yes, that's actually a very interesting dynamic. I think for some of our other committee members that have no children, I think it's in their interest that they're like, "My health has been affected." Or more like, "Our people are being abused," Latinos or African American or whatever. And also the poverty. It's like I heard these drivers talking about kind of like scrambling for cash to get the diesel to pay--I mean, everyone is impacted by different consequences from pollution, globalization, and environmental racism. So I think a lot of people, whether it's not their children, I think people personalize it, whether they're like, "Man, I've seen some of the paisano drivers on the 710, like I could see them struggling, or the tire blows out and they're just out there just like stressing it out." I don't know, it's like everyone has their own connection.

Ramirez

I know one of our committee members, his name is Carlos Ramos, his brother is a Teamster, and he's like, "Yeah," he's like, "I know what a union job would

offer versus an independent owner-operator." Like some see the victory and go, "Man, if these guys can have it and industry is okay, why can't these guys have it?" So some people read it, too, in a book, and they're just like, "I've studied this, but to actually see it is also a new experience." So everyone derives their motivation. But ultimately, it's the personal story and the stories of the drivers connecting together, so it's not just quick blame to the drivers, "It's their fault for driving those trucks," but it's more like, "There's a reason why they're driving those trucks, and the industry loves it." So it's like, don't shoot the messenger.

Collings

Yes. Do you think that the drivers and the people who are also involved in this campaign--what is their perspective on all of these goods that are brought into the ports in the first place? I mean, does it alter their mentality as far as an opinion about the consumer lifestyle? Is that something that anybody ever talks about? I mean, there's clean freight and fast freight and whatever, but is there ever a discussion of what's in this freight and how useful is it really?

Ramirez

I think that comes from the community, like, "Why do we need like four lawn chairs? Why do we need to keep consuming all this stuff at the Wal-Marts?"

Collings

People do, they do discuss these things?

Ramirez

Yes, they talk about that. I think for the drivers they say, "Well, we are moving these goods. We keep America moving. If people need food or whatever, they go to the stores. But if drivers stop working, this whole country would pretty much stop, because you can't move rail, I mean, everywhere. It's like you need truck drivers to haul these goods." I think drivers want to acknowledge that they are valued. I think like they're professional drivers, not just guys that you yell out obscenities or you treat them like crap. I mean, we have [unclear] drivers come in and they go, "Yeah, the dispatcher called me this, this, and this, that I'm worthless, I'm not--"

Collings

The dispatcher at the port?

Ramirez

The dispatcher of their trucking companies. I heard one driver, his name is Raul, he's like, "They refer to us as wetbacks." And it's like when you hear that, you're like, what the hell? I think the drivers want to be acknowledged with respect and that they are professional drivers, that they have Hazmat licenses and Class A, and they're moving \$70,000 worth of goods in each container, and that their work is essential to keeping this economy going, and the consumerism and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I think that's where the drivers

want respect. That's what it comes down to. It's like, "Yeah, you could pay me \$100,000 an hour, but I want that respect that other workers may have or get in the same line of industry, whether it's longshoremen or the shippers or the clients or the port or the port worker." I mean, when you talk to drivers, the drivers are like, "We don't get respect. We don't get any respect. They think we're like animals."

Collings

Do the Teamsters drivers feel the same way?

Ramirez

No, no. The Teamster drivers, oh, there's a lot of pride. There's a lot of pride, there's a lot of honor and respect, borderline ego. [laughs] No, but you can see them--it's funny that you said that, because yesterday I met some UPS drivers at an Isaac's Burritos place in Wilmington, and they were just happy. They're just like, "Yeah, I have my lunch break. I get to eat, go back to work and that's it. I don't have to eat and work at the same time. I don't have to rush. I do my routes, I work, I get paid, and I get to have my American dream." And I was like, "Cool. Right on," because we were just talking. Actually, it was three drivers, and there's this sense of like, "Hey, man," like this more relaxed feeling, like, yes, they've got a job to do, but they're not stressing out over paying for the diesel, the UPS truck, or the maintenance or the tires. They just get in that truck, turn on the engine, move that steering wheel, unload packages, and that's it.

Ramirez

Contrast to the independent misclassified drivers, where they just are on the verge of getting heart attacks because if a tire blows out, the diesel runs out, maintenance radial tax, federal tax, da, da, da, da. Drivers, you see their faces and they're like, "I'm up to here with the stresses of the bills and the responsibilities, and I don't make that much money," 29,000 a year on average.

Collings

What percentage of those drivers are undocumented, do you think?

Ramirez

There are no undocumented, because TWIC [Transportation Worker Identification Card] came in, TWIC. They're all gone.

Collings

They've all been shed out.

Ramirez

Exactly.

Collings

Yes, because that's what I was going to ask you about. That's over.

Ramirez

Yes. The feds came in and did backgrounds on longshoremen, dock workers, port pilots, merchant marine, everyone, and that pretty much just said that was it.

Collings

That was it. What kind of work did those guys go into? Do you have any idea?

Ramirez

No, no.

Collings

They just vanished.

Ramirez

Yes. Or either that or just Home Depot, or I know that a lot are actually probably returning to Mexico, because there's nothing here in the U.S. for work. As a matter of fact, gosh, I think there was a report, something like more white Americans are doing the jobs now that predominantly Latino were doing, immigrants, like janitorial, service sector. It's really interesting. I want to remember if it was "L.A. Times," it was a Sunday newspaper, or "New York Times." But it's just interesting. Like, yes, I was reading it and I was like, what? I was like, come on. But we don't know, and matter of fact it's like it's a safety issue, because prior, for the twenty-five years, licensed motor carriers or trucking companies would go to Home Depot, pass out some I.D.'s and say, "Get to work." And it was a risk of Russian roulette, because if the driver were to flip a can, a container over, get a tire blowout or, God forbid, kill anyone, the driver is gone. There's no recourse. And it's health and safety, too, for those drivers, and health and safety for the community.

Ramirez

But now you have standards, and this deregulation thing really opened up the doors for hell to come in, and that means exploitation of drivers, getting drivers, getting them licenses and saying, "Get to work and work like animals, break the law, speed, drive, a couple of red lights. Do what you've got to do to move those containers." And that's ending.

Collings

So TWIC kind of like brought regulation back in through the back door?

Ramirez

Standards. Ha, ha, ha. Yes, but I mean, ultimately what it comes down to is health and safety, because, I mean, you could be making millions of dollars an hour, but if you're dead it's pointless, doesn't matter. So a lot of the brothers and sisters were getting injured, breaking their arm, smashing a finger, dying, but now it's like this is a professional job. This is professionalism. These drivers need to have health and safety standards or regulations, whatever, versus this like animals, "Go to work."

Collings

Did the recent accident at the port help to mobilize the community as well?

Ramirez

Yes. It was so interesting. We had a community meeting January twenty-sixth--how life works. We had a community meeting here in the Teamsters office at six o'clock p.m. We had a conversation in our community meeting about health and safety and drivers dying. Our meeting ended at seven-thirty. At seven-thirty a port driver died [snaps fingers].

Collings

Jeez.

Ramirez

Weird how life is. I remember Ricardo talking, Ricardo, lead organizer of the Teamsters here, talking about like, "Yeah, we have guys that are dying or that get severely injured," blah, blah, blah, blah. And then I was driving home and someone called me and said, "Alberto, did you know a driver was just killed?" I was like, "What?" I go, "We were just talking about that in the fricking meeting." He was like, "Well, it just happened." Well, the time was 7:34. Our meeting ended at 7:30. The same time, same date that we're talking to the community about driver safety is when a driver died. It was just creepy.

Collings

Was there anything that came out of that death?

Ramirez

Yes. People rallied. Community Partners Council gave food baskets to the family, the Garcia family. Letters were written. Our community committee went out to the vigil, so we had like Long Beach [unclear] rap program. Yolanda Huerta went out. She also works with the Mother's Brigade. The Community Partners Council board came out. The Long Beach Alliance for Children with Asthma, the A-Team, Asthma [Assessment] Team came out. Other Teamsters, other drivers just came out to support. I mean, there was nothing really you could say to the family but just say, "We're here and we care. We're concerned." And the response was the Community Partners Council gave food, their membership. The CPC comes from a very humble background. They don't have money, but they gave whatever they could, and that's huge, because they're like, they don't have much. But they're like, "You know what? Here." And the Garcia family was really like helped, happy. It eases the pain. It doesn't get rid of it, but it eases it. They wrote letters, they made a big card for the family. It's just amazing to see that connection.

Collings

And what was the contribution of the port on that occasion?

Ramirez

Janice Hahn came out and spoke, awesome woman. She's, like, tough. Man, she's tough. She spoke, calling on the ports to have more standards, more safety

issues. This happened at the Port of Long Beach. Antonio Villaraigosa made a statement. I don't know what Bob Foster said, from Long Beach, the mayor, but Tonya Reyes-Uranga came out, councilwoman of the Seventh District came out of Long Beach, really solid. She even had like a broken leg, and she still came out. It would have been nice to have the mayor of Long Beach there, but he wasn't there, so he sent, I think, a deputy, and it was just more like, "Sorry."

Ramirez

But it's like that driver was misclassified as an independent owner-operator, became an employee under the Teamster contract--

Collings

Oh, he had become an employee?

Ramirez

He became an employee. That's the difference. The thing is, if he would have been an independent owner-operator, we wouldn't really have known. They wouldn't have done an investigation. OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] wouldn't have come down. See, if you're independent, misclassified, that Long Beach is still holding onto through the leadership of Mayor Foster, there would be no investigation from Cal-OSHA. There'd be no recourse. There's no benefits, there's no death benefits, nothing. But luckily, and I say that with respect, that he died as an employee under a Teamster contract. That highlighted everything, that there is a serious issue dying as an independent owner-operator and dying as an employee, because if you die as an employee and under maybe a union contract, whether or not, there's an investigation. You get that respect. You get OSHA coming down and investigating. You have the longshoremen. If a forklift driver was falling asleep, drunk, whatever, I don't care, how he died, when he died, where are the witnesses, was it a mechanical failure? I mean, everything, like a normal investigation. And also there's like some death benefits, insurance. Like there's things that people can help ease the pain of the family, because funerals are like \$12,000 plus. That's dying with at least some dignity, versus you're just a number, you're just a body, tough luck. Cover the body with a white sheet, that's it. And that's as an independent owner-operator.

Ramirez

Whether that sends a message to the leaders of Long Beach, I don't know. Who knows? But all I know is that Mayor Foster and the harbor commissioners of Long Beach are holding onto archaic, dangerous policies that put drivers and the community at risk.

Collings

Yes. And was the fact that he died as a covered employee--were you able to get that message out?

Ramirez

Oh, yes. Univision did an awesome report. It was "Primer Impacto," First Impact, translation. I mean, it was in "Press-Telegram," "L.A. Times." I mean, it was just like viral online, You Tube, it was everywhere.

Collings

The issue of his status, of his covered status.

Ramirez

Yes, and his death. His death and his status and the compare and contrast. People were just like, "This has to end. This misclassification is abusive, exploitation of workers," because God forbid an independent owner-operator is driving, a tire blows out, flips the can, container on a family minivan or whatever, what do you do?

Collings

Now, okay, pretend there was no TWICs program. Would it be more difficult to proceed and put pressure on Long Beach and even on L.A. to have this Clean Trucks Program and hire truckers as employees and so on, if there was still this vast pool of people that they could still get to drive?

Ramirez

It would be challenging. It would be much more challenging. But it doesn't stop campaigns.

Collings

No, no, but I'm just wondering. I mean, what if there was no TWICs program that's also kind of like creating a pool of--

Ramirez

Pool of drivers that can just come in? I think what the Teamsters did was organize them.

Collings

They organized the people that were eligible under TWIC.

Ramirez

Yes, and still talked to those that have questionable paperwork and just say, "Look. Get your ____ together," and try to work with them. They're having issues of paper, or they don't. Then it's like, what are the legal teams saying to them? Like what are the Teamsters, like consultants or advisors, like, "What can we do to help out these undocumented drivers?" But at the same time, it does put us in a bind where it's like, if you get caught, you're going to get deported.

Collings

Because, I mean, the big argument, the big thing about the big immigration debate has the idea of, well, if you have a lot of undocumented workers, that puts pressure on the documented workers, and they need to be able to compete with--

Ramirez

It drives down the market.

Collings

Yes.

Ramirez

Yes. I mean, personally, my opinion is you organize and you inform our brothers and sisters that are undocumented and saying, "These are the steps of potentially getting your documents. This is the benefits of being part of a union," and at the same time, the onus is, "You guys have got to figure out your situation with your paperwork." But I think it's part of the equation.

Collings

Yes. But TWIC really has been a net benefit for this campaign, it sounds like.

Ramirez

I would say it did clear up a lot of the mismatching of he or she exploitation, health-and-safety issues, training. But yes, it did play a big role.

Collings

That's interesting, yes.

Ramirez

But, yes. But I mean, not everything is fool proof.

Collings

No, of course not.

Ramirez

So, yes, so that's why I think also trucking companies are more worried of hiring undocumented workers. See, it's the legitimate trucking companies that do things the right way, but they're still exploiting their drivers by making them do shitty stuff. But it's the low road, the other 700 companies that have a fax machine, a hole in the wall and just giving out tickets or dockets to truck drivers to pick up the loads, those are the ones that we want to say, "Bye-bye. Get out of here. You guys are destroying our economy, our environment, and the health and safety of these workers." We want the big trucking companies that are playing by the rules, doing it by the rules, at least putting that platform for drivers to have at least some sort of [unclear], we want them to succeed.

Ramirez

I have no problem seeing these trash companies, I mean, these like exploitative, low-road companies going bye-bye, because those are the ones that are hurting our communities, caused me to have bronchitis like hell, putting our families in danger of tire blowouts and killing someone on the road and hurting these drivers, and pitting worker against worker, like, "Oh, Miguel will move a container for 150, and you're asking for 160? Well, you know what? Erica will move it for \$90, and she'll do something on the side for me." You know? There's some funny stuff that happens on docks. There's some funny stuff.

Collings

Do you think that the driving work attracts a certain type of person?

Ramirez

[laughs] I think truck drivers are like Care Bears. They're huggable, squeezable guys. No, they're cool. I mean, it's a tough attitude, but they're real cool folks. They're very caring, like they're very much like, "Hey, we've got to back up each other." I mean, some have bad days, and you know when they have bad days, but I think it's just more like, "I want to work. I want to earn money. I want to have that American dream for my family, el sueño Americano, and you see it in their eyes. They want to work, and they want to work hard. They're not asking for handouts, or else they'll be in the middle of an island street asking for money. But these drivers want to work. These drivers want to move those containers. These drivers aren't asking for handouts. They want to work, and they want to work and have the American dream.

Ramirez

See, the thing is they work hard, but they're not reaping the benefits. They're working hard and they're injuring themselves. They're working hard, they have no health benefits. They're working hard, and they're having health issues. They're working hard, and they're being exploited. So it's just there's something wrong with the system, where you have drivers that go, "I want to work, and I don't want no handout from the government," because I have that energy, rapport, respect or whatever it is they call it, but pride that they have. Because they say, "Oh, I can easily go on this benefit, that benefit, this or that." But you could see that they want to work, and we're like, "Okay, cool. But let's get organized."

Collings

All right. Well, let's talk a little bit about this flyer here, this Teamster's flyer.

Ramirez

For everyone to see.

Collings

[reads] "Teamsters, fighting for workers, justice, and the environment--"

Ramirez

God! Oh, my god, the environment.

Collings

"--across the global supply chain." Last time I was asking you, was it difficult for the Teamsters--you'd mentioned last time about Teamsters appearing at community meetings, outreach to the community, rallying the community, getting support, and I was sort of saying, well--

Ramirez

How the hell--?

Collings

Well, I'd never really sort of pictured that when I pictured my stereotypical Teamster image.

Ramirez

Same here. When I think of Teamsters, I think of bomber jackets and black shades and guys that weigh like 200 pounds--

Collings

Right, and making outreach to the community? How does that work?

Ramirez

Yes. I was watching "The Simpsons" episode where they're making fun of the Teamsters. It was funny, because the Teamsters were like, "I'm on my break," and they're all stretching and yawning and like falling asleep. But I think that's like an old perception, not too old, but recent. But I think that with the leadership of General President James P. Hoffa, it's like, "Okay. We need to change things. We're in the twenty-first century. We're entering the twenty-first century," because I'm going to go back in time.

Collings

Okay.

Ramirez

So, the WTO, World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle was, I think, the pivotal moment where the future changed. I was in the tenth grade. I still remember just like people in the streets just protesting, rioting, frustrated with all the global corporations, all the leaders of IMF [International Money Fund], da, da, da, da, da, making the decisions for everyone. Democracy capitalism? Sure, buddy. You had labor protesting all these like policies like NAFTA, CAFTA down the road, and the unions joining forces protesting down the street, and then you had the environmentalists, health advocates, angered about NAFTA/CAFTA, all these global policies destroying the environment, destroying the rivers, destroying the air, destroying the land, and bear this in mind. You go back in time ten years, five years, in the nineties, in the eighties, in the seventies and sixties, you have environmental, labor, particularly Teamsters, fighting in court, NRDC, Sierra Club, ANWR [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge], blasting each other in court.

Ramirez

Well, you go '99 and people marching in the street, and I think what it was is that Hoffa was saying that they looked to the Left and the see environmentalists marching with them. Environmentalists looked to the Right, and they see labor marching with them. And Hoffa was saying that there were some young activists dressed up as turtles, taking pictures of the Teamsters, and Hoffa was like, "I have that picture, Teamsters and turtles."

Collings

Ah, so that's the origin of the Teamsters and Turtles.

Ramirez

There you go, yes, yes.

Collings

And the Teamsters and Turtles is an organization devoted to?

Ramirez

Environmental-and-labor justice, saying--instead of shooting each other, attacking each other, yelling at each other in court or on the streets, it's like, "Well, let's join forces, because industry and corporations love it, divide and conquer." Don't have to work that hard when labor and environmental and health are fighting each other, because they realize that green jobs not too far in the future--I mean, that was ten years ago, and now we're in the crux of like global warming, and the ice caps are disappearing, and then some people are still in denial, saying that, "Well, that's just normal," whatever. And the Teamsters saw that the future of jobs, yes, they're being manufactured out in China and Mexico, whatever, but there are some jobs that just cannot leave, and we can make them clean, green jobs, whether it's liquid natural gas, compressed natural gas, or electric. And those truck drivers can drive them and have a clean truck and make a livable wage at the union, and it's like, "Whoa, we can do that?" It's like, "What is this?" And it's like, good jobs, clean air.

Ramirez

And it's just a simple phrase, but it's like, it's the twenty-first century. It's the future. And the Teamsters saw it as like, "Well, how do we make something comprehensive to lift drivers out of poverty?" specifically speaking port drivers, 90,000 truck drivers in the United States that work in the docks and the ports, and make sure that when the ports do grow, that they grow green and there's policies to make these trucks clean, and that's where our environmental allies and health allies and our labor allies came together and made policies, looked at policies, with LAANE coming in, looking at comprehensive policies that address poverty and pollution. Teamsters came in, enviros came in.

Ramirez

And it was interesting to be in the meeting where you had all these environmentalists, all these health advocates, and you had all the teamsters and labor just like working together, and it's like in my mind like, "Man, ten years ago you guys would be like--."

Collings

Are there cultural differences among these groups?

Ramirez

I mean, it's, yes, the Teamsters are more like--not saying that environmentalists aren't dogged, they're aggressive, but Teamsters are very like, "Get it done. This is how we're going to do it." And I think with the environmental health they have their own style, like you see suits and stuff like that, and then like

truckers are just more like ready to go. But it's an interesting mix, because like a lot of environmental health, nonprofit, are predominantly women, and then labor, there are women but it's predominantly male, and it's just interesting to see like both are powerful leaders that it's something new for the Teamsters and something new for health and environmental. I can't speak for them, but it's just interesting to see, like, yes, there are cultural differences, but at the end it's like, "Ha, ha, ha. We're on the same team." It's like that general commonality of respect and honor. It's really cool. It's really interesting.

Collings

Well, do those differences translate into any like struggles over strategy?

Ramirez

Sometimes, because like Teamsters have done their thing, do it their way, and that's where the community, that's where the Teamsters were like, "We need to work with our environmentalists and health. We can't do this from our bootstraps and go." It's like the Teamsters see it as a comprehensive thing, like the organizing styles of the twentieth century are done.

Collings

And how would you characterize those, in contrast to today?

Ramirez

This is a union campaign and we're going to do an election or a card check, probably an election, and that's it.

Collings

No rallies?

Ramirez

Well, there'll be rallies, but maybe picket lines, some stuff like that, but the community component wouldn't be there, the religious component wouldn't be there, and health-environmental wouldn't really be there at all. Actually, it wouldn't be there. But I think with the Teamsters it's like a strategy of like having its openness, because I know the Teamsters have their structure. It's very private, that's just the way it is, but it's like being open to new idea, pushing back on some ideas and not dumping the past, but changing the trajectory, changing the style or organizing, where it's more inclusive of community, religious, enviro and health and being comfortable with that, because every organization, whether it's Teamster, LAANE, NRDC, Sierra Club, Coalition for Clean Air, whatever, everyone has their own style. But I think it's like picking out the best in the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, and everyone bringing the best to the table and making it happen. I think it's like superheroes, like you've got very powerful superheroes coming together to battle evil.

Ramirez

So I think that's where the Teamsters, the blue-green alliance, for some, from what I've heard in the past, it was like, working with environmentalists? But when Hoffa pulled out of ANWR [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge], and that's a lot of jobs, and that's a lot of union dues, and that's a lot of contracts, but it shows faith that Teamsters aren't just saying, "Oh, yeah, we're green." No, they're serious. And pulling out of ANWR, it's like that's huge, because that shows respect to the environmental-health allies, saying like, "It's tempting to have a lot of union jobs and make a lot of bread, but we see the environmental movement and the labor movement as one." It would be a betrayal if the Teamsters were like, "Yeah, we want ANWR jobs." But it's like that shows the respect and the closeness, the tightness of the environmental and health and labor movement together, and that's awesome that the Teamsters are serious about the environment, are serious.

Collings

Now, is that because they just love the Earth?

Ramirez

It was because the leadership saw that you can't move forward without joining forces with others. I mean, if you want these jobs and to move policies, you're going to be battling not only policy makers but enviros and health and the city and construction and other unions, it's like why are we going to fight amongst each other when industry is just laughing and saying, "These environmental-health and lefty liberal groups are going to kill each other. Let's move with our agenda, corporate agenda." It's like, "No, we're all organized, just as you guys are organized with your money and your power and your attorneys and your lobbyists. We have our social capital, which is the community, our workers, our religious. We may not have the millions and billions, but we've got the street heat."

Ramirez

And it wasn't easy. I know, talking to some of the Teamsters here, there are some rank and file that were saying, "What the hell are you guys doing?" pushing back on Hoffa. You're talking about like some of the old-timers that were just like, "Hey, what the hell are you guys doing? What are you doing with these lefty environmental-Teamster-green save the Earth tree huggers?" Not all, just some. And Hoffa's like, "Nope. We need to change. We need to see the future that we have to address the issues of poverty and pollution and green jobs, clean air, green jobs, clean air." It's like, we need to get our heads out of the sand and realize that, yes, membership in unions is falling. Jobs are leaving. New jobs are developing in the United States, and Obama with the green job, blah, blah, blah, that would be an opportunity for Teamsters to organize these new jobs that you can't outsource, and at the same time have standards that clean up the air.

Ramirez

So in a sense, it's somewhat of a self-interest. At the same time, it's a greater interest. So, I mean, we all have some sort of self-interest in this. I mean, for me, I want clean air. I don't want my lungs to be bronchitis. I don't want to see drivers die. I don't want to go to any more vigils. I want drivers to have healthcare. But that's my interest. I want to see the communities have some sort of rights over their residential zoning areas, that they don't get cancer ten, twenty years from now. I think for the Teamsters it's healthy jobs for their drivers, so that they don't develop lung cancer driving those diesel rigs, drivers don't lose a finger or break an arm or die, and strengthen the labor movement with union density. Enviros, same thing. Clean up the air, have sustainable Clean Trucks Program, have sustainable clean air, not just like clean trucks on the road and then two years from now they're breaking down. And that environmentalism is more mainstream, versus like, "Oh, that's just a liberal-green-leftist thing." No, it's a universal thing, whether you're on the Right or the Left or in the center, whatever.

Ramirez

And I think that's where everyone, even in environmental health, get your head out of the sand, because it's like with the environmentalists, labor, workers, unions, "Oh, they want jobs and screw the environment." I mean, we saw that with the coal mining and stuff like that. It's like, "No. Let's work together versus kill each other." Because you're going to get nowhere, while industry is still moving on, while industry is still making its billions, while industry is still exploiting the workers and the environment, so that's where we're joining forces.

Collings

Now, how does this message--I mean, if this is sort of like the official message from the top, how does this message get transmitted through the organization?

Ramirez

LAANE, or to the community?

Collings

No, through the Teamsters organization, the message about the importance of the environment and green jobs.

Ramirez

The conferences. I mean, they have conferences, rallies, events, media, paper, e-mail, everything, Facebook, My Space. I mean, name it. Online.

Collings

So a flyer like this would be like--

Ramirez

Posted at a local hall.

Collings

--for Teamsters as much as for anybody else.

Ramirez

Yes, that's correct.

Collings

To sort of disseminate the message of the organization to members of the organization.

Ramirez

Yes, that's correct, and just basically saying, "Click on this, future Teamsters, green jobs. This is the future. This is where the Teamsters are heading into the twenty-first century," and just bottom up, top down. I mean, there are some things at the local level that maybe Hoffa doesn't know that are happening, but it'll get to him, and the directives that Hoffa is giving downwards, it's like, "This is where the leadership is going to head into, and this is how it's going to better the rank and file, strengthen the union, strengthen the labor movement, and also build ties with the environmental movement. It's really cool. I think it's fascinating, because I'm like, Teamsters and Turtles. You know?"

Collings

I know.

Ramirez

I want to see some truck driver--I want to see Teamsters dress up in turtle costumes, but they're going to have to be pretty big turtle costumes, for Halloween. Yes, right.

Collings

The turtles that I think of are the ninja turtles.

Ramirez

I know. I think of those same things, too, with bomber jackets and shades. The Teamsters are great.

Collings

That sounds like a pretty historic photo that you have.

Ramirez

Well, Hoffa was sharing that story, so yes, Hoffa has that picture in his office, or it's him taking a picture with some young folks with turtle costumes. So it's just like, who would ever know that would change into a different future?

Collings

Yes. And how developed is that group, Teamsters and Turtles? I mean, you mentioned that there was a Teamsters and Turtles meeting at the local high school.

Ramirez

Oh, yes. Last Tuesday we had about fifty students. I mean, these students are natural organizers. They're awesome. They were just like, "I don't know if we might get like fifteen people." I'm like, "Okay, cool. It will be focused,

concentrated." It was fifty. I had to change the whole thing. I was like, "Oh, my god." And this was at three o'clock, after school.

Collings

Was this at Banning High School?

Ramirez

No, this was at Poly High School, Polytechnic in Long Beach.

Collings

That's right, yes. Because it always seems like Banning High School comes up as sort of a hotbed of local organizing.

Ramirez

Oh, yes. The students over there are also--I mean, students are just like natural organizers. I always go back, I go, "How do you guys organize a party?" because like I asked students, "Have you ever organized a political event, or a social event, or an economic, whatever?" They're like, "No, I don't know, like I don't vote. I'm not even eighteen." I'm like, "Okay. Have you ever organized a party?" "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." "All right. What do you do?" "Well, I've got to call people, I've got to find a location, I've got to call people and make the flyers, and e-mail people. I'm going to have to Facebook, My Space people. I have to do e-vite and then like make sure people show up, and then make sure there's food." And I'm like, "Uh-huh. So what if you change the message from party to rally or political meeting? That's the same thing you would do." And they're like, "Really?" And I said, "Apply that for this event." And they did, and they got fifty people, fifty students and the librarian.

Collings

For the Teamsters and Turtles?

Ramirez

Teamsters and Turtles. We showed the video of our montage of what's going on at the docks, Power Point, explained the Clean Trucks Program, explained the Clean Air Action Plan. Students ask hard questions, and there's really like hardcore conservative students, like the Young Republicans. They're like really right-wingers. They're like fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, and they were saying, "Well, shouldn't--," and these are folks that lived in East Long Beach, and we had folks that lived in West Long Beach that are more like center-Left, Left, and more idealistic. It's really interesting to see Young Republicans at fifteen.

Ramirez

Anyway, but they were asking hard questions like, "Shouldn't industry have the right to make money? And if you don't like your community and the pushing, you can always move out." And I said, "Oh, the same people that sit right next to you in this meeting, they should move out?" [laughs] "I mean, no, I mean, well, I'm playing devil's advocate." And I'm like, "Sure. Sure, buddy. I know a

lot of devils that were in power." But basically it's like they're saying, "I'm not union, I'm not for unions, but I'm for cleaning up the air." And I'm like, "Fine. That's your opinion. But unions have set the standards for non-union, and that's sad that a lot of people had to pay the price, whether their lives, whether their livelihood, to have standards that anyone else can just reap on. That sucks, but, I mean, that's your opinion. That's everyone else's opinion." It's like a lot of people sacrifice everything for the better of others, and then for others to just say it's like taken for granted.

Ramirez

Even the librarian, she was like, "That's a horrible thing to say, that if people don't like their community they should move out." I go, "Well, where do you live?" "Well, I live on the East Side. Pollution is more their problem." And I'm like, "The people again around you--." I go, "Who lives on the West Side?" All the hands go up, and people are just looking at this kid just playing devil's advocate, and I just told him, "Look, dude. Here's the facts and statistics." Because he's like, "Well, I'm statistics, I'm pro-business." And I go, "Sure." I go, "But look at the benefits if you have employee standards, 4.2 billion dollars back?" I go, "I'm conservative fiscally on industry. I don't want corporate welfare. I don't want these workers to be on my taxes, but I want these workers to be working, making a livable wage, having healthcare, so they're not on state benefits." I told him, "Did you know 19 billion dollars is spent every year due to health issues to the port? It costs the state 19 billion, 19 billion that could go to your education." "Oh, really?" And I go, "Yeah." So I'm like, kid, what the? I go, "I know Mommy and Daddy are talking through you, and that's fine. Everyone's going to find their identities," but I'm just like, damn, dude. But everyone else was pretty cool. But I have to give him credit. He was just like on my ass, so I was like, damn it. But everyone else was just more like, "What do we do next? What can we get involved in?"

Ramirez

I'm like, "Well, there's going to be more activities coming up." So this summer I'm building like a student-youth internship type of thing, environmental stewards, environmental-labor stewards, connecting students more and more with the environmental labor movement and training them at a very young age, so when they go through the college years they come back and recycle over and over and over. That just takes time. But it was cool. The Teamsters and Turtles are great things.

Collings

So that's a Teamster-sponsored activity, this labor-environment internship?

Ramirez

Soon, yes. It's still in the planning works. I mean, we're in April. School's out in late June. But talking with the Teamsters and the enviros, it would be wise to

do it, because the school year is going to start again in September, and you already have students ready to mobilize their whole school system, so it's go as you go, pay as you go.

Collings

So are there particular schools around here that are more active?

Ramirez

Banning High School, Cabrillo High School, Poly High School. Jordan High School is getting there. It's more in the visuals than groups. Renaissance is more individuals than groups. Millican is more individual than group, and Wilson is barely getting going. I mean, Wilson is the furthest school, and it's more of an affluent, white neighborhood that sees pollution like over there like, "That's the West Side's problem."

Collings

So why are Banning, Cabrillo, and Poly more active?

Ramirez

They're in the diesel death zone. The kids have asthma, teachers have asthma, nurses are overwhelmed, and there are some kids that are the children of truck drivers, so it makes sense, it makes sense. And there's lifelines, bloodlines, veins, arteries that connect schools to each other. The school systems of Long Beach are the jewels. I'm giving away the secrets. In the power structure of Long Beach, even Long Beach is its own power structure in the Long Beach Report, L.B. Report. Mayor Foster and city council are number one. Guess what's number two? School system. Number three is like, I don't know, the Chamber of Commerce. Four is something else, five is something else. But right below the power structure of the city, power players is the school system, because I know Long Beach is like number two in the state or in the nation--I think it was the nation--in quality and functionality.

Ramirez

I mean, sounds like, "Hmm. What if we take the school system and turn on against or for policies?"

Collings

Yes. Do you find that the fact that this port is being built down in Baja has had any impact on what you're trying to do here?

Ramirez

From what I've read in the newspapers, that they're not going to really invest anything, because there's so much corruption and death issues in Mexico with the ports, they're pretty much not even moving forward, because all the trade's going down. Even the ports here are struggling.

Collings

So that's kind of dying.

Ramirez

Yes, that's pretty much dying. Matter of fact, I think they're not even moving forward with it, because there's just too many problems over there in Mexico without--to get the port going. Who's going to finance it? Who are the investors? Is it going to be more private or more government, when Mexico's own government is almost like a failed state? I mean, there's no rule of law in Mexico. It's chaos, I mean, in some parts, not others, but others where people are just killing each other in the middle of the street over drugs. So that's another issue is health and safety over there in Mexico. Are these ports going to be the ports of drug cartels? I mean, that's the hard questions, and I think--

Collings

That's a scary thought.

Ramirez

That's a scary thought, but I know longshoremen that have actually gone to the ports in Mexico and tried organizing, and they're facing an M-16 to their face. That's not good. But I know that with the economic and with the global recession, that's just on ice.

Collings

That had died a natural death.

Ramirez

Yes, yes, pretty much.

Collings

For now, anyway.

Ramirez

Yes. So it's not too much of an issue. Like, good like guys even getting that project started, when everyone is so corrupt and taking bribes.

Collings

All right. Well, I think we're just about ready to wrap up. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Ramirez

No. I mean, this is ongoing. I think in the next few years we'll see what all this reaps, and hopefully we're all still around. [laughs] 2012? Anyway, but this has been a positive experience, really eye-opening, so in 2012 I'll be twenty-eight? Okay, cool. [laughs]

Collings

Right. Let me turn that off. [End of interview]

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