

# A TEI Project

## Interview of Joseph Benitez

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### 1. Transcript

#### 1.1. Session One (June 19, 2014)

COATES

My name is Julia Coates, and today is June 19, 2014, and I am with Joe Benitez at the offices, the tribal offices of the Cabezon Band in Indio. And I guess to start out, if you think this is a good place to start out, you told me on the phone that you are Chemehuevi also, is that right?

BENITEZ

Yes.

COATES

Would that be sort of a beginning place?

BENITEZ

Yes, that's a very good beginning place. It's an interesting story of how I got mixed in with the Cahuillas. [laughter] My name is Joe Benitez, and presently I'm seventy-nine years old. I live on a reservation, and my wife Diane and I have lived there for thirty-nine years, and I've lived there all my life. We have four children. Two are hers and one is mine, and one is ours, and they grew up on a reservation with us, which gives them kind of a little bit of insight of this family and how it grew up and what we used to do and what things that I had to go through over the years with leading a small tribe. I was born in an Indian Health Hospital in San Jacinto, California, which is the Soboba Indian Reservation, and that hospital stayed there until 1952, serving Indians in Riverside County and San Bernardino County. I was moved from there to the reservation where I presently live, back in 1935, and lived off the reservation at different intervals during my growing-up period. My stepfather was a farm worker, and so he worked at different farms throughout Southern California, and so that allowed me to be traveling with them to different parts of the state in seek of employment. So I got to go to different schools, public schools. I

never did want to go to the boarding school because that available to me, but I wasn't interested in it.

COATES

Which boarding school? Was this Sherman?

BENITEZ

Sherman. This was Sherman Institute. At that time, it was called Sherman Institute. But I chose to travel with them and went to different schools. The furthest I went was the Mojave Desert up in the central part of California, and went down into Los Angeles County; my parents did harvesting there. And lived off the reservation till I was probably, oh, I would say about six, seven years old. The interesting part is I never wanted to go to a boarding school, but my mother wanted me to go to a Catholic boarding school in Banning, which was called St. Boniface. I stayed there for six months, hated every moment of it because I didn't like the Catholic nuns, who were very, very mean, and the Catholic priests were about the same. We did have opportunities to go into the city of Banning, go to movies on the weekends, but that never made up the difference. It was just being away from my mother and my stepfather and just being in a different environment. I didn't like living with a bunch of boys, you know, because I never had any brothers that lived with me. So consequently, I grew up as an only child. Well, I did have a half brother that I didn't know anything about until later on in years. So I stayed there for about six months and then moved back down into the Coachella Valley. My stepfather worked for a date farmer, and so we went to live there on this ranch in what is called Thermal; Thermal, California. Then he didn't want to work for them anymore, so we moved to another ranch further south, and I went to another little school and stayed there for probably about a year. Then we finally moved back to the reservation after all that time. We never had a home that was considered an up-to-date home like my friends at the school I had. Mine was a shack. Mine didn't have any running water, no inside facilities, no electricity, so consequently, during the summertimes it got very hot, you know, and very cold during the wintertimes. So, lived there and started my school on a steady basis in one location, and I went to grammar school first. I completed the fifth grade and then went to middle school, sixth, seventh, and eighth, and then went to high school in 1950 and graduated in '54, and I still lived in the same place. Then, finally, I went to Riverside City College when I graduated, and I didn't graduate from Riverside City College. Came home and married my first wife, and we lived off of the reservation then. But I was still involved with the Tribal Council. That's when I was old enough to sit on the council and be a part of the board. And in 1961, I was elected chairman for the tribe, and I held that position until 1981. Did a lot of different things for the tribe and got things moving, because I had a business education background, and the Tribal Council

had placed a lot of confidence in me, so that I went after different things that we needed to build on the reservation. 1981, before I left office, so we brought a developer down. I brought a developer down that helped the tribe further their development.

COATES

I think I'll pause it. [recorder turned off]

BENITEZ

And then my last thing was to bring in something, someone into the tribe to develop even further. So that's where I left off.

COATES

Okay.

BENITEZ

Okay. So are you ready to record?

COATES

We are recording.

BENITEZ

Oh, we are recording. Oh, okay.

COATES

We have been recording. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Oh, okay.

COATES

We're good. It's fine.

BENITEZ

I didn't say anything out of context.

COATES

[laughs] Aw, tell a joke. Come on.

BENITEZ

Yeah, I can tell a joke. Well, there was this— [laughter] No, won't tell that one. But anyway—

COATES

Can you talk about your family's ancestry going back several generations on each side and so forth, who they are, and all of that?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah. This will be something of a history that's been recorded not only by a written book, but there was a movie made out of it.

COATES

Oh, really?

BENITEZ

Mm-hmm. And it involved my family, my great-grandfather and my aunt. This happened in 1909. My aunt, who was kind of involved with this young man, his

name was Willie Boy. They called him Willie Boy. This was during the summertime, and the summertime was the peak season for picking fruit in the Banning area, had a lot of apricots and peaches and that type of thing. So the family lived in Twentynine, Twentynine Palms, and they would travel every season. They would come down here during the winter, and then they would go up there during the summer to harvest fruit. So anyway, this one summer, Willie Boy had been drinking downtown with a bunch of cowboys and so forth, and they were teasing him about going to get his woman, and I guess the drunker he got, the more he thought about it. So anyway, he went to the camp where they were camping, and he wanted to take my aunt, and off they go. Well, my grandfather said, "No, she's too young." She was sixteen at the time. So anyway, a fight had ensued, and Willie Boy had a rifle with him and—or no, he didn't. Yeah, he did. He had a rifle, and he told my grandfather that he was going to take the daughter, and the grandfather said, "No, you're not." And so a fight started, and he shot him, killed him. So then he was going to kill the rest of the family, and my aunt agreed, "No, you leave them alone. I'll go with you." So she did. So he headed south towards Whitewater, which you passed on the way down here, headed towards Whitewater, dragging her along, and they went up to Mission Creek, which is a canyon, and they kept going up. By this time, the posse was formed, including a couple of Indian trackers, and they tracked him down to Whitewater and then they tracked him up into the canyon. He was up on the ridge and they were down below, and he opened fire on the posse and hit the sheriff. He shot him in the back, and the only thing that saved him was a pair of handcuffs that he had on the back, and he killed several of the horses, shot them out. So they took off and went back towards Banning to get reprovisioned, and so Willie Boy did the same thing, only he didn't take my aunt with him, because he said, "Well, she's holding me back when she's really tired." So he left her there. He left her with his coat. So he went to Twentynine Palms, where his grandmother lived, and wanted to refresh his provisions and get another rifle and so forth, and ammunition. So on the way back, he came back and he couldn't find where my aunt was. Apparently, the posse had shot her as well, thinking it was Willie Boy, and, of course, the first book doesn't depict that. It depicts him being shot and laying on the ground. Well, we surmised in looking at the picture that they showed, that this person was too big to be Willie Boy, because Willie Boy was slight in stature and very short. So they never said anything about it. They just said, "Well, Willie Boy killed your aunt." So anyway, they were still shooting at him when he came back, but he was able to elude them, and they say they killed him, but they didn't. So he went towards Las Vegas, Nevada. He had relatives up there because he was Paiute and not Chemehuevi, but they were related. They were related somehow, and that was the reason my grandfather didn't want them getting together,

because they were too close in relationship. So anyway, he eventually died wherever he was, and a lot of the relatives attested to that. So anyway, that's the synopsis of that history, that part of history of my grandparents. I never knew him. I never knew my grandmother, because she passed probably in 1938, or before that, because I was born in '35, so I never knew her, never knew my grandparents. I didn't even know that Twentynine Palms was a reservation for the Chemehuevis, and I was later to learn that through the book and through other writings that that's where we originated from. So my cousins across the street own 29, Spotlight 29, and they're Chemehuevi. [laughter] My mother, bless her soul, we kind of lived together on the same section of land, which is across the highway, and she decided that she wanted to stay on the reservation because she already had her allotment. So she wanted to be a part of the Cabezons because she thought that being part of the Cabezons, she could keep her property and stay there. Well, as it worked out, that's what happened is that she became a part of the Tribal Council and her property was still in the Cabezon Reservation. So the 29 were part of the reservation as well. So in 1960, somewhere around 1960s, the Cabezons and the 29 decided to split the section of land that's on the other side of the freeway, and so they did. The councils got together and decided, "Yes, you can have your council and we'll have our council." So that became Twentynine Palms, and that's how they got a casino on the other side of the freeway. My uncles were singers. They sang the songs. They sang at funerals. They sang at fiestas. Very good singers, and I often wanted them to teach me, but they wouldn't. They wouldn't teach me, I guess because I didn't have enough interest or—I don't know what it was, but I sure wanted to learn.

COATES

What kinds of songs were they?

BENITEZ

What we call bird songs, bird songs and funeral songs. Funeral songs, of course, are only song at funerals. Bird songs are sung at fiestas. So I wanted to learn the bird songs, but they didn't teach me, so I didn't get to learn. I learned the language. My mother talked to me in Chemehuevi all the time. When I went to school, when I started school, I was, oh, probably in the second grade, third grade, and I was still talking my tongue, and the teacher told me, she said, "Well, you can't talk that in here." And I said, "Well, there's nobody to talk to anyway." She said, "Well, you'll have to learn English." And I said, "Hmm." I went home and told my mother. She said, "Well, you'll have to do that in order to survive in the school." And I said, "Oh, okay." So anyway, I started learning English and still talking to my mother in my own tongue, but consequently, after years of not living with her as much as I had, I kind of lost some of it, and I started speaking more English.

COATES

Are there still speakers today?

BENITEZ

There are speakers over in Chemehuevi Valley. They still speak the language. It was so funny, one time I went to a meeting over there. They invited me to come over for a meeting, and so I went. And here their council was sitting, and I was sitting opposite them. They were chattering back and forth, you know, and pretty soon they stopped, and I said, "What did you stop for?" And they looked at me and said, "You understand what we're saying, don't you?" I says, "Yes." [laughter] He says, "Do you speak?" I says, "Very few words." I says, "I know some of the words, but I understand more than I speak." And they said, "Oh, okay. That's good. You can learn. You can learn." I said, "All right." So anyway, that was just one comical thing that happened later on in life. Then I got so associated with different organizations downtown in the community that I was slowly getting away from the Indian community and picking up more of the white man's community, you know, and I had a lot of friends that were Indian throughout the county on different reservations, so they knew who I was. But I got more involved with the white man's way of life. I married a non-Indian, and my mother didn't object to that. She said, "That's okay." She loved my first wife. Because she was interested in what my mother was interested in, she wanted to learn language, she wanted to learn the ways, and that's what impressed my mother. Unfortunately, she died at an early age because of an illness. So anyway, I moved back to the res, and I went to work locally and worked there for a while, and I didn't really, really like it, but I did it because it was a way of earning a living. I really wanted to be a manager of a store that I worked for, and they kept pushing me back, pushing me back, even though I had the education. So anyway, the day came when they finally made the transition. I became an assistant manager, and they wanted me to take over managership in Flagstaff. They wanted to send me out of the country. [Coates laughs.] And I said, "No, I don't want to go." I said, "My son is here. He's already in school and he wants to stay here and finish his schooling." I said, "I'll just have to pass it up." So I still am assistant manager, and they would send me back and forth to a store in the Palm Springs during the summers, and that's where I met my second wife, who's Diana. But she was still married, so I never made anything with her until she finally got a divorce, and then we got married later and had one child. She grew up on a reservation along with my two stepchildren. My son was getting old enough that he was starting to get out on his own. He was ready to graduate from high school. So he decided that he would move out, live uptown. So he did, and that was okay.

COATES

You explained this to me at lunch, but just for the recording, can you explain about uptown, what that is?

BENITEZ

Uptown is the city of Indio, the community.

COATES

[laughs] Okay.

BENITEZ

It was a small, small town. It wasn't large, and it was not like what it is today. I think there was probably 20,000 people, at best.

COATES

And what is it now?

BENITEZ

It's probably at 150,000.

COATES

Wow.

BENITEZ

So it's grown quite a bit. It's expanded. And that's where my playground was when I was growing up, because I had a lot of friends that went to school with me, and so that was my playground. So when I got out of college, I came back, I went to work, and then when my wife passed away, I came back to the reservation and lived with my parents. In the meantime, the reservation in Morongo, which is by the city of Banning up on the Interstate 10, they were looking for a director for their medical clinic, and then I became a medical director, director for that clinic, there for seven, eight years, and I got a real good understanding of different tribes in the county, as well as all over the United States, because that's where it took me. In the meantime, I got married with Diana, and I moved her out to the res, and she was happy. She was happy with that. So I continued to work, driving back and forth from Indio to Banning. And all the time, my relatives who were passing on, all my uncles and aunts passed on, and the siblings were still here, and, of course, I knew who they were, so I would go visit with them once in a while. So finally they took over the reservation here and they finally got a casino. So then I got more involved with them. I'm still involved with this tribe, being a former chairman, and I was still working with the clinic and doing a lot of traveling all over the United States, because Indian Health Service had a board in Colorado, and so that was the main office. So I became a member of that board as well and a board in California, so I had a dual role, plus I was still running the clinic. And fortunately, I had a very good administrative assistant, because she took a lot of work from me. [Coates laughs.] So in doing this—I did that for, like, say, about seven years, and then I finally decide, “This is too much, too much. I can't handle it.” So I came back, went to work with an irrigation distribution

company, and stayed there for about twenty years till I retired. So that's where it's kind of taken me in my younger, youthful days in my early twenties, my early thirties, and probably my early forties. So then I was still a member here and going to tribal meetings and so forth, but I never got involved. I didn't want to get involved back with chairmanships. I'd had enough. So as far as my relatives are concerned, I have those across the street that are my cousins. I have numerous cousins in the State of Nevada, that they're offsprings of my youngest uncle, who's passed now.

COATES

And they just moved over there or they—

BENITEZ

They were born there. They were born on a reservation that he moved to and married a Paiute lady that was a member of that reservation. So they just kind of moved there. They had their children. They had nine children, and then just kind of just grew up there, and all of these—there's about 350 relatives that I have up there. [laughter]

COATES

But who's counting, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, really, really. And they're still populating. [laughter] So anyway, that kind of takes us to where I spent most of my life doing different things and being part of a tribe, being part of another tribe.

COATES

When you were growing up, you grew up on the reservation.

BENITEZ

Yes.

COATES

What do you remember about it? Were you aware that it was a reservation? Was there a divide between it and the town? Just what are your memories about growing up in that community?

BENITEZ

I remember it as there were other families that lived on the reservation, not specifically Natives. They were Hispanic and Negro.

COATES

Were they leasing reservation land or something?

BENITEZ

The Negroes had come from the South, and it was during that period of time when there was a high influx of Negroes coming west, and apparently one of the tribal members was approached by one of the main persons of all those Negro people, and he wanted to lease some property, and the tribal member said, "Yeah, sure." So anyway, that started the first family, and then another family

showed up, and then another family showed up. There used to be probably sixty families that lived across the street, and there was one, two—two Hispanic families that lived there, and they were both farmers. They farmed the land. But the Negro people worked off different trades that they were used to doing, and they lived there for a good number of years until they were moved off by the county. The county came in and condemned all our housing because it was all substandard housing.

COATES

All the tribal housing, or what was—

BENITEZ

The Negroes' housing.

COATES

Okay. And they had built these homes themselves?

BENITEZ

They had built these homes themselves.

COATES

And they built it on the reservation?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

So there was no consultation with the—

BENITEZ

With the county or city or anybody like that.

COATES

Or with the tribe? Was there a tribe or tribal organization at that point?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah, there was a tribal organization, but they couldn't say anything because that was an allotted piece of land. And so the famers had allotted lands, too, so they were renting those properties. So the tribe couldn't say anything against them. So they—I don't know. There must have been—well, it wasn't only on this—there's a railroad track that runs down the middle. It's the main line for Southern Pacific, and there was a piece of property on the other side that there was a lot of Negroes living over there as well. There was even a little grocery store on one of the streets on the other side that serviced them, and then they moved in a migratory camp on the other side, which was like a farm labor camp back in the late thirties.

COATES

So that's what they were doing? They were farm workers, huh? Did farm work?

BENITEZ

They were farm workers and builders and carpenters. A lot of them were carpenters, so they built their own homes.

COATES

Did the town have laws at that time that they couldn't live within the boundaries or something like that? Is that why they were kind of in these places?

BENITEZ

Yeah, at that time, at that time. A lot of prejudice going on during that time, so they didn't want the blacks moving up into their territory. So they made it so that they couldn't because of land prices and so forth. This one Negro man, he was kind of like the leader and he was a minister, he formed a community within the community, and it was all Negro, and it started to expand, and they called it Noble's Ranch because that man's name was Noble. So then people that were living on the other side of the street started to move a little bit, and then when the county came in, they started condemning their shacks, their shanties, and their homes, and the Negroes didn't have anywhere to go. So Mr. Noble had built some houses and were building houses there on this community, and then finally they moved way out west of town and built another community that they started moving into. And all of this was razed. They razed all of those community housing. There was two government homes that were built on the reservation back in the thirties, and that's where the one Hispanic person lived. There was three government homes. There were three Hispanic families. One lived in one government home, and that was actually assigned to that tribal owner, and then the other one was right next door, so they lived in that, and then there was another one way down south of where those two were. And there was a community well that was built and drilled by Indian Health Service way back in the thirties, so that was the central water and irrigation and drinking water and everything was right there, so that's why all the Negroes moved into that area, because there was water there. Pretty soon, they finally got the electricity. Well, the electricity was already there because of the well. So they just started feeding off of it.

COATES

And were there tribal families living around them as well or—

BENITEZ

No, it was just one.

COATES

Just yours or more?

BENITEZ

No—well, I'm sorry. There was two. Ours—

COATES

Besides yours. [laughs]

BENITEZ

I forgot about mine. There was two. Mine and another elder that lived in the—that was a fourth government home too. They lived in a government home, and he lived there with his wife. No children. They lived there by themselves. He used to raise all kinds of heck with all of the community there because he'd get so drunk and he'd go down and tell all the people, "Get off my reservation," all of that, you know. [laughter] They never paid attention to him. They knew he was harmless anyway. So anyway, he finally passed, and then all the houses got razed.

COATES

So did they get razed after he had passed away or before? [laughs]

BENITEZ

That home, I don't know what happened to that. I think that home burned down is what happened.

COATES

His home, huh?

BENITEZ

His home. His home burned down. The other three homes were still there, and then they razed those as well. They had no business doing that, because it was government homes. So anyway, those families moved, and then there was just us. There I was all alone, no playmates.

COATES

Now, where were most of the other tribal people living then, if not on the reservation?

BENITEZ

Off reservation. Off reservation.

COATES

In Indio or just anywhere?

BENITEZ

Most of them lived in Banning, the other reservation up there. Some lived in Palm Springs. Some lived at TM, which is Torres-Martinez, but a lot of them just moved away, or some of them moved into urban areas. I think we had one family that moved to Los Angeles County because he worked for the railroad.

COATES

Did your family continue to have contact with those that had moved away? Did they continue to have relationships or—

BENITEZ

Not really. Not really. They were gone, and the only time they came back was when a Tribal Council meeting was called. They'd all come back and meet, then they would all leave. They were gone.

COATES

So you had nobody to play with, and your mother had nobody to speak with except you.

BENITEZ

Well, actually, at one time there was a family that lived way down about almost—about a half mile from where we lived on another section of land, and there was a Hispanic family and a Native family and a tribal member who lived down there, and I used to go down there. I'd walk all the way down there by myself, walk all the way back, and play with the kids down there. Sometimes they'd come up to my place and play for a while, then go home. Actually, my playmates when I was growing up were all the Negro people, the Negro kids. They knew who I was, and we did a lot of things together, and even today I meet one or two of them that are still alive. A lot of them have passed, but I still keep in contact with a couple of them that are still here.

COATES

So when all their houses were razed and everything, they didn't leave the area then, huh?

BENITEZ

No, they stayed here in the area. They just went to the Noble's Ranch area that had all those other homes on the properties.

COATES

So you continued to see them in school and—

BENITEZ

Yeah, I saw them in school.

COATES

—all the rest while you were growing up.

BENITEZ

Even when I went to high school, I saw a lot of them there. But I guess development came to that part of the reservation when somebody had put an equipment rental place and sales of tractors along a dirt road. She told me one day—and I was older; I was in my twenties, I guess. And she told me, she said, "I'm going to put a road through here, so that my patrons can come in a little easier, and we can get our equipment out, and equipment coming in, we can get it in a little better." I said, "Great." So she did. She built a street from, oh, probably about a quarter of a mile that she put in, and that was a great thing, because before that, it was dirt, it was a dirt road. So that was one develop, and then pretty soon there were small developments going along that road as it went down south of where I live.

COATES

So this was in the forties, probably?

BENITEZ

This was in the fifties, the fifties. Forties, there wasn't much anything out there except the Negro families and Hispanic families and myself and the one elderly Native.

COATES

Were the people in Indio aware that this was a reservation?

BENITEZ

They didn't have a clue. They never had a clue that that was a reservation for years, and then—

COATES

Did they know there were Indian people around?

BENITEZ

They knew me. They knew me and they knew some others that lived elsewhere on the other reservation. But they knew me and they knew I was Indian, and they always asked me where I live. I said, "I live on a reservation." They said, "Well, where's the reservation?" I said, "The reservation is just east of here." We used to all—when I was going to grade school or middle school, we used to all walk. We never had bus service from—it was probably about, oh, I'd say a quarter of a mile that we had to walk to school. So they would always ask me, says, "How do you get to your reservation?" I said, "Well, you go down this road and you go down, you keep going, and you go across the railroad tracks, and, voilà, there's the reservation." [laughter] So it was a fun time. It was a fun time growing up on a reservation and knowing the people that I knew and grew up with. The friendships just continued on, even when we got older. But when we started—this is moving fast-forward to, let's say, the eighties, seventies and eighties. We started developing gaming, you know, trying to develop resources for the tribe. So it was only then that tribal members were starting to move back, moving back into the area, when gaming started and money was being generated and they were looking at homes to build. Back in the nineties, that's when they started building homes for tribal members. So it took that long, about ten years, from the time they started the gaming to that time, the nineties, to start producing some kind of advantage or home things for tribal members. So then they all started moving back.

COATES

Now, you said you hadn't really kept in touch with them or anything, but when they started to come back, everybody knew who the others were and all of that, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, we knew who each of us were, because we would see each other at tribal meetings, and that was the only time, and the rest of the time they'd be gone, you know.

COATES

What would happen at tribal meetings? Did they occur, like, annually?

BENITEZ

At that time they were every six months.

COATES

And what would they do at those meetings?

BENITEZ

Discuss what's happening with the government, is it moving forward. And we would report to them, "Well, okay, we've got these things in place, and they're starting to move forward. We're looking at gaming, we're looking at a card room, and we're doing this. We're looking at smoke shops. So we're trying to generate money." And they said, "Okay."

COATES

Now before this era, before the '60-'61 when you became the chairman and so forth, were these tribal meetings going on in the forties and the fifties also?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah. They were going on in the twenties, I would say, maybe further back, but they probably would only meet once a year, if that.

COATES

Was the discussion a different kind of discussion in those years than it was in the sixties and seventies, do you know?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

I mean, you would have been pretty young, but do you know what it might have been in those older days?

BENITEZ

The older days was they more or less just met for just renewal of friendship or kinship, and that was mostly what it was for, and it didn't have much to do with tribal government. They met, they would have their luncheons or dinners or whatever that went on. And discussion of politics or anything, anything of that nature was very, very few and far between.

COATES

Were people participating in ceremonials or anything like that very much?

BENITEZ

The only time they participated in any ceremonials was either death—they had their big house where they took their dead to, to have their ceremonies, and then they would have their fiestas, where there were a gathering of the all the tribes in the Valley at certain reservations. And there you got to watch the singing and you got to watch the peon games and all the cooking by all the ladies, and, you know, just everything going on. Everybody—

COATES

Did you go to those when you were young?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah.

COATES

And you remember them?

BENITEZ

I never went to sleep. I was always up. All the kids were always up. You'd hear a mom say, "Go to bed! Go to bed!" [laughter] We'd still be running around. Funny thing about it is, you know, today's society, we've got to watch our children, we've got to watch what they're doing, and, you know, protecting them. In those days, everybody was our protector. Everybody watched out for everybody, and they always knew where we were because we never ventured out of that area. They knew we were in that area, and they never worried about us. So, consequently, they could do what they wanted to do and have a good time. So, yeah, it was neat. It was always neat to go to those things.

COATES

Do you have some specific memories of something that happened at those things?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, really.

COATES

I just am interested in how does a child or a young person sort of perceive something like that. What's the memory?

BENITEZ

Yeah. I used to like to watch the peon games. As a child, I'd sit there and watch them because I was fascinated, fascinated in what they were doing, you know, trying to guess who was moving the bones around. And they had these blankets up, and they were on their haunches and had this blanket stretched across, and they held it in their mouth, and they were chanting. They were one side against the other, and they would chant. Then all of a sudden, they would stop. They'd do like this and point to that guy, and this guy would open his hands. He'd have nothing, so that meant they lost. [Coates laughs.] So then they'd play another round, and they'd do the same thing, boom, and stop and drop the blankets, then they'd point to this certain person. Okay, he had the bones. [laughter] So they won, so it was even, you know. And they played for money. You know, funny thing about it is the county sheriff's department came in one year. I was older then too. They came in one year and shut them down because they were gambling on the reservation. [laughter]

COATES

Kind of ironic now, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah. Right, right, yeah. Payback time.

COATES

Right. [laughter] You should have let us have the peon games.

BENITEZ

Yeah, that's right. That's right. Now we're taking some of your money, not each other's money. But, yeah, that was fun, that was fun to watch, and it was fascinating. Then it disappeared after that, and then I guess when gambling came back into being on the reses, the peon games came back. Now the young people play it, you know.

COATES

Had it gone underground because it had been busted, or did—

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

—people just forget about it and then they picked it up?

BENITEZ

No, it went underground.

COATES

It had always been there, huh?

BENITEZ

It had always been there, but the sheriff's department—I don't even know how they found out, because those were always—

COATES

There weren't outsiders at these things, huh?

BENITEZ

No, no. They were always secretive. "All right. We're having a fiesta up here on this res." And everybody would just go.

COATES

How long would it last?

BENITEZ

All night. Peon games lasted all night.

COATES

But the whole fiesta would be—

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

Would it be like several days or just—

BENITEZ

It would be a couple days. And the ladies had fun. You know, they brought enough food that they could cook for two days, two and a half days.

COATES

What kinds of things did they cook?

BENITEZ

Oh, boy. Oh, they'd have stew going, you know. They'd have stew going, they'd have tortillas going, they'd have beans going, and they'd have fry bread going, and they'd have wiiwish going. Do you know what wiiwish is?

COATES

No.

BENITEZ

It's ground-up acorn made into a jelly-like consistency, looked like chocolate pudding, is what it looked like. The first time Diana went to a gathering, the ladies were saying, "Do you want some of this?" She was walking along getting her beans and her tortillas, and she said, "Yeah, I'll have some of that." She said, "That looks good." And you could see the ladies would kind of smirk. [laughter] They kind of smirked, and then they would watch her after we went and sat down and we started eating. They'd watch, and and all of a sudden, she took a bite of that, and she'd go [demonstrates]. [laughter] And they busted out laughing. And she looked at them. She said, "[unclear]." She says, "That's awful." And I says, "Well, it isn't when you eat it with beans and your soup."

COATES

Right. You have to mix it with other stuff, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, you mix it with other stuff. Because it was high in protein. It's high in protein. It's very arsenic. [laughter] You could die from the stuff too. Ladies, the elder ladies, knew how to make it. Some of the younger ladies know how to make it pretty good, but you have to leach it several, several times to get all the arsenic out of it.

COATES

Did they flavor it with stuff? I'm asking, because we have something called kanuche, that it's the same way unless you flavor it with cinnamon or maple syrup or something. Something has to go into it before it's really palatable.

BENITEZ

No.

COATES

They just mixed it up—

BENITEZ

Just mix several—

COATES

—with all the other food.

BENITEZ

They just mix up with all the other food.

COATES

So it really is just to get the protein, then.

BENITEZ

Sure, it is. I love to eat it. It's good. [laughter]

COATES

Funny.

BENITEZ

But some of the foods that they prepared, you know, it was in bulk. They had great big pots that they made their stew in and their beans, and they had their flat irons that they cook their tortillas on. Everything was done just manually, you know, nothing—

COATES

And it was done right there at the festival, huh?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

They didn't bring it from home?

BENITEZ

No, nuh-uh.

COATES

They made it right there.

BENITEZ

They just prepared it right there. They didn't prepare too much meat items, maybe some venison once in a while, because they had no way to keep it, to preserve it. Initially, like their stews, they would make the stew up in big pots, so that they would have it.

COATES

Were most people taking their living off the land to some extent? Were they hunting, were they gathering, or were they more in jobs and then they go to the store? [laughs]

BENITEZ

There were a few hunters that went out to get their annual deer or whatever, and they would save some of it and bring it to the gathering. Rabbit, of course, was plentiful. They could get those anywhere. But a lot of the grocery consumer stuff was like sugar and flour and—

COATES

All the lard and things like that, probably, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, the lard, potatoes.

COATES

All the things that are good for you. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah. Gee whiz. Then we found out it wasn't good for us. [laughter] It was great. I loved eating the stuff. But that was good times. It was. Never knew any different. We had our own little games that we played.

COATES

So you would just fall in with a bunch of kids, even though—did you know them, for the most part—

BENITEZ

Some of them, yeah.

COATES

—if they were from other reservations and stuff?

BENITEZ

Some of them. I'd just fall in. We'd all fall in together, just have a good time.

COATES

So you said you had no electricity, no running water.

BENITEZ

No.

COATES

Living in a house with no heating, no cooling.

BENITEZ

That's right.

COATES

How many rooms were in the house?

BENITEZ

One big room.

COATES

One big room. That was it, huh?

BENITEZ

One big room.

COATES

And it was you and your parents.

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

So, three of you.

BENITEZ

Mother cooked on the woodstove, heated her water on a woodstove, washed her clothes outside. I used to haul the water for washing dishes and doing laundry, and I used to haul the water for drinking. I had two different shifts. That was my job, because I had to walk over to where the pump was to get our water, and every once in a while—we had a ditch that ran through by the place, and the farmer occasionally, when he ran his irrigation water to irrigate his

field, would always fill up that ditch, and it made it a lot easier to put the washing water into big barrels and keep that water, and it also provided a way to take a bath too. [laughter] Otherwise, I'd have to—

COATES

Using the greywater, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Otherwise, I'd have to take a bath in the tub.

COATES

[laughs] Didn't like that?

BENITEZ

No, no, it was—I don't know. It was survival.

COATES

Yeah, yeah. So there seriously was no fires or anything like that in the— because it gets cold here in the winter, doesn't it?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah. The way we provided—or my stepfather provided heat for the house was, what he would do, we always had a big stack of wood, and he would burn several logs in a washtub, and once he got the coals in it and everything, he'd bring it inside, and that would keep the house warm until it went out and then it became cold. But for the majority of the time, it would keep the house warm.

During the summertimes, that was—

COATES

Nothing much you can do then, is it?

BENITEZ

Not much you can do, no. We used to take sheets and wet them and lay them over our bodies, so that if there was any breeze, it would blow through that and keep us cool. And during the day, we'd just sit under trees and stay out of the sun. [laughter]

COATES

And try not to move very much, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, really. It was tough.

COATES

Yeah, I'll bet.

BENITEZ

But, you know, I guess I didn't know any better, didn't care. When this All-American Canal was built back in the thirties and I was old enough to get out by myself, the Negro boys used to go with me and we'd come up to the canal and go swimming. That was before they had an extension, any extensions running out of the canal to irrigate fields, so the water was fairly calm. It didn't move very fast. So I taught a lot of the Negro boys how to swim, and it was

fun. And we'd walk all the way across the desert going back to our houses. And the next weekend we'd do the same thing. There was always something that we were doing just to keep occupied. And parents knew where we were. Their parents knew where they were too. Never had any accidents with any of those kids.

COATES

Didn't lose anybody, huh?

BENITEZ

No, never missed anybody. Nobody drowned. [laughter]

COATES

Nobody got abducted, huh?

BENITEZ

No, nobody got abducted. Then my stepfather had an old Model-A, converted a car into a flatbed truck, and we used to take that out on the days he wasn't using it. I'd drive it, and we'd get up towards the canal, driving through the sand dunes and all that. It was fun, and here I was probably, I think probably twelve, eleven, twelve years old, sitting back and driving—

COATES

He let you drive it, huh?

BENITEZ

—that Model-A Ford, bunch of kids in the back.

COATES

So you were raised primarily with your stepfather, is that—

BENITEZ

Yeah. My biological father I never knew. I never knew him until the day he passed. I happened to see an obituary in the county paper and I recognized the name, but I didn't go to the funeral. About a month or two later, I get a letter from the BIA telling me that my father had passed and that they were having a hearing on his estate. So I went to it because it requested me to, and I did, and that's where I met my other nine half brothers and sisters that I never knew I had. [laughter]

COATES

Instant family.

BENITEZ

Yeah, really. Oh, they welcomed me like a long-lost brother. I was amazed.

COATES

Are you older than them or younger than them?

BENITEZ

No, I'm older than them.

COATES

So this is a family he had afterwards, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah. I think the oldest, when he was passed, he was sixty-nine or seventy, I think. Yeah, I had all these sisters and one brother left, one brother left because there was four—there was either four or five brothers and either four or five sisters. That was the instant family. I was invited to—when they knew who I was, they surrounded me and gave me handshakes, pats on the back. The one thing I remember that they told me was, he says, “You never knew your father, did you?” And I said, “No, I never did.” And they said, “Well, he knew you.” And I says, “How?” And she says, “You played football, baseball, and basketball, right?” And I said, “Yeah.” “He used to go to every one of your games.”

COATES

Oh, my gosh. Really?

BENITEZ

Yeah, and I never knew it.

COATES

Oh, my goodness. [laughter]

BENITEZ

I never knew it.

COATES

What did that feel like?

BENITEZ

Oh, it just sent chills up my back. I said, “Wow. Wow.”

COATES

Did you see pictures of him? I mean, did you recognize the guy, that he had been there, that you just didn’t know who he was or—

BENITEZ

No.

COATES

You just didn’t know at all?

BENITEZ

I never had pictures of him.

COATES

Oh, my gosh.

BENITEZ

I only got pictures after he passed. He was a handsome man, and I could see where—

COATES

So you didn’t remember seeing him at the games or anything, huh?

BENITEZ

No, no, because I never knew what he looked like. He was a handsome man, too, swept my mother off her feet, but they never got married. So he married somebody else from the Morongo Reservation. That's where he lived. And the thing about it is I worked for that clinic up there, and nobody told me that he used to come in there until—I guess it was after he passed, when my administrative assistant said, “Oh, yeah, he used to come in here all the time. I thought you knew.” And I said, “No, I didn't.”

COATES

Oh, my gosh. So everybody else knew, and you didn't?

BENITEZ

Yeah. I didn't.

COATES

Why was that, do you think?

BENITEZ

Well, because in tradition, Chemehuevi tradition is that when a sibling leaves and renounces his association with their mother, he's presumed dead, and that's the way it was, and so I never even knew I had a half brother until later on. He used to come to tribal meetings, my mother used to go to tribal meetings, but they'd never say anything to each other, and so I'd never say anything either, until one day I asked her, I says, “Arthur Welmas, who's his mother?” And she just dropped her head and her eyes, and I said, “Oh, okay. I know. Yeah, you were his mother.” She said, “Yeah.”

COATES

Wow.

BENITEZ

Yeah. So it went on that way, and she never wanted me to know about my dad. So as far as in her tradition, you know, they were both dead. But anyway, I walked into this birthday party with my sisters up there in Morongo. They'd invited me to go up and participate. So I walk in the door, and everybody was making a lot of noise, and me and Diana walked in, and I thought the “Hush, hush,” sounds just [demonstrates], just like that, and I thought they were doing it for Diana because she was Anglo, and then they started to chatter [demonstrates]. So then one of the sisters got up and says, “This is my brother.” And they said, “Oh. He looks just like your father, and we thought it was him coming back.” [laughter] I busted out [unclear]. Oh, my god.

COATES

You should have played along with that. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, really. Yeah, really. It was fantastic. I met all of my sisters and my brothers that were there.

COATES

So how old were you when you first met all of them, approximately?

BENITEZ

Approximately, oh, probably sixty-five, somewhere in there, I think.

COATES

So this is not that long ago.

BENITEZ

No, it's not long ago, because I think he died in '84, I think, something like that. Yeah, it was funny. But we still communicate today. They let me know what's going on with them, and I respond. I let them know what's going on with me. And they always include Diana. They say, "How's Diana doing?" One of them lives back in Oklahoma.

COATES

Oh, yeah?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah. She moved away about—oh, I think they said about ten years ago, but she comes back periodically.

COATES

Did she move away for work or something like that?

BENITEZ

I really don't know. I really don't know. But, I don't know, you know, it's been a family life like I've never experienced, finding out about brothers and sisters, finding out what my dad was like. Because people used to ask me, "Well, don't you have any brothers or sisters?" I said, "No, I don't have anybody." "Well, where's your father?" "I don't know where he's at." And they'd say, "Well, who's this guy?" And I say, "This is my stepfather." And that was it. They wouldn't ask me any more questions, you know, because I didn't know, really. I really didn't know.

COATES

Well, it's an interesting thing, because you hear about so many fathers, like, abandoning their kids and stuff like this, but this was not who your dad was, right?

BENITEZ

No.

COATES

I mean, he had another family that he stayed with the whole time, and he came to all your games, unknown to you.

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

So he obviously invested a lot.

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES  
And your stepfather did too.

BENITEZ  
Sure, sure.

COATES  
Wow.

BENITEZ  
Yeah, yeah.

COATES  
So your stepfather, your mother married him when you were real little, I think, right?

BENITEZ  
I was still an infant. I was still an infant.

COATES  
So that was your father that you knew for all your life.

BENITEZ  
Yeah, that was my father. I take them good and bad. No, I forget about the bad times. They worked hard.

COATES  
They stayed together, though, huh?

BENITEZ  
Yeah, yeah. He helped me through a lot of things, helped me go to college, and I knew they couldn't really afford it, but he did anyway. He got me through college. He couldn't come up and watch me play ball, but I knew he was always there. They had gotten older, so they didn't drive around as much. But when they were younger, they'd go different parts. They'd go to Vegas and they'd go over to Lake Havasu and visit with family and say, "You want to go?" I'd say, "No, I don't want to go." [laughter] I didn't like the ride. They'd go in the summertime too. It was hot.

COATES  
No air conditioning in the car, huh? [laughs]

BENITEZ  
No, no, none whatsoever.

COATES  
So what was it like for you going to school? Did you go to schools that were mixed, all kinds of kids in the school—

BENITEZ  
Oh, yeah.

COATES  
—white kids, black kids, Indian kids, Hispanic kids, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, white kids, black kids, Hispanic, Indians. Not many Indians, not many. I was very surprised at that. I think the only other Indian that was there was a girl, McCurtain, and she was from Cherokee. Her husband—not her husband. Her grandfather was a very important Cherokee from Oklahoma, the McCurtain family.

COATES

Cherokee? Not Choctaw, huh?

BENITEZ

No. Cherokee. So she was the only one. She was uppity, though. She was an uppity Indian.

COATES

Well, we're that way. [laughter]

BENITEZ

Yeah, I know. I know you guys. I know you guys.

COATES

But she let you know or she let it be known that she was Indian, though. I mean, you knew she was somehow.

BENITEZ

Well, I knew that. The way I found out really was we had Iron Eyes Cody come by. You remember Iron Eyes Cody?

COATES

Mm-hmm.

BENITEZ

He came and paid a visit to the middle school, and he says, "Are there any Indian children?" So I raised my hand. He said, "Who are you?" I told him. He said, "Okay." Then she told him. "Oh, your grandfather's so-and-so, huh?" She said, "Yes." So then I found out who she was. But anyway, my time in school was very well. I had good teachers that believed in what I was doing. They encouraged me. There was times when I didn't want to go to school. I didn't like school particularly, but they encouraged me to stay in school and learn, and they taught me a lot of different things, history and art and music and mathematics and spelling. They all worked with me because they knew I had a handicap—not a handicap, but I just couldn't grasp things. But they encouraged me. I finally got through it and graduated from middle school, went to high school. Had some good teachers in high school. Got interested in sports. Played football when I was a freshman in high school and I moved right into varsity right after that, because I was a big kid. And baseball, I loved baseball and played on the big team when I was a freshman. And played basketball. I wasn't very good, but I loved to play basketball. But baseball was my main thing, and football. Went four years on all three items.

COATES

On scholarship to—

BENITEZ

No scholarships.

COATES

Didn't get scholarships?

BENITEZ

Never got one.

COATES

This was in high school, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, never got one. I was the All-County League lineman in my junior year and also my senior year, but I never got a scholarship. My dream of going to a university was University of Michigan.

COATES

Oh, yeah?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah.

COATES

Because of the football?

BENITEZ

Because of the football, yeah, because of the football. When I learned that my daughter, Trayci, was going to the university, I says, "Yay! Some part of me got to Michigan." [laughter]

COATES

So how big was the high school? How many students?

BENITEZ

Probably five hundred, I think. It was not very big.

COATES

And where did they come from, just from Indio, from Palm Springs? Was it mixed or was it just—

BENITEZ

From Palm Desert to Thermal, all that area, all the farming area. That's where they came from, and that was the only high school.

COATES

I'll bet there's a bunch now, right?

BENITEZ

Yeah. The only other high school was Palm Springs, so we had a big football—we had a big sports league. It stretched from this end of the county to the other end of the county, so we had a lot of driving to do on the school bus. It was a big league. I think there was nine—yeah, nine high schools that competed in

what they call the Riverside County League. I was fortunate to make the two teams the two years, and then went to Riverside City College and played baseball up there. I was going to play both football, but my parents, I knew they couldn't afford to send me to school, so I just elected to play one sport and work the other time. So I played baseball, did well at it too.

COATES

Now, what you've described to me about all the people living on the reservation and everything, it sounds like it was something of a segregated community where the white folks lived here and everybody else lived there. I wondered if that was kind of the situation.

BENITEZ

It was. It was, yeah. It was that way kind of like going to high school too.

COATES

Yeah, that's what I was going to ask. That kind of spilled over into the school system as well, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, it spilled over into the high school period, because that was the fifties for me, and it was the sixties when they got all the uprisings going between colors. But, you know, I felt it. I felt a prejudice all my growing-up period.

COATES

Did you?

BENITEZ

In fact, I played summer Midget League softball, and one year we played and we won the league championship within Coachella Valley. So the coach, he says, "Well, we're going to have a big barbecue and we're going to go swimming and we're just going to have fun." And I asked him, "Well, how are we going to get there?" He said, "Don't worry about it. We've got transportation." I said, "Okay." So I went. We had one Negro boy that played on the team, and we showed up in Palm Desert at a public swimming hole, swimming pool, and we all were ready to go in, have a good time. So the coach comes back and says, "We can't go swimming." We said, "Why?" And he says, "Because we have Cookie over there. He's black, and they won't let him in the pool." And he said, "You guys want to go swimming?" And we said, "No, we're not going swimming." He says, "We don't need to swim in their swimming pool, because they won't let him swim in their swimming pool. We don't need to go." And they all agreed. He says, "Well, what do you boys want to do?" "Let's go out in the park and have a barbecue." So we did. And that was the first time that we experienced that type of a prejudice, and everybody was just really, really mad, all the boys, white, black, Mexican, and myself.

COATES

You said that was the first time it happened.

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

Didn't that happen, like, repeatedly and—

BENITEZ

It happened other times, too, yeah, especially when we'd go on our bus trips to other high schools to play. You'd go in to have dinner, and we have a few Negro boys playing, and you could feel the difference. You'd feel the apprehension. We didn't care, you know. We were kids, you know. We thought of each other as one, you know. But you could feel it, yeah.

COATES

Was there discrimination in the town too?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

Your parents, for instance, would they have been comfortable going to certain areas, or they just didn't just go there? Or I don't know if that's—

BENITEZ

They just went to certain areas where they felt comfortable. I remember sitting—

COATES

So if your mom had tried to shop in a certain part of town, that wouldn't have gone well, huh?

BENITEZ

No, it wouldn't have. And we went into a restaurant one time, me and my mother, and the service person was—she was kind of obnoxious, kind of [unclear]. Then there was a white guy there. He was trying to hit on my mother. And I'm a little guy. I just stood up. I says, "Don't be bothering my mother." [laughter] You know, I was protective.

COATES

So you've always been like that, huh? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, I have. I've always been protective. I've always been protective of the little guys, you know, and the little guys that have a disability, girls that always had a disability or they were shy and they didn't like to be kidded or pushed around, you know. There was all these people that did that, you know, and I'd step in. I'm a protector.

COATES

[laughs] So what did the man do?

BENITEZ

He just looked at me. He left her alone.

COATES

He saw you were serious? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah. So anyway, there was incidents like that. My stepdad worked for a date grower in Cathedral City, and his wife just adored me. She'd come over on Saturdays and ask my mother, "Can I take your son shopping with me?" And she said, "Well, okay, okay." And so I would go with her. We were in Indio at a cafe, we were going to have lunch, and she drags me in there and we sit down at the counter. So the proprietor says, "Where'd you get that brown boy?" [Coates laughs.] She says, "I'll have you know he's brown because he's American Indian, and he is one nice boy. Now we want some service." [Coates laughs.] She was a Jewish lady and she just spoke her mind. I adored her. She was a nice lady.

COATES

So this was your stepfather's second wife or later wife or something, huh?

BENITEZ

My stepfather?

COATES

I thought you said this was your stepfather's wife.

BENITEZ

No, no, no, no. This was the farm owner's wife.

COATES

Oh, oh, I misunderstood you.

BENITEZ

It was the farm owner's wife.

COATES

Okay. Got it.

BENITEZ

They used to have people come down from L.A., because it was a big ranch and they had a big guesthouse. We lived in one of the smaller houses. They would invite people down from Los Angeles or wherever, and they would come down and shoot blackbirds, shoot blackbirds, and they would bring blackbird pie. She asked me one time, "You want some pie?" I says, "No, no." I says, "I don't eat bird. I don't eat blackbirds." [laughter]

COATES

They'd have to kill a lot of birds to make a pie, wouldn't they?

BENITEZ

Yeah. Well, there was a lot of blackbirds there on this ranch. And they'd come down there to have a party and all kinds of stuff. Every once in a while, she'd drag me over there, introduce me to everybody. I guess I was just her—you

know, her—whatever, whatever you call them. But anyway, I adored her because she respected me. She never had any children of her own.

COATES

Now, you said that you lived in some of the housing on the ranch, huh?

BENITEZ

Mm-hmm.

COATES

Was that a different place from what you were describing earlier that was on the reservation?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah, yeah.

COATES

So how did you get there to this housing on the ranch? How did that happen?

BENITEZ

Well, I guess my stepdad got tired of living—and my mom was, too, she was getting tired of living off the reservation and living in different houses and different ranches. So she told my stepdad, she said, “I want to move back where we can settle down and stay, and you can go work whatever work you want to do.” So we did. After the last school down in Thermal, we moved away from the ranch and moved back there. He built a house the best he could, and it was okay. So then one day a truant officer showed up at the ranch, and to my mother he says, “That boy should be in school.” And she says, “Well, why?” [laughter] “Because he needs schooling.” And she says, “I give him enough schooling here at home. You know how to speak Indian?” He said, “No.” “Well, he does.” [laughter] And he said, “Well, you can be arrested.” She says, “For what?” “For not putting him in school.” And she says, “Well, I don’t want to go to jail, so I guess I’ll put him in school.” And the first time I showed up at school, I was barefooted.

COATES

Oh, wow.

BENITEZ

No shoes. Barefoot.

COATES

And how old were you?

BENITEZ

That’s when I was—let’s see. In fifth grade, I probably was about eight, nine.

COATES

So you didn’t go to school before you were eight or nine years old, huh?

BENITEZ

[demonstrates]

COATES

And then you went right into fifth grade?

BENITEZ

Yeah, right.

COATES

That's pretty good.

BENITEZ

Actually, I actually went to schools, but I wasn't in school. I stayed out of school more than I was in, and I guess they just kept moving me up the ladder till I got to fourth grade. In fourth grade, they decided I didn't learn enough, so they wanted me to repeat, and so I got shoved back with the younger kids, which I didn't enjoy, because all my friends moved up.

COATES

Right. They went on.

BENITEZ

Can we stop that a minute? [End of June 19, 2014 interview]

## **1.2. Session Two (June 20, 2014)**

COATES

My name is Julia Coates, and today is June 20, 2014, and I am with Joe Benitez from the Cabezon Band of Cahuilla Indians. Am I saying it the way that it is said in the present day? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Right.

COATES

Leaving out the Mission designation these days.

BENITEZ

Right.

COATES

Good. And Joe, we were talking yesterday mostly about your childhood and everything, so I wanted to try to move into the adult years and the years all the things that you were doing with the tribe and everything throughout all your life. But I think you talked about that you went to college after graduation. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because your parents didn't have the means to send you to college, I think you said, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

So you got there other ways.

BENITEZ

Well, my parents helped me with my room and board. That's what they paid out of what they earned in their crop gathering. So they helped pay for the room and board. I drove a school bus when I was there at college and drove elementary and high school students to their respective schools, and I did that for two years, and took major courses in business administration. That's what I did. I think the thing that really fouled me up was I took a course in psychology, which I thought I understood, but I didn't that well, and that kind of left me without graduation on my the last year, because I didn't have enough grade points to graduate. My boarding person, which I call Mrs. S\_\_\_\_\_, helped me in trying to get the professor to change his test scores by redoing the test scores, and he wouldn't hear of it. He wouldn't do it. I was willing to do it. And she was very upset, because in years past, her sons had gone to that college in Riverside and they graduated from there. So she was very involved with the school and the faculty, so she tried helping me do that, and, of course, she wasn't successful, because—

COATES

Which school was this?

BENITEZ

Riverside City College. So anyway, my second year I finished and I left, came back home. During that course of time of being at the college, I played baseball, and I played that in the springtime. My grades were doing okay. I was running about B-minus to a C, and keeping that up in order to play. We played a lot of different teams in the Orange Coast League and we also had the opportunity to play service teams like the Marine Corps base in San Diego and the Naval Air Station in San Diego and the Air Force contingent in Moreno Valley. So it was a great opportunity. I loved playing and I loved the coach that I had. He was very good. My second year, I had a position and I could play. First year, I didn't. There was too many other guys that were playing my position, and I was kind of on the bottom of the ladder, so I played wherever he wanted me to play. I was kind of like a utility player, and I did real well with what I could play that first year. And in the second year, I played a little bit more, so that was good. I enjoyed that. I had a brother-in-law who was a brother, but he was later to become a brother-in-law because we dated sisters. He wasn't actually my brother; he was an adopted brother. They adopted me into the family of some sorts, and I stayed with them during the summertimes. But anyway, we used to travel back and forth from college to home on weekends, because I already had a weekend job, and so I came, and he did too. We'd come home and spend the weekend and head back to school the next day or Sunday. So we did that the year that he had left to go to college. And then the following year, I had the opportunity to drive by myself now. So anyway, I still worked and was able to earn some money to get me through school.

COATES

What kind of job was it?

BENITEZ

I worked at a feedlot. The feedlot, they had me doing repairs to the different lots that they had, mostly water troughs and cleaning out a lot of the manure that was there, using a skip loader I knew how to operate. I'd learned early in my life to operate machinery. I was twenty, twenty-one at that time. So I made a pretty good living working weekends. I'd drive back to school, spend the week there, drive a school bus every morning, every evening, you know, school.

COATES

You were working the whole time you were going to school?

BENITEZ

Yeah, I was.

COATES

And playing sports?

BENITEZ

And playing sports.

COATES

And that makes it tough, yeah.

BENITEZ

Yeah. But I left school the second year. My first wife, she lived in Pasadena and she wanted to be an actress, and she had a form of arthritis that was getting a little bit more intense, a little worse, and so finally she had to leave and go back home, back to La Quinta, which is here in the Coachella Valley, and live with her parents. So anyway, I decided I would marry her anyway, because we'd been going together since juniors in high school. Her father said, "Do you really want to do that?" And I said, "Yeah, I do. I'll take care of her the best way I can." So anyway, we got married in the summer of 1957, and I started working for a furniture company and I was earning a pretty good living. I lived at the brother—or the brother-in-law at that time, because he finally married the sister, and they lived in a house that they had built in the city of Indio. So he got drafted in the service. I never did go to the service. For some reason, I didn't. Korean War, Vietnam War, I was never, never called in, and the reason was because of my wife's illness. They classified me at a lower rate, so they never did call me in.

COATES

So this is off the subject, maybe. I mean, they usually only have a draft during wartime, right?

BENITEZ

Well, this was during the Korean War.

COATES

Korean, okay. So it was early in the fifties, then.

BENITEZ

Yeah, it was early in the fifties—late in the fifties, really, because it was '57 that he got drafted, and they were still using service people to go over to man the demilitarized zone.

COATES

I didn't realize that. Wow.

BENITEZ

Yeah. They still needed personnel to do that, and they also sent personnel over to Germany for clerical work and so forth, and he was a clerical service person. So he got the opportunity to stay in Georgia, and he stayed there for two years during the whole term of his induction. So we lived in their house, and my wife got pregnant and the doctors had told her, "Well, you'll probably never be able to bear a child because of the illness." And, lo and behold, she got pregnant, and we have my son. He'll be fifty-six this year. We had him, and he was a newborn preemie, and when he was just an infant, they checked him for all of those symptoms that she had, and he didn't have any of it, so that was good. So anyway, we lived there until he came back from Georgia, and then we moved to another place across the street, which was a new apartment. So we lived there for, oh, probably about maybe a year or two years, and then I finally bought a home, and we moved to the home.

COATES

Now, what kind of work were you doing through those years?

BENITEZ

Through probably the first four years, I was doing warehouse work. It was a furniture company, so I took care of all the deliveries and warehousing of merchandise that came in. And she was getting worse with her illness and she was spending more time at the hospital. They were trying to figure out what she really had, and finally one time the doctor finally figured out what it was that was causing all the problems that she was having. She had lupus, so she just finally was deteriorating. My son was going to kindergarten and first grade, and then in 1967, she passed, and my son was probably about eight. Let's see. Yeah, he's probably about eight. So anyway, we lived at the house for a while, and I had met this lady that wanted to move in together. So we did, and she had two girls, and they went to the same school. So Marc had two sisters, more or less, and grew up with them for probably—oh, I would say, just guessing, about five years maybe after my wife's passing. Then that relationship ended, so my son said, "Well, what are we going to do now?" [Coates laughs.] And I said, "Well, we can't live here. We're going to have to move somewhere." And he says, "Well, how about if we moved out with Grandma?" [laughter] And I

said, “I don’t know. Let’s go ask her and see.” So we went down. Of course she said, “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Come live with us.”

COATES

So he’s asking to move out to the reservation, then?

BENITEZ

Yeah, he wanted to move back out to the reservation to be next to his grandmother. So we did, and we lived in a little shack that was built a long time ago, made it more livable, put air conditioning in. At this time they had electricity and they also had running water, because Indian Health Service came in and provided her with a well that they dug at no expense to her, and so they had running water. So we did some modernization there when I was living there.

COATES

Do you know approximately when all that was put in, the electricity, the running water, etc.?

BENITEZ

I would say probably—let’s see—about 1962, ’63, somewhere in there.

COATES

Early sixties sometime.

BENITEZ

Yeah, early sixties. They came in. They put in septic tanks for sewage. So they had bought a trailer, and they moved that on to the res, and they were living in that, and they still had this little house there, and we lived in that, and the Indian Health Service did some other things. They built a bathroom on to that addition, as an addition, and so we had a bathroom and shower and so forth. He was just starting middle school. I took him to school for a while. Then I bought him a bicycle. My parents actually bought him a bicycle, because I was really deeply in debt with medical bills. So anyway, they bought him a bike and then he started riding the bicycle to school. He went to school all three years, and then he finally graduated from there and then went to high school, Indio High School, which was just built in the sixties, so he was there for high school. We lived there, oh, quite a while. It was quite a few years. And I was still working for this furniture company, and then I got a call to go work for this clinic as a director in the early seventies. So it meant driving from where I lived across the road to Banning. So I said, “Well, it’s going to take me away from home most of the day. If my son needs some help or he gets into a problem—,” blah, blah, blah. My mother said, “Don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of him.” And I said, “Okay.” And they did. Anything he needed, they would go see what he needed. It was so funny, one year he was interested in motorbike motocross, and he wanted a motorcycle, and, of course, I couldn’t provide it for him, so they did. They used to go to San Bernardino, and came back one evening with a

little bike sitting in the back of their truck, and my son was so happy. [Coates laughs.] He was so happy, and I was very grateful. And, boy, he used to ride that thing all over the res, and it was so funny. Anyhow, he was part of the tribe for Chemehuevis, and they had received a settlement for thousands of dollars for land taken away or something. So anyway, they had provided him with some money, and also me. So he said, “Can I buy a bike?” [Coates laughs.] I said, “Oh, okay.” So he bought a bigger bike, and then he had friends in high school that used to come out and ride with him, so he started riding. Then he said one day, “I’m going to go down here.” They had a racetrack down in Thermal. They had a little community down there, and he said, “I’m going to go down there and race.” And I says, “Okay.” I had a truck at the time, so then we loaded up his bike and went down, and I watched him and I said—closing my eyes, closing my eyes, because—

COATES

Scary thing for a dad. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, right. He was in a particular class. There was probably twelve, fifteen riders besides himself. So they all take off the line and they’re all going like this, all heading down to this narrow opening, and I just closed my eyes, then opened them up and he was through. So I watched him, and at one point he had a little accident. He went over.

COATES

Oh, no. [laughs]

BENITEZ

But he was okay. Nothing broken. So anyway, that was kind of like his growing up on the res. Finally he went to high school, graduated from high school. He had decided he wanted to go to college and he went one year. He got a grant from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, educational grant, and he started going to school. Then he comes to me at the end of that first year. He said, “This isn’t for me.” And I said, “Well, what are you going to do?” I says, “You’ve got to do something.” He said, “Well, I’m going to go work for the grocery store.” So I said, “Okay.” In fact, this is where my brother-in-law worked. He worked for one of the grocery stores in town, so he kind of got him a job there. So he started working and earning his own money. So finally one day—he liked my truck, which was a small pickup type of truck. It was a Ford. And he said, “I want to buy your truck.” [laughs] I says, “Really? You want to buy my truck?” I said, “What am I going to drive?” He said, “Well, you can buy yourself another.” [Coates laughs.] And I said, “Okay.” I says, “Well, how much do you have?” And he said, “Oh, let’s see. I have \$1,500 saved.” And I says, “Well, I’ll take 1,000 of that, and you keep the other five.” And he says, “Oh, okay.” [Coates laughs.] So anyway, he took the truck and used it to drive

back and forth to work. I was later to find out that he used to go to Banning. This administrative assistant had three boys—or two boys and two girls, and they loved to ride. They rode on the res there in Morongo, so he'd go up there and ride with them, but he also would race the truck on the res. He'd get challenged, and the guys, the brothers always said, "You should have seen him, man. He just tore down in the middle of that road and beat the heck out of those guys." I just shook my head, and I says, "Marc, what are you doing?" And then he kind of sheepishly told me, "Well, yeah, I was racing a little bit." [laughter]

COATES

Just a little. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, just a little bit. So anyway, it was a good relationship. Then I started working and traveling back and forth, and then I started traveling out of town. I had to go to those meetings for California Indian Rural Health Board, and it would take me away a few days, and I'd have to tell my mom that I'd be gone for a few days. She said, "Don't worry about anything. I'll take care of him." I said, "Okay." So anyway, then finally they sent me to Colorado for the National Indian Health Board, which I became a representative for California. So my son, he's still working, not causing any problems at all, because he—I guess he got into smoking pot, but I don't think he ever got into alcohol. So anyway, did that for a couple of years, and then he was going with this girl, which was later become his wife. He's been married to her about thirty-seven years. They have two daughters. I have two granddaughters. So then I got married to Diana, and I moved her out to the res, and she's been here ever since. Couldn't get rid of her. [laughter] But she loved it, and that was the main thing was that she was happy there. Otherwise, I probably would have bought something uptown and moved off the res, which I didn't want to do. At the time I didn't want to do that. So anyway, my son decided he wanted to move back to the res, so he bought himself a trailer. Him and his wife moved back. They lived there for probably five years, and then they decided the wife didn't care too much for it, so she convinced him to buy a home uptown. So they did. So in the meantime, I'd had some families that I had living there on the res with me. They had two sons, and one of the sons wanted to rent the trailer from my son, so he said, "Yeah." And he asked me if it was okay, and I said, "Sure." So anyway, I had that young family living there. And for some reason, I had a [unclear] of young boys that he ran around with. They wanted to live out there because they loved it. So anyway, this other friend of his got married, and the house that my parents lived in was vacant, and the trailer, and they came to me and asked me, "Can we move out here and live?" And I said, "Well, you sure want to do that?" And he said, "Oh, yeah, yeah. We love it out here." And I said, "Okay." So then I rented that house to them.

COATES

Now, these were non-Indian people?

BENITEZ

These were non-Indian, yeah, non-Indians. So anyway, they lived there for, oh, several years. They had two children, and finally that marriage ended, and he went his way and she went hers. Then I had some Natives that wanted to come by and live, so I rented to them.

COATES

Were they people of the tribe of a different—

BENITEZ

Different tribe, and most of them were Sioux from up north. At that time, we were just starting in the early eighties. A young guy that came by, he says, “We can’t a build a sweat lodge anywhere in town.” He says, “I notice you have a large property. Can we build a sweat lodge?” I says, “Yeah, let’s build a sweat lodge.” So we built a sweat lodge and dedicated it and had a number of sweats I was participating in. So it just kind of grew; it mushroomed. We had a lot of people, a lot of men, a lot of ladies coming down for sweats. That lasted for probably about ten years. And finally, the young man, he got into some problems and so he had to leave. So the lodgers that were there, they stopped coming. Then I had another family was Navajo and Sioux, a man and a wife, and so they came to me and asked me if I would grant them the use of the lodge. So I said, “Yeah. Well, here’s the things that you’ve got to do,” and so forth. So they ran it and operated it till he passed in probably another ten years. So finally she moved away and went to Sacramento with her daughter, and they lived there, and then she passed away up there. So here I have a nice—not a nice trailer, but a fairly nice trailer sitting there, and it’s empty, and I’m not knowing what to do with it. So finally the daughter called. She says, “You go ahead and take care of the trailer, and if you want to sell it, sell it, or if you want to rent it, rent it, but it’s yours.” I said, “Oh, thank you. It’s just what I need.” [Coates laughs.] So anyway, we got through that period. Then probably, I’m saying about five years ago, six years ago, yeah, about six years ago, another young man came to me and he said, “You’ve had the sweat lodge here, and I was wondering if you would allow me to build another sweat lodge.” So I said, “On these conditions, you build a sweat lodge that you welcome everybody, man and woman, and you run it appropriately the way it should be run.” And I said, “Nobody gets out of line, nobody races up and down the driveway getting to the sweat lodge. And he said, “Oh, I’ll makes sure that none of that happens.”

COATES

Had people been doing that the first time, or there had been those kinds of problems?

BENITEZ

Yeah. The first time was okay. The middle time when the elderly couple had it, whoever they had coming out didn't have any respect for them, so they would race up and down. And I would continually tell them. "Oh, yeah. We'll go tell them. We'll tell them the next time they come out." Well, they'd still do it. So and I told this last guy—and we still have the lodge down there, and I've went in a couple of times. I don't go in because of my heart condition. So he's continued to run it. He's my nephew. I call him Nephew and he calls me Uncle. But it's been running smoothly ever since, and so they've been up there for a while. [interruption]

BENITEZ

So anyway, that's that portion. But kind of reverting back to that time when I was working with Indian Health, it was a trying time for me because of my absence from my home when my son was going to high school and so forth, and I was always worried that something might to happen to him and I'm not there. So I finally had married Diana, and I was still working for the clinic and still traveling, and I was still doing my thing, drinking and carousing and whatever. So I finally gave that up at the assistance of her because she says, "You know, you're drinking too much. You're starting to drink at home." And she says, "And you're not pleasant when you're drunk." And I said, "Really?" She says, "Yes." So then I made up my mind that when our daughter was probably, oh, twelve, thirteen years old, and she says, "You're affecting the family, too, and your son doesn't want to come around because of your drinking," and they were ready to move and they were living there, too, at that time. I kind of miss that. So anyway, just one day I had been drinking with some guys that came down to help me slaughter some pigs that we had, and so we started drinking and was overly intoxicated. So my youngest daughter—they were going to lunch, and I vividly remember I was kind of passed out in my truck sitting there, and she came up and knocked on the [unclear], and I kind of woke up through my fog and I yelled at her, "What do you want?" And she just kind of backed away and went back over to her mom's truck, her vehicle. So then they left, and I passed out. I guess I woke up sometime in the early hours of the night and decided I'd better go in the house. So I went in and I slept on the couch. And then the next day, she says, "We're leaving." And I says, "No, don't leave." I says, "I can take care of this problem." I said, "Yeah, I know." So I quit. I stopped drinking, and I was dry for two years. In the meantime, the thirteen-year-old, she decides she's getting into drugs and alcohol. [Coates laughs.] So then we dealt with her addiction and I took her to rehab and so forth.

COATES

When she was a teenager, huh, a young one?

BENITEZ

Yeah, she was a teenager. Took her to rehab. After rehab, we had Aftercare, and I was working at the time. I was working for another company, the irrigation company. So I asked the boss, I said, "I've got to do this." I said, "I've got to help my daughter get through this," and so forth. He says, "No problem." He says, "You go do what you have to do." So I would leave, oh, probably about four o'clock in the afternoon, maybe three o'clock, and take my daughter to Aftercare, which was way in Redlands at the time. So we'd go back and forth once a week. It was so funny, after she got out of Aftercare, got sober and so forth, she started going back to school. She comes to me one day. She says, "Dad?" I said, "Yeah." And she says, "You quit drinking." I said, "Yes." She says, "But you still have some problems." And I said, "Oh, what do you mean?"

COATES

Nice to hear this from our kids. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, really. And she said, "Well, you know, in our circle, which is called Alcoholics Anonymous, we talk about stop drinking, which isn't really the problem. It's when you start getting sober and you have all these other issues that you start having problems." And I says, "You think I have them?" She says, "Yes, you have them." I said, "Well, what's the solution?" She says, "Go to AA for thirty days, and if you don't like it, you can quit." So anyway, that was 1985. I went to Alcoholics Anonymous and I've been with them ever since, and needless to say, my life has turned around. I never thought it would, but it did. I respect my family. I respect ladies more than I used to. I treat them differently. I treat everybody differently. They're all my friends. And I got spirituality going from the sweat lodge and the circle, and I continue to stay in that circle, and it's been a blessing. It really is. I see more and more young Natives coming into the program. There was only me at the time, twenty-nine years ago. So, more and more, I see some of my friends that live on different reservations coming to meetings now, and they're getting sober and staying sober, and they keep dragging others with them, and that's the way this works.

COATES

Did you go through the traditional—I mean, you probably did, because I don't know that there were sort of the—I guess the Red Road variations of it that are sort of tailored to Native people nowadays.

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah. I practice the Red Road. In one side of the coin, I practice the Anglo side. So I intermix them. A lot of my cohorts, a lot of my friends know that because I talk about my creator, I'll talk about God, and so they respect that. They oftentimes tell me, "I want what you have." And I says, "The only

way you can get it is to come into my circle.” So they say, “Well, we’re willing.” I said, “Okay.” It’s your understanding of a power greater than yourself.

COATES

What was your religious upbringing when you were growing up?

BENITEZ

I had none. I had none. My mom never went to church. My aunt, she went to church on Christmas in a Catholic church and probably attended once in a while. But growing up, I didn’t have any religious background, probably never cared about it. I never had a religious background, never had a cultural background with Natives. I was kind of like a free spirit, never got involved. It was only when I married my first wife that I got involved in church, and that didn’t—

COATES

And she was non-Native, though.

BENITEZ

Yeah, she was non-Native. She was non-Native. But even going to church didn’t cure me of drinking and so forth. [Coates laughs.] That didn’t do a thing for me. And I’d go because it was her, satisfy her. But, no, I never grew up with that. Like I say, I’d go to church maybe once a year at Christmastime with my aunt, who drug me along.

COATES

So what was your first exposure to spiritual practice? Was it this—

BENITEZ

The sweat lodge.

COATES

—Sioux guy that came with the sweat lodge—

BENITEZ

The sweat lodge, yeah.

COATES

—and that was it? That was when it started, huh?

BENITEZ

That’s when it started, yeah. I never realized it before. I’d heard of it, but I’d never realized it, never experienced it. And once I experienced it, things started changing, and that’s when I started discovering that I was doing a lot of things wrong in my living, but I continued to drink—no, I didn’t continue to drink. This was when I stopped drinking, when I finally went into the lodge, because you can’t drink. So I had been sober in 1985, probably 1986, somewhere around there the sweat lodge started, and then I got into the circle, and I knew what the circle meant and what it means to us and started that journey. But before that, I didn’t have it. I understood it, but I never participated.

COATES

So you had actually quit drinking for some time before you started going to AA, huh?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

You had already stopped for—

BENITEZ

I'd been stopped for two years before that.

COATES

But your daughter felt that that wasn't enough? [laughs]

BENITEZ

That wasn't enough. That wasn't enough.

COATES

So AA, it's your feeling, has helped you to maintain it? Would that be—

BENITEZ

That would be fair assessment.

COATES

—an accurate statement?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's allowed me to maintain it. It teaches me how to maintain it and stay on this path and stay on this Red Road that I'm on.

COATES

And so as part of AA acknowledging a higher power and all of that, that's been the sweat lodge and that way for you has been the—so it hasn't necessarily been a Christian, or were they mixed?

BENITEZ

They're mixed. We started going to—when I say “we,” Diana and I started going to church after we had spent some time in Aftercare with Trayci, and we decided that we needed a little bit more, not specific the church concept, but the spiritual concept. And, see, most of the people that are Anglo, that go to church, most of them go there because of a commitment to go there. Some of them believe in the scriptures, some of them don't. But I feel I have a little bit more because of the spiritual background that I have with the Red Road and the circle and all the things that we believe in. It's a little different. I find that Christianity talks a big word, but they really don't follow the word. You understand?

COATES

I understand. I surely do. [laughs] I'm just trying not to interject into your interview. That's all it is. [laughs]

BENITEZ

So it's been a journey and it's been a good journey. I have that unconditional love. It's like I can love you for who you are, what you are, and not expect anything in return, and that's the whole concept. Sometimes my mind goes in different directions, but I know how to pull it back in. [Coates laughs.] So anyway, I love this life. I do. I just wish that more of my tribal members could get that concept and get that feeling. They have it. They're almost there, but some of them aren't.

COATES

[laughs] Well, you could suspect that was probably always the case, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, really, really, really.

COATES

So Diana kind of popped into the story here, but you didn't really talk about how you met and all of that.

BENITEZ

That's a story in itself. I went back and started working for the furniture company after I left the clinic as a director, and I went back and started—I've always been in sales. After I had made my thing with the company in the warehouse, I went to the floor and started selling. So I went back and I started selling again, and I was a salesman, and they moved me up in to an assistant manager. I used to take care of all the other crappy things, and I'd go over to Cathedral City, which had another store over there. And who worked there? Diana. She worked there as an office manager. So they'd send me over there when the manager would go on vacation, so I noticed this sweet young girl there, and I used to talk to her, and she says, "Don't get too familiar with me, because my husband is parked outside, and he always watches what I do."

COATES

Oh, my gosh.

BENITEZ

And I said, "Well, doesn't he work?" She says, "After he gets off work, he comes over here." Because she was a cute little thing. She was cute. [Coates laughs.] So I said, "Okay. I won't ask you about dinner or lunch or anything like that." I says, "I'll wave at you and smile at you, and that'll be all." So anyway, I didn't know it at the time, until she told me that, that she was having that kind of a problem with him, and so she had called me on the phone, and said, "Can I come and see you?" And I says, "Come and see me?" I says, "You're married and your husband is a jealous person." She says, "Well, I'll come over. Because he's still working, I'll come over to the store where you are on your lunch hour." So I said, "Okay." And so she did, came to the store, and all the guys were standing there. They knew who she was, because they'd seen her at the store. So I said, "I'm going to lunch, guys. I'll see you in a little

bit.” And they, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” They get to teasing. So anyway, we go have lunch, and she starts telling me that she’s thinking about divorcing him. I said, “Well, you’ve got two children. What’s the problem?” And she said, “Well, he’s abusive verbally as well as physically.” And I said, “Oh.” “And he’s been going out on me too. He’s been seeing other women,” because he was Hispanic. So in his world, he thinks he can do that, because you know all Hispanic men seem to have that attitude. So anyway, I said, “Well, when you decide to do that, just let me know, and I can take care of you okay.” I says, “You need to move or anything like that, you let me know. I’ll come and help you.” So she says, “Okay.” So this went on probably six months. Eight months, she moved to Mission, Texas. He decided he wanted to move them down there, so she left. So I didn’t hear from her, didn’t hear from her for quite a while. And then one day, she calls me on the phone. She said, “I’m ready to come home.” I said, “Okay.” I said, “What about your husband?” She said, “Well, we’re separating.” I said, “Okay.” So she came back and I saw her, and then I continued to see her and visit her at her parents’ house, where she was staying with her children. So anyway, she decided she was going to move closer to Indio, because that’s where her work was. She worked at a bank, and she was working the [unclear], but they sent her down to Indio to work. So she worked there. She was driving back and forth. So she decided that she’d move closer, where her work was, and she did. So anyway, one evening I go by to see her, and he shows up. Needless to say, it was a confrontation. All it took was two, three punches, and he went down and he left.

COATES

Oh, my gosh.

BENITEZ

He left and he never did bother her after that.

COATES

Really? Wow.

BENITEZ

Yeah, he never bothered her after that. So finally she—let’s see. What’d she do? She stayed there for a while and then she moved back to her parents’ house because she didn’t know what he was going to do afterwards. So anyway, she moved back there. So finally she got her divorce and she’s still working at the bank. She had moved back to the other bank in Cathedral City, was working there. So we started going out and dating and so forth. Then one day I asked her, I said, “You want to get married? You want to move out to the res?” And she says, “I’d love to.” And I said, “How about the children? What do they feel?” And she says, “They’ll go. They’ll do anything.” [Coates laughs.] I said, “Okay.” So anyway, we moved out to the res and she transferred back down to Indio, worked at the bank there. The children were enrolled in the school. By

that time, we was getting bus service for the children, because I went to the district and said, “I have three children soon. They’ll be using your bus service. I need bus service out there.” And they said, “Okay. Where do you live?” I told them, and they said, “Okay, we’ll create a route.” So they came by and picked them up and brought them back every day. So anyway, as they got older, they invested in some three-wheelers that they used to ride around on. [Coates laughs.] And my daughter Trayci, she would go over to see some friends at a ranch, which was probably about a quarter of a mile away, and then she’d jump on her little three-wheeler and take off, go down the road.

COATES

Now, your oldest son was pretty much out of the house already by that time, right?

BENITEZ

Pretty much, yeah. Pretty much. He was living in his grandmother’s trailer for a while, and then he decided to move uptown.

COATES

But he had already graduated from high school at least and was working and all that?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So he was out on his own. It was kind of a hard time for me. He couldn’t quite accept the fact that I had gotten married again. It bothered him, but anyway, he got over it. They’re very good friends now. Took a while.

COATES

And how old were Diana’s two kids when you got married?

BENITEZ

Let’s see. I think seven and nine, I think, and Trayci was just probably—eighteen months old? Eighteen months old, because my mother was still alive, too, and she got to see her before she passed, and I was happy for that. My mother gave her a bird name in Indian, and Trayci today just still remembers that, and she always says, “And I have an Indian name too.” [laughter] So anyway, she’s very proud of that.

COATES

Is she the only one? Your son doesn’t?

BENITEZ

He has one too.

COATES

Does he?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

So your mother gave them to—

BENITEZ

Yeah, my mother gave them to them.

COATES

—all the grandkids.

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

Great. You were talking yesterday about the nature of the—there's a tribal meeting every year or so throughout all of these decades, right, and everybody, even if they'd moved off to wherever, they all come back for these meetings once or twice a year. And you'd said yesterday that probably through the thirties and the forties, those had been more meetings to just kind of check in and be social and say hello to people and so forth. At what point does it become more—

BENITEZ

More organized?

COATES

More of a organizational or governmental meeting, even.

BENITEZ

I would say probably in the middle forties after the war. After the war, it became more organized. They elected chairmans and they had a leader, and then they had their elections and became chairmans and secretaries and whatever. It was kind of formerly done that way until I was old enough in, oh, 1957—'57, I would have been about twenty, twenty-one, and I'd already been enrolled in the tribe. My mother had enrolled me. In 1961, the then-chairman was wanting to retire. He didn't want to be a chairman anymore and he came to me. He says, "You ought to run for chairman." And I said, "No. No, I don't want to be a chairman." He says, "Yes, because you have education and you know what's going on. You know how to talk." And he says, "You may have some struggles with your membership, people that are on the council, but you'll get through it okay." And I said, "I don't know. Let me think about it." So anyway, I did, and my first wife says, "You should run. They need leadership and they need organization." And I says, "But I think I'll catch a lot of flak from all the tribal people, especially the elders." And she told me, she said, "Never mind about that." She says, "You're going to catch flak anyway, whoever it is." And I says, "Oh, okay. All right. I'll give it a shot." So anyway, they elected me during the elections and elected two other people for vice chair and secretary and treasurer, and that became the formalization as I understood. At that time it started to be formalized. We started writing Articles of Association to govern the Business Council, and we set up bank accounts and

we set up—you know, a secretary had to have minutes recorded, which they weren't doing before that.

COATES

Now, what was the impetus to begin doing all of that? Was that your idea? Were those initiatives to sort of formalize it a little bit more?

BENITEZ

After the Indian Reorganization Act that the government placed on all the tribes, that's when they started doing that. The BIA got more involved. They would send a representative to help us set up the books, set up the way the secretary had to take minutes, and those minutes had to go to that person.

COATES

But that act had been passed thirty years earlier, so they had never done that—

BENITEZ

Never had done it. Never had.

COATES

—for thirty years, but then suddenly by the early sixties, it's the Bureau that's actually urging you to sort of be more formal about it?

BENITEZ

Get more and more formal. Because they were getting into an era where we were going to deal more with the federal government on certain things, so we had to. We just took it and said, "Yep, we're going to do this," and we did it. And, oh, the tribal elders, "No, we don't have to do that. We don't have to do that. What's this government coming to?" And all blah, blah, blah, blah. I says, "It's so that if we want to get some of these fundings from the federal government to do what we need to do, that's what we're going to do." And they said, "Well, we get money from—" I says, "Where do you get your money from for operation? Where do you get your money from for development?" And they looked at me with a blank stare. They didn't know.

COATES

They had no idea, huh?

BENITEZ

They had no idea. So my first term, we set up an office and we got a grant to run that office. We got a grant to set up accounts for different things and run that office. Then after we set up the office, then somebody came from the University of California at Riverside wanting to develop jojoba. I don't know if you've ever heard of that.

COATES

A what?

BENITEZ

A jojoba.

COATES

Nuh-uh.

BENITEZ

It's an oil-producing plant that's used in—

COATES

J-o-j-o-b-a, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It was supposed to replace the sperm whale oil that they use today for cosmetics and pharmaceuticals and all that stuff. So anyway, this scientist came by and he said, "We can do this. If we grow enough jojoba, we can harvest it and so forth, and you can start to generate some income." And so I was a little skeptical. So, "Okay, we have some acreage way down and we could develop." So we developed it and planted jojoba, started to grow. First year we didn't get any seeds. The second year we got seeds, and there was no market. [Coates laughs.] There was no market. Something that happened that the jojoba plant was starting to phase out. Even at the insistence of the scientist in going to the World Trade Market and seeing that other countries were developing the jojoba plant as well and starting to generate it, but we weren't able to take part in that for some reason. I don't know. But anyway, it finally went down the tubes. We finally [unclear] it up and planted alfalfa.

COATES

Alfalfa always is good, huh? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, really. The scientist passed away, and so that ended that program. So we started—what did we start? Oh, we started a smoke shop, and we had two different locations within the reservation.

COATES

And when was this? Is this in the sixties?

BENITEZ

Let's see, yeah, late sixties. And that was working pretty well until the state came in and said, "We're going to have to tax you because of Public Law 280." And we says, "No, you can't." "Yes, we can." So anyway, they finally said that we could be taxed for the service sold on the reservation. So that ended the smoke shops and ended the smoke shops in Washington and Portland, all up and down the coast, because they were 280 states as well.

COATES

Wow. I didn't realize that law extended beyond law enforcement jurisdiction. So it goes into regulation and taxation issues too, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, it does.

COATES

I did not realize that. Wow.

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah. So then we said, “Okay. What else can we do?” And they said, “Okay. We’ll start a little card room.” They started the card room, and by this time I was out of office, but I was seeing what was going on, and there were several times they raided the poker room, shut it down. Then they started the Bingo hall. Now, they couldn’t shut the Bingo hall, because the Bingo hall was everywhere in the state. All the church organizations were having Bingo, so they couldn’t shut that down. So they kept continuing to harass us in the poker room. They even went so far as to say that there was mafia involved in the card room, and there probably was, and we had a tribal member that was killed because of it.

COATES

Oh, really?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, back in the eighties.

COATES

What was that about?

BENITEZ

Well, he was on the Business Council and he was getting more and more disillusioned because of what was going on in the card room, and he was finding that there was—he thought there was skimming going on, there was mafia involved, and the developer was having some ties with those people. So he was ready to go to an attorney and divulge all of this as what he’d seen, because he worked inside the poker room. Well, lo and behold, that same year, we went by to pick him up to go to see the attorney, and we found him dead in the backyard.

COATES

You found him, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

Oh, my gosh.

BENITEZ

Me and one of the other tribal members. Yeah, they had been shot. So anyway, we went and called the sheriff’s department. They came out, did an investigation. Didn’t last very long. They closed it all down. They shut it up. And to this day, they have not found who did the contract murders.

COATES

But they know that it was, huh?

BENITEZ

They know, yeah. They know. They know. But why they covered it up, we'll never know.

COATES

Well, we kind of know, don't we? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, sure we do. Yeah. So anyway, that's kind of the—

COATES

So it's a struggle through all of these decades, huh, through the sixties, the seventies, the eighties to try to find some sort of economic enterprise that—

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah.

COATES

And when you do have things like—well, the jojoba doesn't ever work out, I guess. The smoke shops did for a little bit before they're shut down. What was done with the revenue? What is it used for, then, later?

BENITEZ

It was mostly used for, I would say, salaries and whatever type of reaching out we could do to get people interested in the property, and that's what we were trying to do.

COATES

The reservation, huh?

BENITEZ

The reservation, because we have strategic areas that front the freeway, front the main artery that goes into town, and we had good property, and that's what we were trying to institute. Then we talked about the period when the Cabezon sued the State of California because of this card room thing, and they had a small casino going at the time too. The county came in and wanted to close it down, and they successfully did. They shut the doors and locked them up, and nobody could go [unclear], and so then that was part of the litigation. So when that was sent up to the Supreme Court, where it was finally [unclear], is the day that those doors opened back up. County couldn't come in and help antagonize anymore. They wanted to. They tried to, but even the FBI came in and told them, "No, you guys get your butts out of here. You have no jurisdiction out here."

COATES

Yeah. It's all federal now, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

So that decision came down in 1989. How long had that case been working through—

BENITEZ

Through the channels?

COATES

—through the various levels of courts, yeah.

BENITEZ

Oh, I think it was filed probably, I'm guessing, probably about 1985, somewhere in there.

COATES

Four or five years, then?

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah.

COATES

Had it gone into state court first? Is that what you said yesterday?

BENITEZ

It went to the federal level [unclear].

COATES

Right, because it was lost in the state, but then it jumps to the federal level, right.

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

Were you represented? Was Cabezon represented by the Justice Department in the state cases, do you know?

BENITEZ

Let's see if I can remember.

COATES

I'm just wondering, because I know that that's what Justice did in the case of fishing rights, for instance, but I don't know if they would do that in gaming.

BENITEZ

I don't think they did. We had a private attorney that took the case, and he took it all the way to Supreme Court. I don't think we had any help from the Justice Department on that.

COATES

If we can jump back to—you said you thought it was probably about the mid-forties when these annual or semiannual meetings of the—

BENITEZ

Of the council?

COATES

—of the council begin to take on more than a social character to them. What was the drive at that point? Was it the IRA again or what was it?

BENITEZ

I'm going to say probably it was the government was—one of the things, if I can remember correctly, was I think they were doing allotment programs at that time, and so they were heavily involved in that, and they were trying to decide—because, see, at that time there was two different tribes involved with one particular section of land, which was the Twentynine Palms Band of Indians and then the Cabezons, and they equally shared one section of land. So they were trying to handle not only Twentynine, but also their own, and so Twentynine people would come in and they would meet at the same time going over these allotment programs. And so finally some of the Twentynine made selections on property, but they got very disillusioned and very mad because of all the jealousy that was going on during that time, because they were part of the Tribal Council, that they just got mad and left. They just moved and they relinquished their hold on their allotments.

COATES

Oh, my goodness.

BENITEZ

And my mother was telling us, which was my aunt and my uncles, she says, “Don't do that. Don't do that. Stay there. Stay there.” And they said, “No, no, no, no. We're not going to fight them.” They didn't want to find them. And they had some good land. Half the section of the property was Twentynine and the other half was Cabezon, but they had some good land. Somehow or another, some of that land got sold off, and it was in that circle of people that were on the council that were probably instrumental in selling those properties off.

COATES

I see. I see. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah. So anyway, that's something I've always brought up before the council and the chairmans in discussion. I says, “How'd that land over here get out of trust? How did this land get out of trust? How did that roadway, which is Dillon Road, get through the reservation.” And they just scratch their head. “I don't know.” Because they're young. And I says, “Well, it's something that's worth investigating, don't you think?” [laughter]

COATES

And you know very well what the story is—

BENITEZ

Sure.

COATES

—but you want them to go find it on their own, huh?

BENITEZ

That's right. That's right.

COATES

Because they won't believe it until they do, huh?

BENITEZ

Mm-hmm.

COATES

So when that happened, were there tensions, then, that came about as a result between—

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah.

COATES

I mean, I'm sure there were. Did they persist over time, or have they kind of—

BENITEZ

Here's what happened. In 1961—this all takes place in '61—in the sixties. The Bureau came to us and said, "Okay. You have two Tribal Councils that own this section of land. One is Twentynine and one is Cabezon. Would you be in a better position to operate this portion of your land and let the Twentynine Palms people operate their own land and have their own council, you have your own council?" And right away, it was [unclear]. "Yeah, that's what we should do." So we brought in Twentynine. All of the relatives come in. We sat down, talked about it, and they said, "Well, okay. We'll agree to separate the property and we'll set up our own Tribal Council. You can continue to have yours. That way we won't interfere with each other's business." So that's what happened. The federal government came in. They said, "Okay. This portion of this property belongs to Cabezon. This other portion belongs to Twentynine," and that's how it was set up.

COATES

So does this lead to a situation where previous to that in the fifties and the forties and going back, when these meetings would happen, there'd be a lot of people, right?

BENITEZ

There'd be a lot of people.

COATES

And now, you told me yesterday, that Cabezon has twenty-four members at this point?

BENITEZ

Mm-hmm, adult members.

COATES

Twentynine Palms is even smaller?

BENITEZ

They've got sixteen. Yeah, they've got sixteen.

COATES

But previously it would have all been together, huh?

BENITEZ

Yes. Right, right. And it probably was a better situation that they divided the property in half and allowed the Twentynine people to maintain their own business and let the Cabezon—

COATES

So the division between Cabezon and Twentynine Palms occurs then because it's an expediency to deal with property questions or something like that.

BENITEZ

Yeah, exactly, exactly.

COATES

But it's not because of an animosity internally or—

BENITEZ

No, no.

COATES

—anything like that. So there's a good relationship between the two today, huh?

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, there's a good relationship. It wasn't back then.

COATES

It wasn't back then. Okay.

BENITEZ

No. And it wasn't back till 1960 when we made that separation, because the Twentynine, which is Chemehuevi, they wouldn't come to the meetings. They wouldn't come back.

COATES

After that division?

BENITEZ

After, mm-hmm, yeah. But they're happier now. They have their own meetings and have their own chairman and so forth, so they're a lot happier. They have quite a bit of property.

COATES

And they have gaming also?

BENITEZ

Yeah. They have a casino across the street that's 29, and they just opened up another casino in Twentynine Palms.

COATES

But you don't view each other as competitors necessarily?

BENITEZ

No. No, none [unclear]. We're always talking about who does better. That's about it.

COATES

[laughs] I mean, there's got to be competition, but it's not a competition that leads to a bad feeling or an animosity or anything like that?

BENITEZ

No, no.

COATES

What about the revitalization of culture that takes place? When does there begin to be an interest in trying to relearn and recapture language and cultural knowledge and a tribal history and all of this? Does that begin to occur under your administration as well, or is it earlier or later?

BENITEZ

I would say it's been later. It's been later. It started, I would say, probably about in the eighties. Mid-eighties, I think that's when it started. I think the culture had always been there, but everybody was so fragmented because they didn't live on a reservation, and those that did were very far and few between. There was just my family and the Calloway family. Those were the only two that were living on the res after the—let's see, after the sixties, I guess it was. But before that, like I said, there was the three, four government homes over built on the res, and those were inhabited by tribal members until they left too. Then they rented those out probably in the middle forties, just right after the war. So we didn't have any tribal members living on the res up until that time, but I still had the opportunity to put my other tribal members' kids down in the other section and whatever was here. I never seen those, but I did see the others.

COATES

You were talking earlier, not on the tape, but we were talking at breakfast about the songs, right, and there was a generation of elders that didn't teach those to the next generation. So when do you all start to try to relearn those, and how is that done?

BENITEZ

Well, it was done by one elder from another reservation that started some groups of young boys to sing, starting them to sing, and they just—

COATES

What was this person's name?

BENITEZ

Robert Levi. Robert Levi, he was an older bird singer. He sang Cahuilla songs. My uncle's songs were in Chemehuevi.

COATES

And what was your uncle's name?

BENITEZ

Oh, my uncle's?

COATES

I don't think we said yesterday.

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah. My uncle's name was—the oldest was “Lilly” Mike. Nobody could say Little Mike, so they shortened it down to Lilly Mike. [Coates laughs.] He was the oldest. There were two older brothers, but they had been killed in San Bernardino County. They would have been older. But Lilly Mike and Johnson Mike and Sam Mike were the three surviving brothers. They're the ones that sang. Dorothy Mike was my aunt, Susie Mike was my mother, and Carlota was the oldest of the daughters, but she was the one that was killed. Let's see. There was four and five, five brothers and four sisters and three living and four living of the brothers—or three living of the brothers. So they actually never cross-learned the Cahuilla bird songs or vice versa. Robert Levi used to talk about wanting to learn the Chemehuevi songs, but he was never taught by any of the singers. And even today, the Chemehuevi still sing. They still sing in Havasu, Lake Havasu area, because that's where the reservation is, and they sing further up north toward Kaibab and Utah and parts of Nevada, and they sing a lot there. They follow the same language like the Hualapai and the Yavapai along the Colorado River, and tradition-wise, same. They're a part of the southern Paiute congregation, similar in language, but not the same. My mother could speak Cahuilla and speak Chemehuevi and a little bit of Serrano and her English, broken English.

COATES

Wow.

BENITEZ

Because she never had an education, was the amazing thing. She still could write her name. She learned that. She learned—let's see. She went to some kind of a school there on the Morongo Reservation when she was young. That's some kind of church school or something. So she learned a little bit. The aunt learned more because she went to the boarding school at a younger age and learned more there. She knew how to bake and cook and do different things. My mother knew how to cook, but she didn't know how to bake. So there was different things that they learned. Like I say, never knew my grandfather, never knew my grandmother, because they were gone. Let's see. What else did you ask me?

COATES

Just sort of about what the process of cultural revitalization has been over the last—well, it'd be almost thirty years, I guess, if it really gets under way in the eighties.

BENITEZ

It gets under way in the eighties. I think that's the time period where I think all the reservations were not—that finally the realization that all of this other stuff

was dying away, like Robert Levi was getting older, and he was teaching most of all of the young people throughout the reservations how to sing. So they finally realized that they had to do something. Then they started little education programs. Torres-Martinez had it and the Aguas had it and Morongo, the bigger reservations. We never got into it until just three, probably four years ago when they started language here, and then there the realization—after we had a powwow that we put on every year where we invite all the different tribes to come, and that’s been twenty-six years in progress. I think that’s when we really hit a sense of being part of it when all these tribes come in and the exposure and everything. Yeah, I think that’s when it really, really started was that period.

COATES

Well, it reminds me of the festivals that you were talking about that you used to go to when you were a child when everybody gathers together, you know—

BENITEZ

Oh, yeah, yeah.

COATES

—and so it’s probably the contemporary equivalent of that in a way.

BENITEZ

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

COATES

What has been the relationship between—I mean, you’ve talked about this a little bit in some of the things you’ve said, but if we can talk about specifically the relationship between the tribe or the reservation and, say, the county. You’ve talked about the county coming in or the state and shutting things down and so forth. Can you talk about how that’s changed over time?

BENITEZ

It’s changed dramatically with the fact that the Tribal Councils have gotten together with the counties and talked to their leadership and tell them, “Look, we have tribal sovereignty, and therefore even Public Law 280 gives you the authority to come onto our reservation, but your jurisdictional thing stops because of the sovereignty issue, and so, therefore, we want to work with you.” We don’t have fire, we don’t have policing, and so forth. Some of the reservations do. Well, we don’t. “So we will allow your police department or your sheriff’s department come on property, and if they have to make an arrest, they have to contact the tribal office first and let us know what you’re doing. Don’t just come into the reservation and start doing all these tactical things like you normally do off somewhere else in the county, because you can’t do that, and we don’t like it. We don’t like that handling at all.” So they have agreed to set up a go-to person.

COATES

Sort of a liaison, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, a liaison, right, that handles the county to the reservation leadership.

COATES

Now, was that a tough negotiation? Were they agreeable to that right away, or did they resist it?

BENITEZ

Oh, hell, no. They resisted and they said, "Hell, no. We're not going to do that. We have all these jurisdictional rights." And that's when we told them, "No, you don't have all these jurisdictional rights." City doesn't even come out here. If you call them, they won't come. Once in a while they'll come if it's a big enough situation that they need to, and the fire department is a different situation, whereas the county fire departments provide all the—covers it that we need.

COATES

Yeah, they want to get a fire out no matter where it is, don't they? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they do.

COATES

That's not a hard sell.

BENITEZ

That's not a hard sell. And we've been able to work with the county supervisors. We have a supervisor that comes out and he asks us what we're doing, we ask them what they're doing, and they're not providing this, or they're getting too much involved in this, and they shouldn't be, and blah, blah, blah. So he takes that back to the county supervisors. So they work more in conjunction with them too. We also get the feds coming out. The congressman always comes out here and visits with us and finds out what we need done in the areas of tribal business, federal to tribal.

COATES

Now, did they do that before the advent of gaming? [laughs]

BENITEZ

No, no, they didn't.

COATES

Thank you. [laughs]

BENITEZ

No, they didn't. No, nuh-uh. No, they wouldn't even come out here. We had one congresswoman that never came out here. Even when tribal gaming was in, she never came out. They finally replaced her. She had been there for—I don't know. She was going for four terms, and they kept reelecting her, reelecting her. And finally, I guess they just got to a point where they got enough

Democrats to vote for this individual that finally ousted her to get her out. She would always come to me and ask me, “Well, why doesn’t the tribe ever invite me out?” And I says, “You want to come out to the reservation? Come on. We’ll go.” She said, “Oh, no. I’ll be such-and-such day.” Never show up.

COATES

Doesn’t show up?

BENITEZ

No. I say, “You talk out the side of your mouth.” I says, “You really want a relationship with the tribal governments, go visit them.” Otherwise, they don’t care about you. They’ll go up there. They get more work done at the—

COATES

At Sacramento, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, Sacramento and the federal office. Forget about you. [Coates laughs.] But this other congressman, he’s good. He’s Hispanic and—

COATES

Who is this?

BENITEZ

This is Raul Ruiz. He’s Hispanic, but he’s part Native, and he has a feeling for the people. He doesn’t have the feeling for—because he’s a doctor. He had his own practice. But he understands the needs of people who have no means. He understands the federal government and he understands the Indian governments, and he works with them. Comes and visits, and, “All right. What do you need?” type thing. Or he goes back to Congress and talks to them all [unclear].

COATES

That’s good.

BENITEZ

And that’s what you need.

COATES

Yes, it is. Going back to the law enforcement situation for just a moment, when it comes to a point of saying, no, you don’t have jurisdiction or not to the extent that you think you do, I would imagine they don’t just accept that, either. I mean, what actually happens to convince them that they need to show you this consideration?

BENITEZ

Well, I don’t know what it is. I think it’s the power that we’ve gained over the years because of gaming. I think that’s it. They know that we have the power not only in the state level, but in the federal level, so that if it needs be, we can say, “Hey, you guys don’t want to cooperate and understand what we’re doing? We’ll bring somebody in that can explain it to you so you understand.” So

that's what we do. Because for years all the tribes throughout the country never had the means of getting into politics and talking to people in leadership, whether it be law enforcement or the governor or the local supervisors, because they wouldn't have anything to do with us. They said, "Oh, you're just another reservation out there with Indians that are trying to survive." And that's what we were doing. But when gaming came in and the tribes started earning their money, so then the whole thing started to revolve around the tribes because of what they could do in Washington, D.C. They had power. And it's sad to say that it takes that, but that's it does to change everything. So it's been a good road to ride on and walk on, but there are also obstacles get in the way, but we know how to handle them better today. We don't say, "Oh, okay. Well, whatever you want." Not anymore. We stand up and say, "Well—."

COATES

Not for the last twenty-five years, yeah. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, that's right.

COATES

So when the decision comes down in 1989 in the case in the Supreme Court, what happens after that in terms of the development of gaming to the extent that it is now? How does that process proceed throughout the nineties, for instance?

BENITEZ

Well, it proceeded very slowly, because a lot of the tribes didn't have the economic base that they needed to construct new casinos and hire personnel that can run them, because they didn't have the wherewithal to know what was going on in those casinos. You know, some people had an idea, but as soon as investors got a hold of it, then they wanted to invest money into those casinos. And a lot of the tribes have used borrowed money to develop their casinos, and that's just a matter of fact, because tribes didn't have the money.

COATES

That's what anyone that wants to start a new business would do, is look for investors.

BENITEZ

Yeah, that's right. That's right.

COATES

So does Cabezon specifically approach investors, or do investors approach Cabezon?

BENITEZ

Well, initially, they approached the Cabezones. We had one of the biggest investors that wanted to—and I don't know what happened to the relationship, but one of the biggest investors that want to come in and build a new addition

to the casino is Steve Wynn, who's one of the biggest casino owners in Las Vegas. We were starting to get those type of people coming down and want to invest money, but I don't know what happened to the relationship. Something happened. Wynn went his way, and we continued to look for other investors, and we had Hard Rock Cafe wanting to invest money, and then that went away, and there was some other people want to invest money just so that they could say they were connected to a casino and helped develop it. And we were looking for ways to increase the size the size of the hotel, and we're still looking. We're still looking for investors. We're doing that. We're still trying to pay off our other investors as well. We don't want to get too far involved with owing a lot of money out.

COATES

Right. So you did find investors. Even though these others had backed out—

BENITEZ

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

COATES

—there were others that obviously—

BENITEZ

Yeah. They wanted to help build this and expand it.

COATES

And so you have current agreements where once you pay them off, they're out, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah.

COATES

And it's totally—

BENITEZ

That's right. They're gone. That solely is owned by the tribe. The other thing that we have going right now is the recompacting negotiations that'll be starting up pretty soon.

COATES

With the state, that is?

BENITEZ

Yeah, with the state. And Jerry Brown's a little amiable to the casinos, but he still wants his cut of the pie, and they have to negotiate that. [Coates laughs.] But they're looking at trying to increase the amount of time. We had a twenty-year compact, and now we're trying to increase it to another thirty years to increase the number of years, and that's where all the tribes come together.

COATES

Right. Yeah. You don't negotiate individually on that one, right?

BENITEZ

No, no, no. And each individual tribe has certain things they have to negotiate on. [recorder turned off]

COATES

Okay. So we were just talking about the compacting situation with the state and so forth. Do you know what the rate is, the percentage that goes to the state at this time from the—

BENITEZ

No.

COATES

It's in the twenties somewhere probably, huh?

BENITEZ

Yeah, I'm sure it is. But the thing about it is that that money that went to the state is earmarked for non-gaming tribes, and that's where it's supposed to be going. My understanding is some has been paid out to non-gaming tribes, but not a whole lot. And that's one of the things that they want to renegotiate on, I think, this go-around is to make sure that those non-gaming tribes get their share of the money that's being paid to them. Some will have to go to education, and a lot of it goes to education and non-gaming tribes.

COATES

That's a real generosity on the part of the gaming tribes themselves, I think, because that doesn't necessarily happen in other places—

BENITEZ

True.

COATES

—to my knowledge.

BENITEZ

True. Yeah, true. But that's part of the compact.

COATES

Yeah. Well, maybe one last thing that we haven't covered yet, and it's a broad, broad question, but over the sixty years or so of your adult life, could you make some general observations about the change that you have seen for the tribal members from what it was sixty years ago to the present time?

BENITEZ

Boy.

COATES

That's a huge question, huh? [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah. But it isn't so huge, no. You know, those times were hard times for everybody, not only Indians, but non-Indian as well. They were all coming out of the Depression. A lot of the people were coming west because they thought there was more work here. Indians living on reservations survived with

whatever could be provided. The federal government helped them in subsidies, food subsidies. I know, because I used to go with my mother and stepdad down to pick up the provisions back in the late thirties, and all the rationing that was going on during the war, no sugar, no chocolates, no gas, no rubber tires. All of that was being provided to the cause, and so you did without. But even sugar wasn't there. There was substitutes. That's where I learned first about saccharin. Oh, the interesting part was—I didn't mention this—was that we lived in Palm Springs with one of my uncles, who was Uncle Lilly, and he was fortunate enough to be a carpenter, and so he had work all the time. It didn't pay much, but he had enough money to live on. So we didn't have much either, and my stepdad was always looking for work, and he'd work whatever he could. So we all kind of lived together, and I could remember just using the saccharin for sweetening the tea and things like that, and then going, like I say, in the later times was going down to the agency, which was in Torres-Martinez, to pick up provisions. Once a month you got your flour, your beans, and your corn—and what else—apples if they had them, fruit if they had it, and that was it. That was for a month. That had to last a month, and my mother knew how to make that stretch. And coming out of, like I say, the years when we had nothing, really, nothing, we lived in shacks and, like I said, no running water or no toilet facilities and no heating, no air conditioning, but we survived. We survived. Then when I finally got out of the home, I started making my own living and having the education that I had, it was easy to get work. I could work anywhere I wanted to and earn a living and take care of my family, and I even took care of my mom and dad once in a while providing them with different things, because I knew they didn't make a whole hell of a lot of money. And it just kind of increased over the years economically until gaming came, and it's unfortunate that my mother wasn't alive at that time. She had already passed, stepfather as well, but they didn't live to see it. But now I'm reaping whatever's there, and my children who are enrolled that are getting the benefits. Their condition of life has been increased by what's been provided. Sometimes I think we have too much money, but some of us handle it better than others, and that's the way it goes.

COATES

So you're building homes on the reservation. We were talking about that yesterday.

BENITEZ

We built twenty—let's see, I think about twenty-five homes on this one tribal property, and members had a chance to pick out what home they want, how big they wanted it. I had my own allotment, so I never participated in that. I could have. I could have had them build me a home on my lot, but at that time we already had our home, and it was comfortable and it was nice, so we opted not

to have one built. But they put those twenty-five homes down there, and then they've been a godsend for everybody. Everybody lives in better conditions.

COATES

And it's brought people back to the reservation, hasn't it?

BENITEZ

Yeah, it's brought people back to the reservation, because they have a place to live now. But the homes are well maintained. They have their own gardening service that takes care of the complex. It's all gated. It's all walled-in and it's a community in its own. So there's not much to say about that. They don't have a Community Center yet, which we've always talked about, but never have made the effort to build one. But our children go to school. Some go to private schools. I know my granddaughter goes to a private school, gets a better education. She's smarter than a whip, even shows us how to work cell phones—

COATES

Phones and computers and everything else, right. [laughs]

BENITEZ

—and iPads and computers.

COATES

Well, they all do that. [laughs]

BENITEZ

Yeah, yeah, really. And so it's—

COATES

And I presume better healthcare for everybody. They have access now at least through insurance plans and things like that?

BENITEZ

Mm-hum, yeah. We still have the clinics in Riverside or Morongo Reservation. We have satellites that are still operating on Torres-Martinez and up in Santa Rosa, because those people can't get to a nearby clinic unless they drive thirty, forty miles to get to one, so that clinic still provides services, which is good. But we have medical insurance that takes care of major things and hospitalization, and so forth. I would say a few are members have invested their own money into different things for their later years. I know my son has. He's the financial director for the tribe.

COATES

And you said yesterday there are a lot of kids. There are a lot of younger people who are not members?

BENITEZ

Yeah, there's a few.

COATES

Are they going to become members at some point?

BENITEZ

They will become members one day.

COATES

So the tribe will be growing.

BENITEZ

It'll grow. It has to grow, because it can't survive on the membership that's here right now. It will go away and it will be like Augustine. You know, Augustine Reservation only has one adult member and five children. So it will be something like that, and we don't want that to happen.

COATES

Right. I spoke to a woman from Augustine that I think some of your relatives, the Mikes, had told her about this project or whatever, and I was surprised. I think she told me there were nine members or something like that, and it was very small. So what do the kids have to do to become members? It's not something automatic when they're—

BENITEZ

No, it's not automatic. They have to be a certain percentage of blood, and then they have to have lineage to a living or a past descendent that was a member of the tribe.

COATES

So all that has to be documented, and—

BENITEZ

It's all documented.

COATES

—they have to make an application.

BENITEZ

They have to make an application. The application, if approved by the Tribal Council, the Business Committee, then it goes to the BIA for final approval.

COATES

Are most of the kids going to meet the blood degree requirement?

BENITEZ

I think so. I think so. I think so. That's always been a struggle too. It's always been an issue. But it's like any other reservation. They all have issues with that.

COATES

Okay. Well, are there other things that you want to put on record?

BENITEZ

No, I think we've covered most of it, working in the tribe and tribal governments, growing up on the reservation, the ancestry and how far that goes back, and I'm still trying to research my great-great-grandfather, see where he came from, and that's not easy. BIA doesn't have back records, and none of the other organizations don't. So I just kind of feel my way through. I'm checking

with people that are still living. Maybe one of these days I'll come to him.  
That'll be a good day. [laughter]

COATES

Okay. Well, thank you so very much for the time that you've given to all of this  
and all of the time outside of the interviews as well. It's been a pleasure.

BENITEZ

Sure, sure, sure. [End of June 20, 2014 interview]

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