Interview of
UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles Interview of Ramon Holguín

Transcript

Session One (March 26, 2009)

00:00:25

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is March 26, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the SEIU office in Pasadena, California.

Okay, Mr. Holguín, we're going to start with your family history, if you can tell me a little bit about your parents and where they're from, what you know about your mother and your father, or what you remember.

00:05:20

HOLGUÍN:

All right. One of the things that I remember very clearly was growing up in El Paso, Texas, and that as a very young child my mom, who was born in Mexico of Tarahumara descent, was in the United States on a student visa. She had married my father, who was also born in Mexico of Tarascan background in Michoacán. So by that I'm saying that much of my roots have to do with indigenous people, and I am concerned that sometimes we talk about Hispanic, we talk about Latino, and thereby negate our indigenous roots, which are very important in our lives. But I remember at a very young age, I think I must have been about five years old, that my dad came to the room, as I was sitting in bed, and started packing, and looked at me and said, "Son, I'm going to leave, and I want you to take care of your mother." And that was the last I saw my father for seventeen years.

So my mother was very young, and, of course, she had to find ways of supporting me, and I remember that she used to work in restaurants. She used to take me along and many times I had to sit by while she would work and until she got through for the day and went home. Later on I recall that I used to spend a lot of time in a hotel, running the hallway, going up and down in the elevator, because my mother's older sister used to work there, and my mother's younger brother used to work there too. So they had access to the hotel, all the keys to get by and through the things. This hotel also had a restaurant, so I used to go around, go in the lobbies. Everybody there that worked there liked me and took care of me, and it was an adventure for me.

Mr. Campbell, who was the owner of the hotel, once gave me a ride in his biplane, and I remember I was very young, but being up in the air and looking at the city of El Paso, which at that time really was not very big. I think the city of El Paso at that time was probably around a hundred thousand, a hundred fifty thousand people. It's grown much since, but at that time it wasn't that big. So I remember having grown up in that setting.

I also remember having an older uncle, who was my mom's older brother. There were four in all, and this older brother was a farmer. He had what they call an ejido in the valley of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and from time to time he would take me to the ranch, and I experienced working on the farm. I experienced irrigating the fields when they let the water flow off the Rio Grande and learning a little bit about farm life. I remember riding horses, and I remember the first time that I was out there among the kids in the farm, feeling very arrogant and

very superior, and they played a trick on me. They wanted to know if I ever rode a horse, and I said, "No, but I know how. I've seen enough cowboys doing it." So they let me get on a horse that was not a very good horse, and that horse took me for a ride wherever he wanted to until he dumped me in the fields, and everybody was laughing and they had a good joke on me that time.

But that's the way life is, and I found that you have to respect people wherever you go, because you're no better than they. They just happen to have different backgrounds.

But for many years I lived in Juarez, because when my mother and dad divorced, she didn't want to live in the United States anymore, so she went to Juarez, Mexico, and that's where I was raised.

ESPINO:

So you lived in Juarez up until you were how old?

HOLGUÍN:

I lived in Juarez until I was eighteen, when I joined the service.

ESPINO:

You never lived with your father when you were a child?

00:09:55

HOLGUÍN:

No, I never lived with my--I didn't see my father again till I was twenty-three years old. So all that time my mother raised me, the only presence of my father was what she led me to feel, and that was that when she found that I did unacceptable things, she would say to me, "Your father wouldn't like that," and I felt the presence of my father, and I wanted to behave. I didn't always behave well, but his presence was there, and I always had respect for him because Mom said I should respect him.

But my mom, having to get by by herself, she saved money and opened up a business. She opened up a bakery, and in that bakery I learned how to be a baker, I learned how to make dough, how to make bread. I used to help the bakers chop wood, because in those days you didn't have an oven with gas. You had to actually chop the wood, put the wood in there, let it heat up the oven and then remove the wood and do the baking there. So I used to help, not because my mother asked me, but because I wanted to feel useful, and I wanted to learn something. So what happened then, the bakers got used to seeing me around, and when they got paid they would chip in and give me money, so I learned at a very young age the value of money and the value of earning your money. So I

learned that it was not good to have empty pockets, and I made it a point that I would always have money in my pockets and learned that I had to work for it.

My young years were interesting also in the sense that I did not know my grandparents, because as I understand, my both paternal and maternal grandparents died during the revolution in Mexico, and that my mom and two brothers and sister were brought to Juarez by a grand-uncle, who had a family of his own, seven daughters. Apparently, he had sold the ranch that my grandfather had, with cattle and everything, and used that money to come, and in the beginning they settled in Canutillo, Texas, which is about seventeen miles north of El Paso, and I understand Canutillo was a very important spot during the revolution, because a lot of people came from Mexico to stay there.

And by the way, that was in close proximity to Las Tunas, which really was a prison for undocumented workers. Whenever they got caught without documents, they would be put in prison, and then they provided labor in the fields. There were canneries around there where people in Canutillo and some of the other little towns used to work, but the farm work was done by undocumented people that were in prison for undetermined time until I guess they figured they'd picked up the crops and sent them back to Mexico.

In that context, I know my older uncle got caught a couple of times by immigration, and I know that I went to visit him at least two times to Las Tunas Prison, and so I knew what it was like, and I knew what was happening there. The cannery that used to be was Del Norte, I don't know, the mountain pass. Those were the canneries that used to can products from those farms.

ESPINO:

Do you remember the time period?

HOLGUÍN:

That time period must have been in the 1930s, mid-forties.

ESPINO:

Because you were born in 1930.

00:11:27

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. So I know that that was before the Bracero program [1942], because when the Bracero program happened, that was [unclear]. But in that context, like I say, I learned to work, I learned the value of work, but I also found

out something else. And that was because living in Mexico, I did what a lot of kids did. They didn't play football, they didn't play baseball, they didn't do that. They practiced bullfighting. They all made believe they were great bullfighters, and we used to see the kids in the streets playing that. And one day a friend of mine invited me to go see a bullfight, and I was so amazed and so impressed by their manner of dress of the bullfighters, that to me they looked like kings, dressed in gold and with outfits embroidered in gold. I saw the first bullfight, I liked the atmosphere, I liked the excitement, and without really internalizing the whole thing, I guess I became interested in bullfighting at that time, and for the next eight or nine years I got involved in bullfighting.

ESPINO:

Can you talk to me a little bit about how you started in the streets, what did you use and then how that evolved?

00:19:43

HOLGUÍN:

Well, what we did really was that you first use a bedspread or whatever you could get your hands on, and made believe that was a cape. Later on I had--the seven aunts of my grand uncle were all teachers, and one of them was also a seamstress. So one day I took some sheets, some bed sheets, dyed them, dyed one pink and one yellow, and did the design and took it to my aunt and I said, "I want you to make me a cape." So she was very obliging and made one, a beautiful cape that I think still exists somewhere, but that's what I used for a while. Then you have in bullfighting three aspects of bullfighting. The first one is when the bull comes out, you fight with a cape. Then they have the period where the picadores come out and they pick the bull in the back to make him angry and bleed him a little bit, and there are the helpers, who place the banderillas, which are little sticks with little harpoon-like peaks that they place on the bull to make him angrier also, and then there's the last aspect of it, which is the one with a muleta, which is really like a flannel small cape held by a stick about twenty inches long, and you have a sword to stick around it to make it bigger, and those two kind of instruments you use to play bullfighting as you learn.

Eventually, you had to prepare to face a bull, and we were lucky, I guess you might say, because we had a slaughterhouse in Juarez, which we used to visit frequently and get the help there to cut bulls into the corrals and let us practice with the bulls and with a cow. Never we realized, I guess, that any of those times we could be killed, and there was nobody there to help. But we were lucky. The worst that ever happened to me was one of the bulls stepped on my foot and hurt me a lot.

But we also used to get invited to the cattle ranches, and there was a cattle ranch in Chihuahua called Tierra Blanca. There was a breed there that they used to have for bullfighting, and in order to test their bulls, they have a little ring there where you test the bull when they're little and when they're cows, and so we used to get invited there to do the testing, and that's how you practice and you become a bullfighter. Eventually, you do all the things.

All during this time, of course, I was going to school, and whenever there was an opportunity, my mother would send me to my aunts, who'd tutor me and taught me a lot of what I learned, because I learned in school, but they also made sure that I learned a lot of things that I was not learning in school. They used to drill me. You figure with six of them still there teaching, they took turns, and they took turns and grilled me and grilled me until I learned to play the game, and I used to play falling asleep. And I could hear them say, "Poor kid. We've been drilling him so much. Let him rest." So I would learn but also try to rest, and so during that time I was studying

and I was doing bullfighting and I was working, so it kept me pretty busy during those years.

As far as family life, you might say, I really did not have a male figure at home. The four male figures that I had were mostly my oldest uncle, which was my mom's older brother, and my younger uncle, who was not much of a model, because he was only about twelve years older than I am, and my great uncle, who worked hard all his life, as far as I can remember. He was a mail carrier for the Mexican Post Office, and he raised six daughters and put them all through college. They all became teachers. So he was really the solid male figure in my life at that time, except for another uncle by marriage, who married my mom's older sister, and who lived in New Mexico. He was a tailor, and he was a tailor all his life, and from him I learned also the responsibility of raising a family, of working hard and really making myself helpful, because when I came to visit them in New Mexico, which was frequently, every vacation, every chance that I had I would come over, because being a citizen, I could come and go pretty much as I pleased, and I learned tailoring from him.

I learned many things, because even though he worked hard and he had a business--he opened up a tailor shop and laundry--raising all those kids was much--he had three kids from a former marriage, and my aunt had one child by a former marriage. They were both widowed, and so they started a family with four kids, and they had ten more of their own, so they raised fourteen kids. They were not wealthy, by all means, but they got by. And I remember that in Albuquerque we used to go to the rail tracks and pick up the ice from the wagons and bring it home, so we can put it in the icebox, because there weren't many people with refrigerators. At that time you put ice in the box and let the water drip below, and then take it out, and that's how you kept things cold. But we used to do a lot of stuff to help out around the house.

He was a very responsible man, and I respected him all the way until he died many, many years later. He used to brag as he got old and was living on retirement. He said, "You know, they made me pay taxes for so many years, but now I've got them screwed, because they'll have to support me the rest of my life." [laughs] And unfortunately, he got to the point where he couldn't work much anymore. There was a time where he couldn't drive anymore. He had to give up drinking, because he almost lost his sight once, and I think drinking had something to do with it, so he had to stop. But that was generally the kind of life environment in which I grew, a lot of teachers, a lot of hard-working people, and a lot of cousins who also had to learn to help out.

ESPINO:

Did your mother talk to you about school?

00:24:43

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, school. School was very important. I went to school first, while I was still living in El Paso, Texas, and I remember I used to go to an extension of the Sacred Heart of Jesus School, which was like run by nuns. It was sort of like a daycare and school, where working parents used to take us there. We used to get breakfast there, go to school, have lunch, go to school until we got picked up and taken home.

When we moved to Mexico, I started in I think it was the first or second grade, and learned to read and write Spanish, learned that in Mexico the school system is very different. We had a recess period in which we were allowed to play under supervision, but we didn't have any organized sports. It was all academic. We had to study from eight o'clock in the morning till three or four o'clock in the afternoon, with a break for lunch. I remember that the academics were hard. I remember in particular taking a lot of math courses, science courses, but all of

them in theory, because we didn't have labs to practice with. It was all theory. We learned botany, we learned anatomy, we learned zoology. We learned--believe it or not, by the fifth and sixth grade we were learning algebra and plain geometry and all history. History was universal history; it wasn't just history of Mexico. Literature was very important. We were reading Plato. We were reading about Socrates. We were reading about the great pieces of literature in translation and some of the literature written by Mexicans.

The belief here in the United States was that, well, Mexico doesn't publish very much, and if it didn't, it was because they didn't have the means. I remember that most of the books we used to read while we were in school were published either in Buenos Aires or Santiago de Chile or someplace else, not in Mexico. Mexico didn't start really publishing until I guess the late forties. Then they began to publish books that were of very poor binding. They used to fall apart.

But one of the things that was very important to me, and I think still is to this day is that the education in Mexico is federalized. It's under the rubric of the national government, so the teaching that goes on in school is very much uniform throughout the country. You get a fifth-grade science book, that is the same science book that is used all over. So teachers learn pretty much the same systems, use the same textbooks, and pretty much use the same form of testing. By way of going from one grade to another, it was never by the honor system. We used to have, at least in the schools that I went to, when final exams came around, we used to go into the recreation field, and we would be called into a classroom by name, and we were seated separately from each other so that we couldn't peek at each other, and then around the room, sitting by the walls, were the parents observing the testing going on. They checked the materials as we turned them in, and so by the time we got out of there, we knew whether we passed or not, and it was very embarrassing if you didn't make it, because everybody knew.

So education was important to me at that time. Whenever my mother had an opportunity, she'd send me to private schools here in the United States. I used to go to Lydia Patterson Institute, where they had almost private tutoring, kind of, and regular classrooms.

ESPINO:

Would that be like for summer school?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, for summer school, yes. So I learned English and Spanish as I was growing up.

ESPINO:

I see.

HOLGUÍN:

I also learned that I was a U.S. citizen. My mother made a point to make sure that I understood that. In the schools that I went to in Mexico, there were a lot of kids whose parents had been deported, who were citizens and who also knew that they were citizens, and by way of getting around, they used to have what they call a passport, but it's really more like a foldout card with our picture and a date on it and all kinds of signs to show that it was an official document, but we had to use that one to cross the border. It was not a passport in the sense that we know a passport, like a visa type. And so we all carried passports.

ESPINO:

That must have been around the time of the deportation, repatriation.

00:27:52

HOLGUÍN:

Well, during the thirties, there was a lot of deportation. But interestingly enough, during the forties when the war began [World War II], they started the Bracero program, and between Juarez and El Paso at that time there were three bridges. There was one bridge to come and go from Juarez to El Paso and vice versa. There was another bridge that was only to go into Juarez. You could not come through there that way.

And then there was one in between those two bridges, which had the railroad tracks, and that's where they brought in the cattle, what they called the cattles blancas [vacas blancas], the chihuahua, which were used in Texas for feeding the people, and they used to bring cattle all the time. Little were they to know that later on those same cars were going to be used to bring braceros, and braceros came. I remember seeing the lines almost a mile long of people just waiting, waiting to be called, and I remember the immigration officers coming in to the side of the river of the United States and telling people it's all right to come in. They used to test their hands, wash their hands to see if there were calluses or whatever.

And I recall later on I read one book which was called "Las Aventuras de un Bracero," so the adventures of a bracero. This guy was a journalist from Mexico who wanted to really know by experience what was happening, so he bruised his hands and all that on the ground with rocks and all that, to make it through immigration and get accepted as a bracero, and he wrote interesting things about what was happening in the San Joaquin Valley.

ESPINO:

Was it because you lived in that area that you were able to see the braceros?

00:30:52

HOLGUÍN:

You couldn't help but see. The railroad track goes through Juarez, and they come into El Paso, and El Paso at that time was, I guess, a very important point of entry, because there was no--even Tijuana was not a big important city at that time. El Paso was the place. And the railroads of Mexico, interestingly enough, were all built by the U.S., and they were not built to provide transportation for people. They were built in to bring the resources of Mexico, because for a long time Petróleo Mexicana was not Petróleo Mexicana. It was Texaco and Exxon and Mobilgas. See, all the oil wells of Mexico were owned and run by the United States, like the copper mines and the silver mines.

People today don't know that the U.S. used to really impose itself on Mexico in so many ways. They'd quash the strikes of the miners in Sonora. They'd send the army to quash the miners over there. During the Revolution [Mexicana], we know that Pershing was sent to Mexico to punish Pancho Villa for what he did in New Mexico, which was really Pancho Villa's way of saying, "We can do whatever we want." And they sent Pershing, and Pershing looked for Villa all over, could never find him. But those are the kinds of things that I learned.

As a bullfighter, I found that I wasn't going to stay in Juarez too long, and so among the kids that we knew, we started organizing, and we went two or three times into Chihuahua and Delicias, and we were going to throw them bullfights, because over there the culture of Mexicans is that we have festivals almost any chance we get. We celebrate the harvest, we celebrate special holidays on the day that they fall, whether it be a weekend or whatever. We don't push them to the weekend to accommodate a merchant. If it's Cinco de Mayo on a Wednesday, we celebrate Cinco de Mayo on a Wednesday, and so we don't change that, because it is important.

But we did go and fight, and later on I did it on my own and left home at one time--I must have been about fifteen--

ESPINO:

That's young.

00:34:15

HOLGUÍN:

--when I left home. I wanted to try it, because in bullfighting, I guess, you have to start very young, because if you haven't made it big by the time you're twenty-one or twenty-two, you're over the hill. You really had to start very young. And so I went, I left home, took my cape and my muleta and my cap and a change of clothes, and I went. Of course, I had saved money, since I had learned to work and save money early in my life. But I went, and I went to Chihuahua. I made contact with the bullfighter people over there, because when you go to a city, you find where the bull ring is, and that's where people gather, and then you make contacts and all that.

And so we organized, and I fought in two festivals there, got a chance to fight two bulls each time, and then I went to Delicias, another small city, and went there. Then when I came back, I told them my adventures, and we arranged to go to Tierra Blanca again and do more bullfighting and practice more. Later on we organized, and we went into Durango, and we arranged a tour. We went through Palmitas, Durango, Guancame, Presidio Durango, we went to Torreon, we went to Parral in Chihuahua, and all told, I guess, during that period, I must have fought about forty bulls. And little was I to realize how dangerous it was. When you're young, you're foolish, and you feel that you're invincible and even immortal at times. [laughs]

But the time came when I started going to high school in El Paso, and I didn't finish high school at one time. I found out that the draft was coming on, and I didn't want to be drafted. I wanted to go on my own, so I volunteered in the service, and I told my mom, "I'm going to join the service. I'm going to travel, and I'm going to take that responsibility out of the way so I can go on with my life afterwards." So I joined the service in El Paso. I went to do my training in Fort Ord, California, where I learned to practice my English more than anything else, because all during that time I really hadn't been around too many people where only English was required. So I began to learn a lot of terms that I was not familiar with. I learned to get around people that were not of my own kind.

ESPINO:

You're saying this was the U.S. Army that you joined, not the Mexican?

HOLGUÍN:

No, no, the U.S. Army.

ESPINO:

You were living in Mexico, and you joined the U.S. Army?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. Yes. In fact, my records still show my address where I lived in Mexico. My discharge papers show that.

ESPINO:

Wow.

00:38:26

HOLGUÍN:

But, yes, I went to Fort Ord, California, did the training there. From there on I was transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington, where I did more of my training and was tested, as they do in the service, for occupational specialities. They found that administration was my strongest point, so I became an administrator for the rest of my tour in the service, and that was interesting. I kept in touch with my mom all this time, but during the time that I was in the service, my mom got married, and so when I came back from the service, I found a different way of life in some ways.

But my cousins in New Mexico were really my peer group, more than anything else. I can't say today that I have many childhood friends other than my own relatives. We still see each other. Until recently, we used to gather once a year in New Mexico, all of us, and just reminisce and have fun and all that. But as the old folks died, we kind of started drifting apart, and some interesting things happened that I guess happen in every family. When my Uncle Mike *[FULL NAME?] died, the three children that he had from the previous marriage were led by the old one, who remembered his mother, his real biological mother, and for some reason had feelings that my aunt had not been good to them. And I used to say, "But I grew up with you guys. I don't remember her being mean to you." But I guess what he was doing, really, he was missing his mom, and he engrained that into his younger brother and younger sister. So when my uncle died, they went through his things, they divvied up the pictures and everything, and they included me in it, so we divided everything that my uncle had among ourselves, and then the oldest cousin just parted company with the family and influenced the other two to stay away. So the family was broken apart at that time.

Interestingly enough, the only daughter of my aunt's first marriage has become the nucleus of the rest of the family. She lives in Sacramento, and she married very young. She has four kids who've all been in the Air Force. Two of them already are retired. Her husband retired from the Air Force. She was, I guess you might call a military wife and later on became a teacher and retired, so they're all retired now, but she was the one that keep us all together. And she has I guess what you might call the family tree, records. She has the names and addresses of everyone in the family, knows who's who and who's what, but, yes.

ESPINO:

I was wondering before we move on if we could back up a little bit, if you could tell me a little bit more about your experience in the military and what that was like. You said that you worked with people who weren't of your same culture. What was that like?

00:43:53

HOLGUÍN:

Well, yes. I mean, having been raised in Mexico, there were many things that I did that were not here. For example, we learned a different point of view of the history between the U.S. and Mexico. We learned that the Texas Territory was not acquired by purchase but by armed conflict. We learned, for example, that when Santa Ana came to San Antonio, he came to claim what was rightfully Mexico's, because the settlers that had been allowed to stay there were allowed to stay there conditionally. History in the U.S. to kids doesn't tell you that. They were required to become Catholic, number one, and to pay their taxes to Mexico. The white people that were populating Texas didn't do either one. And so when Santa Ana came, he came to say, "You either pay or you leave." And I think they were justified in coming in to enforce their laws, just like we try to enforce our laws here in the United States.

Some people--our teachers liked to say that when the Alamo was taken over by a Mexican troop and the Texans

say, "Remember the Alamo," we also say, "Remember the Alamo," but for different reasons. And later on when the Texans got people together and decided that they were going to retaliate, that's when they say in Mexican history, they caught the Mexicans doing what all civilized people do. They were having a siesta after lunch, and they caught them asleep, and that's why they defeated them. So that's the way the story goes. And so you learn history from a different perspective. And Rudy Acuña used to like to say, "You know, it's his story, whoever happened to be saying it." And we learned a lot of things about how U.S. had been exploiting the resources of Mexico, how they had tried to invade not once but more than twice.

At one time they had their headquarters in Cuahuila. The U.S. government had already invaded there. There was a time when they tried to invade through Veracruz, unsuccessfully. So this conflict between the U.S. and Mexico has been there for years, and I think even to this day there is resentment among Mexicans about how the U.S. took over part of their land.

I like to think that, for example, if the U.S. were to be seen, say, with a conscience, they would probably have some kind of guilt complex about what they did to Mexico, and this is why they try to keep us in line. There is a book written by Mario Gil, not H-i-l-l but G-i-l, who had written in Mexico, and the title of the book is "Nuestros Buenos Vecinos," our good neighbors. He tells the story about what Mexico sees happen during this conflict and how the U.S. has tried to take over time and time again. He even ventured to say that someday in the future, the U.S. might take over Mexico by the wish of the people in Mexico, because Mexico would not be able to survive economically. But he also says that the reverse might be true and that Mexico might take over the U.S. culturally. Very interesting concept, because we see it happening.

ESPINO:

Did you read this when you were in school, or later on in life?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I learned a lot of it while I was in school, because there were a lot of teachers that were really teaching us not just history but their points of view.

ESPINO:

When you were in primaria, secundaria

00:47:19

HOLGUÍN:

Even as early as the second grade. I remember Dóctor López Arellano, who was very anti-U.S., okay? And then

I had a teacher in the third grade whose last name was Adams, who was very good, a very good teacher. She was a science teacher. And I remember a teacher in the fifth grade, Mr. Leonor Ramirez, who was an excellent, probably one of the most memorable teachers that I have in my mind. Although on this side, in the States, I also had some very great teachers. I had Mamie Aisles, who was an excellent teacher in math, learned a lot from her. We used to stay in class after school, because she used to teach us a lot of fun with math, and she loved it. I also had a teacher, Eleanor Reynolds, who was an excellent English teacher, and I remember when we said goodbye as she retired, I was given the task of writing a letter to her, telling her what the collective feelings of the class were. And when she read it, she said, "You know, I'm very proud of you guys, because you have written a long letter without any mistakes." [laughs] So there are teachers that you remember as you go along.

I remember in college here another teacher who was so far ahead of his time, and he was a Chicano. I'll tell you his name later on. But this guy back in 1953 was telling us that in the future, we would not be dealing with money but would be dealing with plastic. That was almost forty-five years ago. He had that vision of the future. Interestingly enough, he gave it all up, a beautiful academic career. He was a contemporary of Dr. Julian Nava, and he became a hippie. He dropped out, he started writing poetry and smoking pot and doing all the interesting things that he felt were really important in life. He divorced his wife, gave her everything he had. I don't know if you would like me to say his name, but his name was Nate Cisneros. He was an excellent teacher, one of the ones that I remember the most. I think he influenced my life.

ESPINO:

That would be East L.A. [Los Angeles] College?

HOLGUÍN:

At East L.A. College, yes.

ESPINO:

If we could just back up again, because I'm really curious about what it was like for you having these feelings about the United States and then being a part of the U.S. Army. What was that like?

00:50:09

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I can say that I had mixed feelings. I think I had a mixed concept of history. I had a feeling with reservations about gringos, because I had not lived among them as much. But interestingly enough, I also had not lived among blacks. People ask me, "How come you're not racist? How come you don't dislike blacks?" I said, "I didn't grow up with them. I didn't grow up with that feeling of separateness or feeling of superiority." I

said, "You know, they were not just in my life during the years that I was growing up." The first encounter I had with black was in the service.

In the military, you didn't find many Latinos at that time. I remember one Latino I found was from New York. He was Cubano; no, he was Puerto Rican, yes, and he had a very different way of talking from mine. I met one guy from East L.A. at a time when I didn't know where East L.A. was, and this guy was obviously a gang member, because he told me, "What gang are you from?" And he caught me in an elevator with his friends, and I said, "What do you mean?" I guess they realized that I was not the enemy, so they left me alone. But for the most part, I dealt with white [unclear], and the blacks that I started dealing with was when I was in Fort Lewis, Washington, the services had the races still separated. Blacks got their own battalions, and it was during that time that I was in the service that they said there's not going to be any more of that, and there was orders to integrate the groups. But just before that, I had joined the regimental boxing team, and that's when I started meeting first blacks, and I became friends with them.

ESPINO:

Boxing?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. And not having those preconceived notions about who they were, we became very good friends, and I was invited to their jam sessions, which was really something new to me. I said, wow, look at all the food, look at all the music, all the fun they're having. That's how I saw them. I saw them as bright, exciting people, friendly, because they treated me--but I also remember a very interesting incident, because some of the guys in my company, who found out that I was going to this party, decided to go, and I guess they were going to crash. But I remember the dialogue that was going on at the door, because they had a sergeant at arms that was there and was telling them, "You can't come in. You can't come in."

ESPINO:

An African American?

00:54:19

HOLGUÍN:

And they insisted that they wanted to go in, and he said, "Well, how come you cannot let us go?" And the guy said, "Because you're white. This is a party for blacks." And I said, uh. It was entirely a new experience for me. And I remember Marvin Smith saying, "But you're one of us." And we were very close friends all the time that I was in Fort Lewis. Then I lost track of him.

But later on when I was in Korea--no, I was in Japan. I was in Japan when the first black came into our outfit, one, one among hundreds of people. You can imagine how he felt. I remember him going around by himself, and so one day I approached and said, "Come on over." And we made friends, because he needed a friend. And since I really didn't feel like a part of the whole group--I was always kind of an outsider--we [unclear] became very good friends as well. But I thought that the way they were integrating the service was so unfair, because it placed blacks at the mercy of a larger group of guys that could take advantage of them. It's getting cold in here.

But anyhow, my experience was that the military have some very strict rules. If you don't follow the rules, you'll get punished for it. I found that people who are given authority can be mean, because even during basic training, they would identify so-called leaders among the groups and give them fictitious ranks, to have authority over the group. They assisted the non-commissioned officers, because there weren't that many. They assisted the non-commissioned officers keeping people in line. They were sort of like the spies for the company commander, insofar as people who didn't behave or did the things or spoke badly of military rules and all of that.

I found that discipline not really bad. I could live with it, because I had learned to be responsible, and I had learned that when there are rules, you follow them, and so I didn't get into problems during basic training. I didn't get into problems during my next assignment in Fort Lewis, Washington, where I was working in an office.

ESPINO:

You don't remember any instances of racism against you because you were from Mexico?

01:03:50

HOLGUÍN:

No, no, because, like I say, in an environment where I was, we did not have the camaraderie that you have like if you're an infantry outfit or an artillery outfit. We were all working in offices, and we were working with the captains and non-commissioned officers and warrant officers, and so the atmosphere was really very tight. When I went overseas was when I began to see that more pronounced, and I began to see--for example, I guess they had a picture or a Latino or a Mexican in a way that they thought I'd carry a knife, for example. I never carried a knife in my life, even to this date, but they were afraid of me, and I was a little guy compared to--I remember Frank Hendricks, who was a tall guy. He'd come in to join the basketball team. They were afraid of me. If I said something, yes, they thought that I might reach into my pocket and pull [unclear]. [laughs] So they had, I guess, an idea of what Mexicans are.

At that time, they probably were having the same experience that I was having for the first time. We'd never seen each other. But I learned to live among them. It was interesting that later on in my life I learned not to trust many of them. Also because of circumstances, I learned not to trust many blacks. But I learned that that's the American way of life. You take advantage of whoever you can, and that's the way it is. It's not the best way, but that's the way things have gone for years. You learn to take advantage, you learn to get the best deal out of whatever you can, and you shouldn't mind stepping over anybody. That's the way to be successful. And I've had difficulty with that, because I am not that way. I was not brought up that way. But I've been among my own, meaning Latinos or Chicanos or whatever they might call us now, who have learned to live that way. They're not always honest. They're always taking advantage of things, and they're successful.

In my own lifetime, I've looked over and my older son was telling me one day, he said, "Dad, you've been around so much, you've been on so many, and look at where all these people are now, and look at where you are now." But then I had no illusions of ever being wealthy. I had some illusions of being famous, but mostly when I was a bullfighter. I thought being famous and rich was a goal, but I gave that up very quickly, because after I came back from the service, and remember, I was in the service during the Korean War, but when I came back from the service, I tried going back into bullfighting, and the world had changed totally. It was not the same any more.

But when I went in the service, I learned, for example, to respect the Japanese people, a very rich culture, very disciplined culture, a very polite people. I learned to live among them. I learned a little bit of Japanese, enough to get by. I made friends with Japanese people, and I enjoyed my stay in Japan, really. I traveled from Tokyo to Yokohama to [unclear], all of the places. I used to mingle a lot with them, mostly because when I went to Japan, I had a couple of good experiences to begin with. Initially, I was assigned to go to the Philippines, and when we were onboard the ship, we went up for some reason to Seattle, Washington, and then along the Aleutian Islands, and I was assigned to the shipmaster's office, so even in ships I already had some kind of a status, had my own place and all of that.

But when we got to Yokohama, I expected to go with the people that were going to the Philippines, and someone come and says, "We have special orders for you. You get your stuff and there's someone here to pick you up." I had been assigned to General Headquarters, Far Eastern Command in Tokyo. So they had sent a guy in a Jeep to pick me up in Yokohama, and that was early in the morning, so the guy said, "Look. By rules, I have nothing to report before midnight tonight. You're okay." He says, "I'm going to give you a tour of Japan." So my first experience was great. I went from Yokohama, which is miles and miles away from Tokyo, and went across and saw what still remained of the bombings that we did with the B-29s during World War II. Because all along the tracks there was [unclear], things that up to that time had not yet been revealed.

But then I got to see a lot of beautiful sights. When we got to Tokyo, he took me around the royal palace and the lakes and all of that, and then finally I reported to headquarters, which was interesting because the headquarters for the soldiers was what used to be the Royal Navy Academy for the Japanese, so it was built like a big military camp, all indoors, beautiful. And what I found there was that from the onset--because [General Douglas] MacArthur had the right idea, because he had given people the ability to earn their own living, to retain their own dignity. We were expected to treat them with respect. But they had provided employment for all of them, in a sense that out of our pay we had to contribute so much every month to pay for the cooks, to pay for the--we had waiters, believe it or not, in the dining hall--to pay for the ladies that used to come and clean after. We didn't have to go an make our own beds. Each company had a tailor shop, because we had to be properly dressed, and we had to take our place there, and everything had to be pressed and neat all the time. We had a shoeshine parlor. Before we went out, we'd stop and get our boots shined, all of that. We didn't have to pay anything. If we wanted to, we could tip them, but they all got paid out of what we contributed every month. And so they worked, and they were happy to provide a service to us, but we were not to abuse them.

Even the Jeeps from the motor pool were driven by Japanese, so if I wanted to go somewhere, it was like a taxi. But I'm not sure that all the companies throughout Japan had the same privileges. We had that privilege because the place was set up that way, and we enjoyed that very much. I remember the headquarters where I worked had a ritual every morning. When General MacArthur came in, his car arrived in the front of the [unclear] building, and there were honor guards waiting at the curb to open the door for him, and from there on there was a series of guards, all dressed beautifully, with shiny helmets and all, throughout the whole building, and as the general stepped out of the car, the guy would click his heels, and then from there on, systematically, like a domino effect, you would see all this discipline throughout the whole building until he got into his office. And that was a beauty to see, every day. You never got tired of seeing that. He was so well respected, and feared, I guess.

ESPINO:

You admired him.

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, yes, very much so.

ESPINO:

Did you ever have a conversation with him or talk with him about anything?

HOLGUÍN:

No. No. I saw him. We crossed eyes, but he worked very fast and all that. But I remember after he got his Congressional Medal of Honor on Wake Island, and Truman fired him, the people of Japan already knew that he was being fired. And when he left from the building where he used to stay to the airport, people lined up the streets, many on their knees, bowing to him as he went by.

ESPINO:

The Japanese?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. Because he gave them--like I say, he allowed them to retain their dignity. He didn't behave like a conqueror. He demanded that we all treat the people with respect, and so the people understood that he had given them everything so they lived in harmony, they lived in peace, they were able to make a living. He allowed a parallel type of government to go on, where I guess the military did not really interfere with him. The Japanese people knew that we were the occupation army, but they treated us with respect also. I don't think that they ever treated me with disrespect, or anybody else.

ESPINO:

No anger or resentment?

01:09:27

HOLGUÍN:

None, none of that. Of course in their culture--I don't know if you ever noted, but they bow to each other, and the bow is, I guess, comparable to whatever status you think you have. If you have lower status than the other person, you bow lower than the other person. And I don't know if you know this, but sometimes [unclear] will bow and they will bow. But I'm sure they're all trying to say, "I have a lot of respect for you," and I think that's nice in a culture. We ourselves, we do the handshake. They don't. They bow a lot to each other, and even to little kids, because they think the child has the right to some kind of respect as well.

But that was the sense of what was going on. When the Korean War broke out, of course, we who were in Japan were not ready for war. You know, the only infantry outfit that we had was that 134th Division, which was already on its way to Europe. I think they had left by way of the Panama Canal, were going around into Europe. So we didn't even have any combat troops in Japan when the Korean War broke out, and so it was a big surprise, and what they did is they started pulling a few people out of each unit and started drafting and sending draftees, and at that time they were sending draftees into combat without even full training.

And I remember the first guys that they pulled out of our outfit, they would be given an M-1 carbine, not an M-1 rifle but a carbine, which is smaller, but it has the advantage of being able to put a clip on it with more than one round, because the M-1, you had to load it up. There are these little cartridges that you drop in and [unclear]. They are semi-automatic. But they used to give the guys a carbine and five rounds of ammunition to go to war. They weren't ready for anything. And we remember the atrocities reported were the first group of guys that went from our outfit. They had been tied behind their back and they had been shot in the head, and those were the kinds of things that we were getting back.

So feeling patriotic and responsible, we all wanted to go to Korea. But they wanted to retain some kind of control in all the outfit and keep, I guess, the Korean Army occupied until we sent troops from the States. Once they started coming in, well, they started populating like that. But during that time, the North Koreans gained a lot of ground, almost down to the end of the peninsula, and when the reformists came in, then they started going back up again.

I was not sent to Korea right away. I think the conflict began in May of 1950. I was not sent to Korea until, almost until the end of the year.

ESPINO:

Can I just pause it for a second, because I'm hearing somebody speak? [End of interview]

Session Two (April 3, 2009)

00:00:28

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is April 3, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the SEIU offices in Pasadena, California.

Okay, Mr. Holguín, we're going to just pick up some details that we didn't catch in the last interview, and one is about your father, when he left the family. You said that you were living in Texas at the time.

HOLGUÍN:

That is correct, and I recall that at that time my mother was forced to go to work. I guess she had dropped out of school, and I remember that she used to take me with her sometimes, because of a lack of babysitters, since the only other family she had there was my aunt, who was an older sister, and she also worked. So from time to time I would go with my aunt, who used to work in a hotel, and other times I would go with my mom.

ESPINO:

So your father was a U.S. citizen?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes.

ESPINO:

And your mother was a Mexican citizen?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes.

ESPINO:

And she was on--I think you mentioned this last time--a student visa.

00:03:38

HOLGUÍN:

That is right, yes. Yes, she had been going to school when they met, and I guess my mother must have worked two or three years, because I did go to a Catholic school, where they provided care and meals, and my mom used to pick me up after work and take me home. And finally, I guess when she decided to move to Mexico, we moved to Juarez. I must have been about eight years then, and so I had some schooling. I, at that time, spoke some English, mostly Spanish, and when I went to register at school in Mexico, I started off in the first grade, actually, because over there, they don't move you on the honor system. You have to earn your promotions from one grade to the next. But I was able to compete with the rest of the students and catch up and stay at grade level with the kids my own age, but I do remember that the studies in the classes were much different from the way they are here.

The activities in the school were mostly academic. We had a recess period only, which was allowed for lunch, and if anybody wanted to be involved in any athletics, it had to be after school. It was on a volunteer basis, and teachers that were involved in monitoring the activities also were doing volunteer work, so that wasn't anything like we have in the United States. It was really more study, preparing for tests and such.

ESPINO:

And then you went to high school in the United States, after you finished--

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. The practice in those years--I don't know if it's still true--was that many of the kids living in Juarez used to go to school to El Paso, okay, and many kids from El Paso used to go to school in Juarez--

ESPINO:

That's interesting.

00:06:31

HOLGUÍN:

--because both cities had been interdependent. People went shopping to the other side, either way, because of what was available and the prices and such. There was a streetcar route that went from the heart of El Paso south into Juarez, go into downtown Juarez, come around and then go north again to the other bridge into El Paso, and it was a route that went on. Many times the streetcars were just bumper to bumper, and they were always full, because people went to school, went to work, and went shopping, and so either way the streetcars were always full, and I don't remember ever riding a bus. I remember walking to the streetcar station and then going in, and the train used to stop three blocks from the school where I started going.

The school was, I guess, a Baptist-run school. The name of it was Lydia Patterson Institute. Later on it became Lydia Patterson High School as part of their public school system, but during the time that I went, it was a private school. I found that it was very different, because we only had a couple of teachers that were Spanish-speaking, and most of the others were English speakers. I recall they were very, I guess condescending you might say. At that time I didn't realize, but as we went over the years, we found that, yes, I remember some racist statements that were being made, and I remember little things like, "You guys are like menudo. You guys eat tortillas and beans," and that kind of stuff, like it was a bad thing to do.

ESPINO:

Do you have an example of any of the racist comments that were made to you?

00:10:06

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I don't know that they're really racist, but I know there were a lot of unfair comparisons that didn't need to be made. For example, the history teacher would say things like, for example, when we're talking about the Alamo, "The dirty Mexican Army was not prepared. They didn't wear shoes. They weren't trained," that kind of stuff, contrary to what we see in movies nowadays, that they were a very well-uniformed army and all that, which isn't true either. But they would make a lot of statements also about food. They'd compare the transportation system, like, for example, "In the U.S.," they would say, "we travel by cars, we travel by buses. In Mexico, they travel by burros or horse carriages," which wasn't true, and we knew it wasn't true, because a lot of us lived on the other side. And when they talked about food, they never really talked about the kind of food that we were accustomed to eating as being healthy. Eating beans and tortillas and chile was the worst thing you could do. So in that sense, we didn't really get much support in terms of a good self-image, and I think, yes, we resented the statements that were made from time to time.

But the education that we received, I think it was fair, because at one point I went to school in Mexico. I think my mother got to a point where she couldn't afford to pay my tuition, so one year I went to high school in Juarez, and I found that the expectations of the school system were much greater, like you almost had to raise the bar quite a bit to meet the expectations of your performance. And that helped me a lot, because it created in me a discipline that I did not really have, because in the U.S. school system there are so many things that are very lax, and most books have the answers to the questions in the back of the book, and kids learn that very fast. You want to know what it is? You just look in the back of the book. In Mexico, it wasn't so. So by comparing both systems, I say that having been exposed to both was very helpful to me later on when I went to college, but that's another story we'll tell later.

ESPINO:

How about the issue of your self-esteem and your sense of self? Was it different when you went to the Mexican school?

00:12:45

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, yes, yes. In the Mexican school, we had such rapport with the teachers that, I mean, the teachers, for all intents and purposes, had an open house in their homes. We could go in their homes. If we needed tutoring, we'd just visit. Very often we would bring them gifts, and that was true of almost all the teachers I knew. I think I visited all their homes, but not only by myself. Most of the kids would be happy to do that.

[laughs] I remember to this day, when I was in the first grade I had a very young teacher who used to give us assignments, and then her boyfriend would come to the window and they would be making their own activities or conversations while we were doing the work. That teacher I guess later on became very popular, because many years later I heard that she was being honored for some of her things. Her name was Alicia Nava, and she was a beautiful lady. And I remember, like I said, that later on she had become very popular in the public school system of Juarez, and I know that because most of my aunts were teachers in Juarez. They had started by going out, as they were expected to, to small ranches to do their internship, and then when they passed, they'd come back to the city and work as a teacher. I know one of my aunts was--I think she was the one that stayed the longest. She was honored, and there's a school named after her now. But having had all those aunts teaching helped me, because they also used to tutor me and expected me to perform well and to know a lot of things, and if I didn't know, they would say, "Why don't you know?" [laughs]

ESPINO:

So this must have been the time during the--we talked a little bit about the deportation and the repatriation of Mexicans. Was that--

00:16:24

HOLGUÍN:

Well, that was a way of life, because like I had mentioned before, there were two bridges that were used for people to go back and forth, and there was one that was like a bridge for the railroad tracks, where the immigration authorities and I guess that the farm-labor recruiters would stay on the U.S. side of the border and lure the people to come in. When the Bracero program started, the line would form from the river south all the way to the railroad station, which is, I would say, maybe about a mile or two miles away, and it was people waiting patiently and the vendors going around selling food and all that, and that program went on for years.

The expectation was that they would have the program for the duration of the war, okay [World War II]. We know now that the war ended in 1945, but the Bracero program continued well into the fifties and into the sixties even. So the argument of the agricultural business people here was that if we didn't continue with the program, the price of food would skyrocket and we wouldn't be able to afford to pay the prices, so the U.S. government allowed the Bracero program to continue, with the cooperation of Mexico, I'm sure. And it was not until the 1960s that finally, through the efforts of César Chávez and other people that were concerned about what was going on, they stopped that.

Reflected in the activities of what was going on there was two books that were written by Dr. Ernesto Galarza. One of them was "Merchants of Labor," in which they really talk about what was going on in terms of getting cheap labor in the fields. The other one was more down to earth about experiences of people, and the title of that book was "Workers in the Fields, Spiders in the House." Dr. Galarza wrote many other books, but those two books really kind of put things in perspective. And then Paul Coates, a television commentator, also did a series of programs exploring life in the farm fields, particularly in California, but also in Texas, and people in the city didn't know how the farmers lived. We know the farmworker lived in a system of exploitation, and they didn't make much money. They didn't live in a very good condition. Oftentimes in the field they didn't have water, they didn't have a restroom facility, and many times they would allow the children to work, in order to make ends meet.

ESPINO:

Did you have any family members who were braceros?

HOLGUÍN:

No.

ESPINO:

Or neighbors?

00:18:15

HOLGUÍN:

No. As I mentioned, I had one uncle who was a farmworker all of his life. He had an ejido in the Valley of Juarez, which was mostly farms. But came the time when I guess he wasn't making it, and he started coming across the river to work in the fields here, but not as a bracero, more as an illegal farmworker. He got caught a couple of times, because I know one time he was gone for a while and then when he came back, he used to bring little carvings of nuts or peaches, and I guess they used to carve little figurines out of the things while they were

in prison. But he used to tell me that they worked them in the fields of Las Tunas, Texas, which is south of Anthony, New Mexico, and north of Canutillo [Texas], in that area there.

And then later on I remember he got caught again, because my mother took me to go visit him once in the prison, and so I was to visit prison. And later on I learned that most of the people in those little towns lived working in the canneries, where all this produce was being--you know, chiles, tomatoes, and things like that.

ESPINO:

Do you think your mom was ever tempted to go work during that wartime, when a lot of jobs were opening up for women and people of color, African Americans? Was your mom ever tempted to go work in the United States, do you think?

00:23:49

HOLGUÍN:

No. I think my mom's experience in her marriage was such that she didn't really want anything to do with the U.S., but she insisted that I should take advantage of being a citizen, and that's why I should go to school, and that's why I should learn to speak English and all that. Later on I was able to work part-time here and there. I know one of the jobs that was available to kids almost anywhere was dishwashing. In those years, you didn't have paper plates and paper cups. All restaurants served in regular dishes, so they always needed dishwashers, and you could always work for one day or for two days or for a week. They knew that it was not a permanent job for anybody, because nobody really wanted to work at that all their life. But I did work at that.

Later one, while I was going to school, I alternated also by working at a company that was run by José Fuentes, who had, initially, an advertising company in a house-painting department. The advertising company in those years was doing this big billboard with papers pasted on. In those years, you had to learn advertising design. You had to do it on plaques or a board, set up the design for the customers to look at and choose, and then you would draw that to scale on the billboards and scaffolds and all that. So I learned sign painting.

And I also learned something that I hadn't practiced very much, because when I was in the second grade, a local artist in Juarez used to come to the schools, and he used to talk about his experiences and about art. I remember that he did a drawing on the blackboard, and we were required as part of our art class to copy that. And I suppose I did a good job, because the next thing I knew, I was involved in a drawing contest, and later on I was selected to represent the school in a citywide art contest, which I won, and they, as a reward, gave me a drawing outfit and some oil paints and brushes, which I didn't use, but I liked the drawing. I kept on drawing.

And when I was working with the José Fuentes company, there was a man named Carlos Mayese, who had studied art in universities of Mexico and who became my mentor, the master who taught me about art and taught me how to paint. An interesting thing about this man was that he loved women and he loved wine, and one day he called me over to go to his apartment and made a proposal that he could fix up a little package of brushes and paints that were basic to start painting again, and I think it went to only five dollars, because he wanted to buy a bottle of wine. So I gave him the five dollars and got my paints and brushes, and that's when I started to paint again.

I became a painter later on in my life, and at one time I even attempted to earn a living at that. But during that experience I learned the value of work, I learned the value of money again, because I had been working in our

bakery and getting bits of money from some of the bakers, who appreciated the fact that I was helping them, and so I used to carry money in my pocket all the time and learned that you had to earn it in order to be able to do that.

ESPINO:

This was when you were in high school. Then when did you decide that you wanted to join the army? That was in 1949?

HOLGUÍN:

I joined the army--at one time I was hearing about a draft. I guess it was also a big drive to recruit, so recruiting officers were all over the place, and somehow I felt that if I don't join, I'm going to be drafted, and if I get drafted, I don't have much of a choice of where I want to go, so I decided to join when I was not quite eighteen. I joined in August of 1948, because I was almost eighteen and I guess they took that into consideration. I signed up and went to training at Fort Ord, California. From Fort Ord I went through the rigorous training of two months and from there I was transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington, where I went through some additional training and was tested for what they called military occupational specialty.

They decided that I was good at administration, I was good at bookkeeping, and so I became an administrator and file clerk and all of that, and that's much of what I did during the time I was in the service, in different capacities. I was company clerk at one time. While I was in Tokyo, I was assigned to the chief file clerk's office, which was filing top-secret stuff. I remember we used to have to go from time to time to have official top-secret records burned. They had incinerators, everything under very close guard. I remember, like I said, I was company clerk at one time. In Fort Lewis I was in the medical administrator's office, so it was mostly administrator clerk the work that I did that time that I was in the service.

In May of 1950, when the Korean War broke out, they started pulling personnel from the different companies, giving them a weapon and some ammunition and sending them to Korea, but interestingly enough, most of us were not combat troops. And, in fact, most of us had not even fired a weapon in at least two years.

00:27:45

ESPINO:

Can we just step back a little bit, because I'm just curious about your impressions of the U.S. involvement in World War II, because you joined after the war was over, if you had any impressions about the atomic bomb, about Hitler's Nazi philosophy.

00:34:59

HOLGUÍN:

My impression of World War II at that time really was such that I did not really understand what was going on. I remember we were in school when it was announced that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and, of course, at that age we didn't know what Pearl Harbor was or where it was. We later on found out that it was in Hawaii and that war was being declared and that it was going to be an effort to win the war as quickly as possible. There was talk about Japan, about Italy and Germany as the Axis that had triggered a world war, and there was talk that German submarines had sunk a Mexican oil tanker in the Gulf of Mexico, and I guess the thrust of that was that they wanted Mexico to join the war, or at least to provide support for them.

I remember my dad, later on he said, joking, he said, "Why did they ask for us? All Mexico had was mariachis." [laughs] But I remember there was a lot of emphasis on the war in the newsreels, because that was the main source of news in those years. I remember on my trips to Albuquerque, New Mexico, Ernie Pyle was a big hero in Albuquerque. He was a war correspondent, and he wrote a lot about G.I. Joe. In fact, maybe he coined the term, I don't know. And so he used to come to Albuquerque and receive a hero's welcome.

I remember there were a lot of movies about the war. I remember in the theaters they used to have sing-along songs about U.S. life and also a lot of military songs like "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and stuff like that. And so not really understanding what was going on, we kind of were involved.

I remember the rationing. I remember the family were only allowed to buy certain things in certain quantities. I remember me and my cousin, we used to look for cigarette wrappers and get the foil, because in those years I guess foil was important, and we used to collect them in the candies and roll them up until we had big rolls, and then we used to go and sell them, and that was part of our way of contributing to the war effort. I remember that even shoes were rationed. You only were allowed to buy so many pair of shoes, according to the size of the family and all that. And my dad tells me that he used to buy boys' shoes for the girls, because they lasted longer.

But all of that, I felt that the thing that was happening overseas was something that maybe happened all the time. I didn't understand at that time much about what Hitler was doing, other than that they were trying to take over the world, whatever that meant at the time. I remember that Italy pulled out of it very quickly and that Mussolini was dealt with. He was the leader of the Italian military portion of the Axis.

I remember they had German prisoners at Washington Park in El Paso, and I remember we used to go, because, ironically, the fenced-in group of war prisoners was right next to the zoo cages, and I don't know if that was done intentionally or what, but in retrospect I said, yes, that was cruel. And I remember looking at the men and I didn't understand that they looked just like other people. We had a preconceived idea of what a German soldier would be like.

But I remember when the war was over, I was in Albuquerque. I remember specifically I was taking a bath and we heard over the radio, and I remember my cousin yelling, "The war is over! The war is over!" So I got out of the bath, got dressed quickly, and I was trying to find out what had happened. But those were the impressions that I recall having at the time. It was something that was going on. It was vague. It was hurting you sometimes in some forms, but didn't really know the reasons for the war, as most people away from it don't know. You hear things.

I think through the movies, we had a misconception of what Germans were like and as well a misconception of what Japanese people were like, because everywhere they were portrayed as cruel, ugly people, and I remember that very clearly. So we kind of learned to hate them, because we were being programmed to do that, and I suppose that they hated us too, for different reasons.

ESPINO:

So even though you were living in Mexico and most of your family and friends were Mexicans, you felt some loyalty to the United States.

00:40:46

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, I knew I was a U.S. citizen. I'd never had doubts about that. Although in some of the years that I was in school in Mexico, I felt very Mexican too, because in Mexico, on the beginning of the week and in schools you have a gathering. You pledge allegiance to the flag. You sing the national hymn or the national anthem, and like any country, I guess, you are taught some patriotism. It is instilled in you. But I had no question in my mind that I was an American all the time, although I guess if you want to think of a term, I guess I considered myself a Mexican American even then, and more so because my cousins in New Mexico, who were born in Mexico, by the way, the first three older ones, they used to make fun of me because they didn't think that I spoke well English. They thought I spoke with an accent and they made fun of me, and I thought that was cruel.

But it didn't matter, because I kept speaking English as well as I could, and, actually, when I went in the service, my English was still not up to par. I could understand it in the written form more than in the spoken form, because when you learn a language, you have to develop an ear for the language before you can speak it well, and I hadn't been exposed too much to that, except in school. But in my personal life, social life, it was always Spanish up until the time I went into the service.

When I was in the service, of course, I didn't have anyone to speak Spanish with, except that during the Korean War, at one time things were so chaotic that I was in a period where I had come back from Korea and I was recovering at a hospital, but I had felt I guess some loneliness and some need for talking Spanish to someone. So I went to the USO [United Service Organization] and the idea struck me that we could start a club. So I went into the "Stars and Stripes" office, which was the military newspaper, and asked if I could put an ad in it, and they said yes. And since I had made previous arrangement with the USO people, I put an announcement in there asking Spanish-speaking people to show up to have a meeting and set up a club. Little was I to know that the response to that call would be beyond my expectations.

When the day came, people arrived, some soldiers, some colonels, some captains, some ambassadors to Spanish-speaking countries, ambassador to Spain. In other words, a lot of people that were Spanish-speaking came because they were curious and they probably had the same need I did. And when I explained why I had called this, they understood and they liked the idea, so one of the ambassadors and a one-star general, I think it was, they suggested that we needed money to start the club, so we had a collection. We collected about fifteen hundred dollars that one night. They sent for sodas and dogs and everything else, and then we set up the next meeting, and before I knew, there was a call for me to go back to Korea. So I left the money with the USO and told them that people will be meeting there and to tell them to elect a treasurer, someone to be--because I never liked to handle other people's money anyway. But I found many years later, like in the seventies, I ran into someone who had been overseas, told me that the Latino Club in Tokyo was still there, so I guess I planted a little seed there that grew.

ESPINO:

Well, let's go back to that, to your time in Japan, because you spent some time training in the U.S. Do you remember what year it was that you went to Japan?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. Yes, I was in Fort Lewis, Washington, during the time of the earthquake which shook the West Coast all the way from Anchorage, Alaska, down into the U.S. So I think it was in 1949 that I got shipped overseas. I remember going up to the Port of San Francisco and going from there up to Seattle, Washington on a ship, and then following up the Aleutian Islands into Japan. I remember that during the travel, which lasted a long time, I was assigned to the ship master's office, so my role was to keep a duty roster, mostly, and I had some special privileges, which was good. But I guess when you're in the military, they'd look you up by military occupational specialty, and since administration and bookkeeping and all that was mine, they assigned me to that.

I wasn't very happy about being assigned to the Philippines, but I figured I have no choice, and I didn't know much about the Philippines anyway, except that MacArthur had been there and he had said something to the effect that he would return someday. But when we got to Yokohama, I found that my orders had been changed and instead of the Philippines, I would be going to Tokyo, Japan. And there was someone there to pick me up in a Jeep and drive me northwest into Tokyo, and we had a whole day to do that, so the fellow was interested enough to say, "You know, maybe you want to get to know a little bit about Japan before you get there." So he gave me the grand tour, all the way from Yokohama into Tokyo through all the little towns, showed me the devastation of the B-29 bombs, all the factories along the railroad tracks, gave me a little drive around the imperial palace, which I found interesting because Tokyo seems to be built around the palace in a circular thing. The streets go in a circle around the palace, get bigger and bigger and bigger, and then all the other streets run from there straight out.

At that time, I didn't know that that would be my area of operations for a time until the Korean War broke out. My assignment there was [unclear] as company clerk and later on as a guard, because I was in that assignment when the Korean War broke out.

00:45:33

ESPINO:

Can you talk to me a little bit the culture of the--I guess you lived on a base. Is that correct? Was it segregated between rank or ethnic group? Maybe you can paint a picture for me of what it was like.

00:50:56

HOLGUÍN:

Well, up to that time there was segregation. There were special outfits for blacks, and the rest of us, I recall--I was puzzled by the fact that my records show that I was Caucasian, and so I assume that almost all Latinos were identified as such, and only the blacks were segregated. And, of course, it was the 442nd outfit, which was made up mostly of what was called Buddha-heads; all Japanese. It's an outfit that excelled itself very much to prove its loyalty to the U.S. And interesting enough, the outfit was headed by a non-Asian.

But there was a time in there when I guess it was President [Harry S.] Truman had ordered that the different groups be integrated, so there was to be no segregation anymore, but it was to be done expeditiously but cautiously was the term that was used. And in that context, I guess they started assigning people from the black

units into white units, and it was, to me, done in an unfair way, because they would assign maybe one black to an outfit of two, three hundred people that were non-black, and it put them at a disadvantage for purposes of interacting socially and all that.

But not having had the experience of the perception of blacks in this country, I made friends with the black people, no problem, and I learned a lot about them. I learned that they have the same needs that other people do, the same aspirations, and that they can be a lot of fun, and that's how I learned to know blacks.

What happened later on was a clearer understanding of why the behaviors that some of them had. I understood why there was anger among many blacks, because I began to learn more about what was going on in the South, which I didn't know before. But my experience over there was heightened, because we also had to learn to live among the Japanese, later on to learn to live among the Koreans, and the others over there are not the same as they are here in the U.S. In the U.S. you have military bases that are set up in a very neat manner, with barracks and everything else, and everything is planned. The way it's set up over there, they adapt wherever they happen to be. Sometimes you live in tents, sometimes you live in barracks, sometimes you live in other things.

Like when I went to Japan to work in headquarters, we were assigned to the building that used to be the Japanese Royal Academy. It was very well designed for the purposes of training military personnel and keeping control. But again, we found that the Japanese were not very different people in the sense of their needs. Their way of life is a little bit different. They have a very rich culture, are very polite, most of them very polite, hard working, very hard working, very much team conscious. I've seen them in every working. They even have chants when they are doing something with a chant, they show how they're going to pull or what they're going to do. It would be equivalent to our saying, "One, two, three," but they sing it out.

ESPINO:

You didn't find there was resentment or anger, especially because of the devastation of the atomic bomb?

00:54:52

HOLGUÍN:

Well, what I felt was there was a lot of respect, and I don't know if it was out of fear or simply because we treated them right, because we were expected to treat them with dignity and respect, and they treated us that way. But we also were expected to treat them that way, so it was kind of, let's get along the best we can and help each other. And since many of them, as I mentioned to you before, were working for the military, in the sense that they would do chores that we were not required to do as we do in the U.S.

For example, when you're in a regular military base in the U.S., you scrub the floors, you wash your clothes, you do kitchen police [KP], which means you're in a roster where periodically you go and work in the kitchen peeling potatoes, swabbing the floors, washing dishes, whatever there is. Overseas we were not required to do that, because out of our pay we contributed so much towards a fund that was used to hire the Japanese people to do that work, so at the mess hall, they became the waiters, the dishwasher, the cooks. In the living quarters they had ladies mopping the floor and making the beds. We had little cleaners, laundry, a place in every company, so that on our way to work we could just go and drop our clothes there and pick them up in the afternoon. They would be neatly pressed and clean.

And so in that sense, I guess the people were happy because they had a job. They were doing something that we

appreciated, and it was not prohibited that we tip them on the side if we wanted to. We did that usually at the cleaners and in the shoeshine parlor, and that was almost a requirement. Before we went out on the town, we would stop at the [unclear] and get our boots shined, and they were very good at shining shoes. But, no, we treated each other with respect, and I didn't feel resentment, not even from the older folks, who probably had more experience as military than the younger ones.

And, of course, most of us in the military were younger people, who were not, except for the cadre, who had been career people--most of us were young people that were in the service for just two or three years, and we were not planning to stay in the service. When I worked at the chief file clerk's office, the guy that was the chief file clerk was a former military man who requested to be discharged in Japan, to stay and live there.

ESPINO:

Can you tell me a little bit about those relationships with--I'm assuming, in this case, he fell in love with somebody and wanted to stay and marry. Is that why he wanted to remain in Japan?

00:56:11

HOLGUÍN:

No. As a matter of fact, he didn't marry. As far as I know, he wasn't married. He just liked the way of life. Yes, he was a good fellow, taught me a lot about filing, because we used to use the Dewey Decimal System, which is very different from the system we use now. But, no, it was not uncommon, actually, because when I got overseas, the fellow who taught me the ropes, you might say, about where to go, what to do and how to meet people and how to greet them, was a Filipino man who had lived in the United States, who also asked to be discharged in Japan, and he was going to marry a girl. He wasn't married yet.

And I suppose that a lot of fellows found girls over there that they fell in love with. I had two or three girlfriends that gave me a perspective on dating. [laughs]

ESPINO:

Were those the first women you had dated? Because you were so young.

00:58:42

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I had dated girls here much younger, but when I was there, through this fellow I met a girl who used to work in a bank, who had a family in Sendai, which is far from Tokyo. One day she took me to meet her family, and her family was very nice to me. I found that there seemed to be two markets in Japan, one market for the native people and one market for the military, in terms of prices, in terms of what's available, because when I went to meet this family, they took me to their market, and I found that it's not like a supermarket, it's more

open. It's more like the markets in Mexico. People sell their wares and their vegetables and everything. People go and pick out what they want and pay for it.

And I was surprised that they don't have beds to sleep on. Of course, the custom may have changed, but in the regular Japanese home, they pulled their beds out of closets in the night, which is like a heavy comforter with little round pillows, and they'd just cover themselves up and in the morning they'd just shake it out, roll it up, and put it away. And so the rooms are, for the most part, fairly vacant, because everything is either hanging on their walls or in closets, and this is one reason why you're not allowed to wear shoes inside the house. You don't want to bring dirt from the outside into the house, so you're expected to take your shoes off. There is like a little alcove before you enter the house, where you take your shoes off and you put them there. Then you [unclear] them there. And all the time that you're in the house, you don't wear shoes.

ESPINO:

Can you talk to me a little bit about--I mean, that's really interesting about the actual makeup of the home, but I'm a little curious about what you did for entertainment, what all these young guys did on the weekends. Was there a place that people went to, or did they stay--

01:03:25

HOLGUÍN:

Well, most bases have movies, imported American movies, so there is no lack of that kind of entertainment. We have also clubs where they have families of the military gather and have dances and such. They, from time to time, arrange picnics. Also, I found that there are dance halls where you could go and you would pay so much to go in, and then they would give you tickets. So you would dance with a girl there, and you'd give them a ticket for a dance, and they would cash in those tickets later on, I guess, and they would use it to drink. They usually wouldn't push you to drink alcohol so much, but you could. You can drink sodas, alcohol, you can eat food, but there are those places where you can go there.

I know that I like movies a lot, so I found that there were theaters that would be showing Italian movies, for example, or American movies, and on a few occasions I went to see Japanese movies. I tried to understand what was going on, because they're put on very nicely, and they have movies about the old days, pretty much like we have movies about the old West, where there was conflict usually between the Japanese and the Chinese, or the Japanese and the Koreans, and they would get into these conflicts in the movies.

But there were things to do. And one thing that is interesting that I found contradictory, in a way, was that wherever we went, there is a bulletin board on the base in each company where they have their list of the places, with their address and everything, that are off limits to military personnel, and they're off limits because there's gambling or there's prostitution. And, of course, the young kids go and look and, "Aha. Now we know where to go." And I found that was very common everywhere we went, and I didn't really understand why people would want to go, because I was more interested in learning about the people, learning about their culture, and so I liked to travel.

I went to their theaters two or three times, was very interested in the way they dressed, the way they put on makeup, and I used to go to dance halls a lot. I had a girlfriend in one of the dance halls, whom I only dealt with in a dance hall. They were not allowed to really socialize with the military outside the hall. They had their own--that was how they earned their living. There was, as far as I know, no funny business going on. You sort of

became good friends. When you went there, they knew that you were there to dance, so they would come over. We'd spend the night there at the dance hall. We'd dance a lot and then we went back to the base, and I guess they went back home.

ESPINO:

So there were two kinds of places where you could meet women. The dance hall was one, and then there was the prostitution area. And I'm sure there are other places to meet women, but--

01:07:25

HOLGUÍN:

Well, there were also the churches. I mean, in Japan I learned about the Shinto marriages. I learned about Buddhism. I remember we used to go to Kamakura a lot, where they had one of the biggest temples, a beautiful temple, and that was the kind of thing I did, because I've always been curious about how people live, about other cultures and about places. So my thing was not really looking for prostitutes or anything else. I had one girlfriend there in the early years, like I said, that I met.

And then later on I had another very exciting, crazy relationship with another girl, who was very beautiful, and I really don't even know what attracted me to her, but it was one of those things that I never really knew much about her, but she knew a lot about me. That was right in the Ginza, which is the main shopping area, this girl comes to me and says hello, and I said hello. Yes, she approached me and said hello, what's your name. Next thing I know she says, "How would you like to come with me?" And I said, "Where do you want to go?" She said, "Let's just go and have fun." I found this girl, and I say I don't know much of her background, because this girl dressed very well and had a girl that was like a servant to her, who went everywhere she went. So she took me to a big house that looked like an inn, with a big dining area. I remember we went in there, and they treated her like she was something very special, and over the course of time I got involved with her so much so that for a while there I was very serious about the relationship, and she was too. I'm saying this in the sense that I was jealous if I saw her flirting with anybody else, and she was jealous if she saw me talking to any other girl.

But what was interesting is that she knew what was happening sometimes before we even knew. For example, she knew there I was going to be shipped to Korea. She knew when MacArthur was going to be fired, long before we knew. She knew little things like that, and sometimes I wonder if she was a spy, whatever. But I had a very, very stormy relationship with that girl, and then one day she disappeared and I never saw her again. But I knew her over the course of about a year and a half.

ESPINO:

She spoke fluent English?

HOLGUÍN:

She spoke very good English, and she was tall for a Japanese girl.

ESPINO:

And your other girlfriends, did they also speak English?

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, yes. Some of them speak better than others, but, yes, they all--and, of course, you tried to learn a little bit of their language too, and you learned key words that helped you get by when you're not around English speakers.

ESPINO:

Can you give me a couple of examples of some of the words that you learned?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the most [unclear] is you say, "Konnichi wa," "Kombawa," "Wataginoatoa" [phonetic]. It's many words that you learn that help you get by.

ESPINO:

Did you try to find out where this girl went? Or did you try to find out anything about her?

01:09:34

HOLGUÍN:

Well, like I say, I never knew much about her, because she wouldn't talk much about her life. But there was this girl that was always with her, not like a guard, more like a servant, because she would do things that the girl

needed without her even asking for them. She would also, rather than request something, order her to do things, and she would do it. And whenever I asked, "Ashiko, where do you live?" "Oh, you don't want to know." But, yes, she was probably one of the most serious relationships I had up to that time. I had had girlfriends here and there that I dated and went to the movies and things like that, but she was probably the most serious relationship I had up to that time.

ESPINO:

Do you think that the women were treated with respect by the military? In, I guess, what you were able to witness.

HOLGUÍN:

Well, no. I think there were some guys that are jackasses wherever they go, and there were such guys over there too. There's some that think that they can push their way around, and there are some guys that think they're superior to anybody else, especially to someone who's not of their own kind. There were some that treated the girls as if they were all prostitutes, treated the men with little respect. So, yes, the dignity and respect I talk about was more prevalent, but there were those guys that really made us be ashamed of who we were, of what we were doing there, because they--even when you negotiate a price with someone, you can do bartering and you can do trade offs and you can negotiate, but there are some guys that simply would get to the point where if they didn't get what they wanted, they'd go, "You are a thief," and things like that. They would be very insulting. So, you know, it's unfortunate that there were those guys, and I think in many ways the ugly American syndrome is there too.

ESPINO:

You mentioned in the last interview that you had a chance to see General McCarthy *[means Douglas MacArthur]. Can you describe his--I don't know if his personality came through when you--even though you didn't have a chance to talk to him, were you able to get some perception of him as a person, as a man, as a military official?

01:19:02

HOLGUÍN:

Well, very much so in terms of personality. He used to have his quarters away from downtown Tokyo, and as I hear it, he used to enjoy movies almost privately, but he had the staff there and where he was could join him to watch the movies, especially movies that were brought in from the U.S. His travel was mostly from his living quarters on a special vehicle that had the five-star flags on both sides. He traveled down the Daishi building, which is where the headquarters of the Far Eastern Command were, were almost across the street from the

imperial palace.

I remember they used to come on, and the car would stop in front of the main entrance, and there were two honor guards there. The honor guards, it's hard to describe, but they were impeccably dressed. They wore helmets that looked like mirrors, shiny, beautiful scarves, very neatly pressed uniforms, shiny boots with white leggings. I think the uniforms were tailored to fit them perfectly. They had their M-1 rifles with white slings, and as the general got out of the car, there was one of the guards there that would open the door for him, click his heels, and then that would automatically start a chain reaction all the way through into the building, where the salute was almost mechanical. It was just [makes sound], but you could see it in unison all the way.

He walked in very fast. He was tall and had a long stride. He would walk into the building and then inside the building, at the point that he entered, you could feel that tension, that electricity, and you could hear heels clicking all over the place, and every click demanded some kind of action until he went into his office. I guess in his office he had a conference room, so whenever he needed to talk to staff, that's where people would go. I never got to talk to him. I think we crossed eyes a couple of times, but, no, I never got to talk to him, he never got to talk to me. But I got to see him in action a lot every day. In fact, we looked forward to seeing that, because it's hard to describe. I don't think I've ever seen that precision in a movie. I mean, it was a precision that was all the way through, into the building, and the Daishi building is a big building. It's almost like the White House. Daishi building means building number one. That was the government building, I guess.

And then, well, we heard when he went to the Inchon landing, but I didn't see that. We saw films of it. But I do remember when he went back from Wake Island, got his Medal of Honor again, and he was relieved from his duty. But we already knew, because the word was around through the grapevine that, like I said, the Japanese people already knew. My girlfriend had known long before we heard about it. And so when MacArthur left his office for the last time to go to the airport, he came to Daishi building first. I don't know if it was to say goodbye to his staff or whatever, but when he did that, the streets were already lined up with people like if it was a big parade, and it was only his staff car with about three vehicles following, and then from there to the airport, people bowing to him, which showed that they had a lot of admiration and respect for the man, because he gave them back their dignity and he treated them fairly and provided a system for them that was acceptable to them in every way, provided them for ways to make a living, to go back to whatever normal life they may have had, and demanded that the military occupation not be a hindrance to them. So in that context, I remember the Japanese people very polite.

There are some things in the culture that is interesting, because I guess some people would be very willing to be Westernized; one might say that. And some people were very nationalistic, very traditional, so in the streets you could see women in kimonos with high hairdos, and then you could see women in Western suits and high heels, and the same thing with men. There would be men that were dress as [unclear] or whatever, and then there would be men that would be dressed in very Western attire.

ESPINO:

So that brings me to another question. That is, being a non-Japanese and being part of the occupying force, how did your girlfriends' families treat you? Were they open? Were they resentful of you?

01:24:45

HOLGUÍN:

Well, when I went to Sendai, it was an interesting trip for me, because they had these electrical high-speed trains. I don't know if you've heard about it, but, I mean, they travel at very high speed and very efficiently. My first impression when we got there is the transportation was very modern, even for our own standards at the time, even today. But we got off at Sendai and the first thing I noticed is there were no military officials anywhere. I mean, this was obviously a Japanese community, but I wasn't, that I could detect, being seen as a stranger. We got off, then we had to go downstairs to the streets.

Then we had to walk through a market, and we walked about three blocks to the girl's house. The girl had a sister, a brother, and mom and dad, and they had I think you might say a modest home. By no means was it a very rich, large house, but neither was it very small. But it did have a little pool in the backyard with a little bridge and fish in the pool and a nice garden. They had the center of a--the family, I guess, was in the center of the main room they had like a brazier, you might say, sort of like a Mexican bracero. It was on fire, and they always have a pot of tea or something on top brewing. The table is round, and people sit not on the floor but on little cushions, but no chairs. So if you're not accustomed to it, you can get cramps in your legs, because it's not something that customarily we do. But for them it seems to be very easy, even the old folks. They either sit on their knees, like this, or they sit with their legs crossed.

And I was treated very nice. I was expected to stay overnight. When they set up the place, I remember something that was kind of odd, and I never asked the question as to why, but I remember that as they set up the beds on the floor, I was instructed to sleep at a place between the two girls, my girl and her sister. And I felt uncomfortable about that, but that's the way it was. The next morning the father took me into town and showed me around. Most of the conversation we had was [unclear]. I appreciated the fact that he was showing me the town and probably trying to tell me what they were, but I didn't understand much of it. But the town was a nice town. There was a lot of activity. People were very polite to me, never saw any signs of anyone being shocked to see a soldier around there, because we had to wear our uniforms all the time.

And really, I was very sad one time I noticed that Yoko wasn't coming around anymore, so I went to Sendai to look for her, and I remember her sister trying to explain to me that Yoko had gone to a hospital and that she had died. That's what I understood, but I'm not sure that that's what happened. But I never saw Yoko again. But I have memories of her. She was a well-educated girl who worked in a bank. We went to a movie a couple of times, went to dances, went to a fair once.

ESPINO:

And then when did you head out to Korea? That was in--

01:29:42

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. In Korea, I went twice. The first time was, let's see, I guess I went in September of 1950. By then the Inchon landing had taken place, who were pushing the North Koreans out, because the purpose of the Inchon landing was to break and separate the troops so that if any North Koreans had gotten beyond the 38th Parallel south, they would be trapped and we'd capture them, and they would push up the other ones.

But once we were in the Yellow River, I remember that they sent out by parachute to send crates of Puerto Rican rum, and so there was a lot of rum to go around. People were drinking a lot, and I remember that at that time MacArthur was pushing--we heard that MacArthur was pushing for the troops to go into Manchuria, which is

north of Korea. Once you cross the Yellow River, you're in Manchuria, and as I understand, [President Harry S.] Truman did not want that, and that was part of the conflict that caused MacArthur to get fired.

But anyhow, if we had gone, I don't know what would have happened, but I know that we were caught by surprise when the Manchurian troops started coming down. They were not Korean anymore. They were the Chinese, and I remember that they were coming in large numbers, almost like a mass of people, and their uniforms were like cushioned comforters, made them look big. They were not uniforms like we had. And I remember me and other people getting caught in a little bit of a peninsula just southeast of North Korea, where the only way to go was the ocean or the Japanese, the Japanski. Men were panicking, because we had been caught by surprise, and I remember in that setting I guess we were trying to load the LSTs and get out of there.

And I remember what I assumed was an officer, because he had a handgun and was aiming at me, and I clearly remember, like a dream, seeing him shoot, but I don't remember being hit until someone said to me, "You're wounded." And then after I saw that and felt the warmth, I guess I passed out, and the next thing I knew, I was in a Norwegian hospital ship. I forget the name of that ship, but I know it was a Norwegian hospital ship, where they put us there for taking us back to Tokyo. Then I was in Tokyo from there until, see, from December until June of '51, and then I was sent back to Korea again, and that's where I stayed for the duration, until I was ready to come back to the States for discharge.

But so my stay in Japan was in two parts. The first part was when I had one assignment--when I got out of the hospital, I was assigned again to another part of the--

ESPINO:

Korea, right? You're talking about Korea?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. When I went to Korea the second time, I went to the Port of Pusan. That was the main port of entry for anything that was coming into Korea from the U.S. or anywhere else.

ESPINO:

Did you see the Koreans as different than the Japanese, like you would think somebody from the United States was different from somebody from Mexico, or?

HOLGUÍN:

No. The only thing that I see, and I never understood very well, is that the Korean culture is different in the sense that men wear hats, and the types of hats that they wear say something about who they are or their status in society. They're not made out of felt. They're sort of meshed, and they have little hats with a brim, had little hats with a thing here, like little hats like a bullfighter's with [unclear]. They had little hats like just a little cap without any brims or anything, and those say something about the man. The women, of course, have a dress that is not like the kimonos. It's a dress that usually they have a very high waist and then they have like a little vest that goes over just above their waist, like it's just an ornament. They don't wear g_____ like the Japanese. They wear like a rubber shoe, one solid piece. I guess they must make them in a mold or somewhere. But they're very impractical, because it rains a lot in Korea, there's a lot of mud on the ground a lot of times, and so this one can be worn and washed to dry and wear again.

ESPINO:

Like culturally, did you find any difference in their treatment that they gave you? Was that different?

01:36:18

HOLGUÍN:

I think the Koreans I found more secretive, more competitive. I think most of the women I knew were working for the military. We used to go to the same church. I met a girl there in the church. We became good friends. We used to take walks in the city. One time we took a walk into the breakwater. You know what that is? It kind of like goes out into the ocean, and I remember we walked and we went, and we were so involved in our conversation, we didn't realize that the tide was coming up. [laughs] Before we knew it, we had to run, because the waters were already coming over, and that was a good experience.

She used to like to eat American food, so we used to go where you could find that. But she used to take me also to places where they have Korean food, and she knew that I liked seafood, so we found that a lot of the Korean restaurants have, well, there are some that are open, but there are many restaurants that have like little cubicles where you can go and eat privately, without being--this family I knew I guess were appreciative of the friendship that we had. She had a brother and two sisters and a mother and a father, and I think that they had been farther up north when the North Koreans pushed down beyond the 38th Parallel, and they had been forced to come into Pusan because of all the turmoil. Because they used to talk about their home up north.

I remember when I left, they came to the port to wave goodbye. And I remember she gave me some beautiful bronze bookends, which got misplaced on the [unclear] when I got back home. But I remember she cried, and I remember I saw the family being concerned that she was crying. But they were all there waving goodbye, I guess saying, "It's been good to know you."

And other than that, really, most of the girls I knew, and the women, not just girls, worked in some capacity for the military, because there are so many things that are done that you don't want to have soldiers doing if you can have someone else, and I guess there was enough trust or enough way of clearing some of the people to come and work for us.

ESPINO:

And then you left Korea because you were wounded and returned to the United States?

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, no. I got wounded and I went to Japan and I stayed there, and then I got reassigned back to Korea. So it was the second time I was in Korea that I got to meet this girl.

ESPINO:

And you were not involved in combat at that time?

HOLGUÍN:

No, not the second time. The second time, being in the Port of Pusan was very peaceful. I saw a lot of ships coming in and leaving, saw a lot of troops coming in and leaving. I saw a lot of equipment and merchandise being unloaded at the port and being left on the ground for anybody to pick up, and I mean anybody. So there was really, to me, more stuff being shipped out than we needed, and some of it was being left, because in Korea, everybody was driving a Jeep, and there were [unclear] U.S. military Jeeps that nobody was keeping really tabs on.

ESPINO:

So what was it like going back to the United States after that experience? Several years abroad in a country very different from both the countries that you knew, Mexico and the U.S.

01:40:42

HOLGUÍN:

Well, in retrospect, I think there is more difference, to me, between the Mexicans and the Americans than it is with the people I knew and saw in Japan or Korea. But then, Mexicans are more nationalistic, they're more regional-oriented. They'll even fight each other if they happen to be from different regions. And I'm surprised, because I went to Mexico in my travels, and what I saw over there is not very much like it is in the northern states. Being in Tamaulipas, the people are very different. In Torreón and Coahuila, they're different from they are in Chihuahua. Over here in Sinaloa and Sonora and Baja California, they're different, and then if you go way

down south, like you go to Michoacán or Veracruz or Campeche, the people are different. It's just not so much in their looks but in their behavior.

I remember one time I took my wife to Veracruz, and we stopped by way of Mexico and took her cousin and her husband and another friend with us to Veracruz, and this cousin's husband was trying to show me, I guess, how to negotiate with a [unclear]. The response he got was not a very nice one, because he was trying to show off, and the guy said, "Look. It's what we do for a living, and you're not going to try to cut us down, because that's what we charge."

ESPINO:

So can you talk to me a little bit about your trip back? You said you came on the train, I think. You mentioned a little bit--I'm not sure if this was part of the interview that wasn't recorded, but you mentioned about the train.

01:44:51

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. When we left Pusan, we stopped in Yokohama, but I guess it was just to pick up cargo or something, and then we came to Seattle. That's where we landed. From there we stopped for one night, I guess it was a reception camp or something like that, and the next day we were put on a train heading east. We went, I guess, through Idaho, maybe Wyoming. I don't really remember what other states we were going through, but I remember that we were displaying a lot of camaraderie, because we'd been through similar things for almost a couple of years, and we shared many things in common. But I recall as we entered the Texas panhandle through Amarillo and Lubbock and that area, that the black soldiers started moving to other train cars. We asked, "Where are you guys going?" And the response was, "We're in Texas. We have to stay segregated over here. We don't belong." And so some of those guys we never saw again, because when we got to Fort Sam Houston, we were segregated. I thought that was very sad, and it made me feel very uneasy.

But then when we were allowed to go into town, we went and we stopped at a bar. We were downright refused service. So we went into a restaurant, and we were refused service. And so here we were, not really knowing what to do, and then we asked someone, who said, "Well, if you really want to have fun or you want to get something to eat, you go to these places here." And so we went into West San Antonio, which is where the Mexican barrio is, and it was all right there. But we felt strange having come back from overseas and being dressed in military uniforms and being told that they wouldn't serve us.

So all things considered, the idea of diversity may be very much alive, but it's not yet a reality, even in this day and age. We go through the motions many times, but when push comes to shove, we find that it isn't so.

ESPINO:

How about in the Mexican town; did they serve African Americans there, in Texas, do you think?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, like I say, by that time we were not together anymore, so I don't know what happened to them.

ESPINO:

So you wouldn't find African Americans in a Mexican barrio at that time?

HOLGUÍN:

No. No, and come to think of it, I have gone back to San Antonio on many occasions since, because we have conferences and conventions there periodically, and I didn't see many blacks around, so they must live in some other part of town.

ESPINO:

So do you remember how you felt? Do you remember feeling any emotion in particular?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I felt strange in the sense that I didn't understand why, because when you're young, there are many things you don't understand. [Recorder turned off]

ESPINO:

Okay, this is the last. You can finish with the question. That will be the last question, and we'll break.

HOLGUÍN:

Which was that?

ESPINO:

Just about, can you recall a specific emotion that you felt coming back and being discriminated against?

01:49:28

HOLGUÍN:

No. I just felt inadequate as a person. I felt unworthy. I didn't understand why, because like I said, when you're young, you don't put things in the same perspective as you do when you're older and had more experience and know more about life. When you're young, you're foolish about a lot of things. You're ignorant about a lot of things, and you don't always understand the human condition. You don't understand human behavior, and so you're just like a child. You just accept that that's the way it is.

And I've learned that because most of my adult life I've worked with children, and children are very good at that. No matter how bad things are, they accept them as they are, and they don't complain. It's until you get older and you have something to compare your experiences with that you realize that's not the way it's supposed to be. But even to this day, I have this problem with my son, because he's still at that point where he says, "That's the way things are." And I say, "But if I wanted them to be different, why can't they be different? And if I can help change them for the better, don't I have a responsibility to try to do that?" And he says, "Well, but you've worked all your life trying to help people, and they don't appreciate it." And I said, "But that's not why I do things."

And my wife says I'm her mentor, and I guess I am only in the sense that I helped her be in places where she could open her eyes and see the world in a different context, and that's why she's become the type of person she is, because she still thinks that we can change the world. And maybe we do, but sometimes it's hard to perceive how the world has changed. Someone said to me once, "If you go to the beach and you move a grain of sand, you have changed the world." And I said, "But does that make a difference?"

ESPINO:

Well, I think I'm going to leave it there. That's beautiful. We'll pick up in your post-military years next time. Thank you so much. [End of interview]

Session Three (April 6, 2009)

00:00:31

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino. Today is April 6, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the SEIU offices in Pasadena, California.

Okay, Mr. Holguín, last time we left off after you left Korea and you returned to the United States. I guess we're going to pick up there, but I was wondering, why did you decide to go to Texas and not to Mexico, because I think your mother was in Mexico at that time?

00:06:53

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. I'm glad you brought that up, because I believe that I had reached that point in my life when I may have had some doubts about my identity. Having served in the military here in the U.S., and having been raised in Mexico, there was the idea whether I would be able to go back to Mexico and get used to the way of life, because the way of life is different, and I wasn't too sure. So I went to Texas and I was there for a while, but I did go visit my mom.

I found when I went to Mexico that a couple of girlfriends that I had known before I went, I had kept correspondence with one of them and not with the other. The other was the niece of who was then the governor of the State of Chihuahua, and I found that they expected me to make a decision about marrying her, and at that time, marriage was the furthest thing from my mind, and I let this girl's mother know in no uncertain terms. So they got very upset. I was told that she had a suitor who wanted to marry her and had proposed, but she was holding off until I got back. So by me telling them I had no interest in getting married, that freed her up to do whatever she wanted to do, and she did, in fact, get married. It was a guy from Fort Bliss, Texas, who was at that time in the military, and I understand once they got married, they moved somewhere because he got transferred, and then he got released. So I never heard from her again.

The other girl was one whom I had known since childhood, you might say, and we had kept correspondence, but only as friends. And when I got back, somehow we began to get involved romantically, and her brother, who was a very good friend of me, also since childhood, got very upset. He was so upset that I heard he had vowed to kill me, because I dared start dating his sister. And I couldn't understand that, because he knew me, and I don't know what he imagined I was going to do.

But anyhow, at that time was when I decided, things here are too different, and I really don't want to stay anymore. So I told my mom I was going to rent an apartment in El Paso, and since I was working in El Paso, I would be going to Juarez only to visit from time to time. I got a job with a painting company where I had worked before I went in the service, but found that it didn't serve my purposes. Things had probably changed in some ways in the city, and the company was leaning more towards house painting rather than to advertising, and the one fellow who had been my mentor, together with the artist who had gotten me started painting, were going to start their own business. But at that time they couldn't afford to have some extra help, so I had to look for a job elsewhere.

I began to work at a hotel in El Paso. Let's see, the hotel was called the Knox Hotel. It was owned by a fellow who also owned one of the hotels in San Diego, and so he only came to visit El Paso once in a while. This hotel also was in the same building where they had the Continental Trailways bus station, and the hotel also had a cafeteria, and so in that setting I met this young girl who was running the elevator in the hotel, and after I guess a couple of months we began to date. The dating went on for a few months, and at one point she took me to Canutillo [Texas], where she lived, to visit her folks and her family, and to reciprocate, I took her to Juarez to meet my mother.

And in that setting, we somehow decided that we were meant for each other, so we made plans to get married.

And it was quick, because by December of that same year we got married, on December twenty-fifth, of all dates.

ESPINO:

[laughs] What year was this?

HOLGUÍN:

That was in 1952.

ESPINO:

1952. Okay, before we go on, I'm really interested in finding out about your marriage and what it was like the first years, but before that, I would like to maybe get a little sense of what El Paso was like at the time ethnically. How was it different from Juarez, not ethnically, but visually, the streets, maybe the buildings?

00:12:40

HOLGUÍN:

Well, there are some basic differences. For example, a lot of the people in El Paso looked to Juarez for entertainment, because El Paso is in a dry county. Bars are only allowed to serve beer, no hard liquor, and so people went to Mexico, because over there even the age didn't matter. If you had money to pay for it, you could drink even if you were a minor, and so that was one basic difference. There were no real dance halls that I remember in El Paso, but there were a lot of them in Juarez. There were a lot of nightclubs. There were no nightclubs in El Paso, no liquor. There were maybe two or three private clubs, where that was different.

The houses were different, of course, because in El Paso, if you look at Old El Paso as opposed to the new El Paso in northeast of the city, many of the buildings are made out of brick. The new El Paso, which is in the northeast area, is made out of wood construction, very much like here in California, whereas in Juarez, most of the buildings are made of adobe, and adobe is very popular. There are adobe factories all over the place, and, of course, people can make their own adobes. All you need is little frames and put mud in them with straw and let them dry, and you've got adobe. So that was one basic difference.

The other one was that El Paso is very conservative. The stores are very much like they are throughout the United States. They have firm prices, whereas in Juarez, the stores extend out into the sidewalk, and you can be walking on the streets and there's merchandise all over the place. You don't even have to go into the store. So the merchandising is different.

I suppose also that the way the salesmen approach people--in El Paso, there are no real salespeople that try to sell you. They work in a place. You go in. You're looking for something, you pick it up, and you go and pay for it, and that's what they call salesmanship. Over there, people actually try to sell you things, and if you show any interest, I guess they have a range of prices that they can deal with, so that you negotiate for a price if you are interested in something. And that becomes an art, because you watch people, and one offers something. They'll say, "Well, no I can't," and it can go on very interesting.

I'll give you an example. I took my wife to Mexico City some years later, and we went to Xochimilco. I had seen some guayaberas there and a jorongo, and the jorongo that I saw was very beautiful. They call them ponchos here. And I inquired about the price. They offered it to me for sixty dollars, American dollars. And I said, "Well, thank you."

We walked along and about two hundred feet later on I saw another jorongo just like that, and so I asked the fellow, "How much is it?"

"Oh, it's forty dollars."

I went, "That's nice," and I went on. We went around and coming back to the other aisle there's another jorongo just like it, and this time it's gone down to thirty dollars. Finally, to make a long story short, I came into this next place, and it was being offered for twenty dollars. What I found is that the same fellow with whom I'd seen that jorongo first, had been bringing it out around to the other places until we find some price that was acceptable to me. So I bought it, but that was about forty dollars less than what they were asking, and you can imagine--

ESPINO:

Excuse me. I'm going to pause it. [Recorder turned off]

ESPINO:

Okay, we're back.

00:18:08

HOLGUÍN:

And, of course, a basic difference that was there also is the monetary unit. I remember when I was a very small child, we used to go to Mexico, and I remember that the value of the dollar was two pesos. It was not until many years later that the value of the peso began to lose power, and it went out to five to one, eight to one, ten to one. It went up to twelve to one, and when people negotiated, they all had to think in terms of the actual amount in either one unit or the other. And almost everywhere you went, especially more in Mexico, was that you would see the price tags in dollars and in Mexican money, so you learned math very quickly. You'd say, "This is going to cost me how much? Let me see. How much is that in," the other amount.

And I said before that Juarez and El Paso, like many other border towns, is very interdependent on the other,

such that a lot of people would go to Mexico to buy vegetables, to buy meat and some other things that are not available in El Paso, and people from Juarez would go to El Paso to buy some groceries that at that time were not available, maybe like canned goods and so on, and clothes. Some clothes are better and cheaper in one side than in the other, and people who go to either one can compare where they can get the better deal, and this is why I mean it's interdependent.

We find that unlike the situation today of the so-called undocumented workers, in El Paso you didn't have such a thing, because there are people like us who are U.S. citizens. We'd get a passport with our picture and all the data and everything else. But then people who were Mexican citizens would get a border-crossing passport as well, and some would get a working permit, so they could come to work in El Paso and go back. And a lot of the people that only had a border crossing could also go into El Paso in the morning, go to work, and then in the afternoon come to Juarez, home, and nobody would know the difference. So there were a lot of people in El Paso that were from Mexico, working and earning a living, and there were people from El Paso that went to work in Juarez. I knew at least four or five people who had their own businesses in Juarez, so it's a very interesting situation.

Most people living in Mexico, in Juarez, have learned to speak English. It's a necessity, especially if you're going to be working in the business world, because you deal a lot with the people on the other side. Whereas many of the people in El Paso, especially those who are not Latino, they don't feel they have to learn Spanish, because the people on the other side are very accommodating. But those are some of the basic differences, I think.

There are others that are interesting. I remember that in Juarez there were Mexican movies, but there were also American-made movies with subtitles, and that was helpful to some of us, because we learned reading. It was very helpful. The subtitles don't stay very long, so you had to learn to read fast. But you also learned a lot about the U.S. and their customs, their history and everything else, as portrayed in the movies. Whereas in El Paso there was only two theaters, I remember, that showed Mexican movies, and that was El Teatro Colón and El Teatro Alcázar, and there were right across from each other on El Paso Street. All the rest of the theaters were American English-made movies. So that's basically one of the things I remember that were very different.

ESPINO:

You said something about returning from the war, or returning from service and being a little confused about your identity, so this kind of talks about that, where you have places where you're from a place that's interdependent. Can you talk a little bit about that?

00:26:23

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I think that the discriminatory experiences that I had got me to thinking, and I'm not sure that I was consciously aware of what was happening to me, but I knew that I didn't feel the same. It was not a question of loyalties. It was a question of--I don't know if it was feeling unworthy, but feeling that there were certain things I would not be able to do because of that. Although in El Paso there wasn't that much of a discrimination, at least not overt, there was that in Lubbock, Texas, when I went to the Veterans Administration Hospital to be evaluated for my disability. It was different in San Antonio. I had gone to other cities and noticed it.

But I also remember that when I used to go to Albuquerque and Gallup, New Mexico, I didn't have such

experience, because the population of New Mexico to begin with is very small, and about 46 percent of the population were of Mexican extraction, although some of them thought they were Hispanic. But, yes, I didn't experience discrimination in New Mexico at all, because there's a lot of Navajo. There are many reservation areas. Probably New Mexico has the most Indian reservations in the whole country, and so there's Navajos [unclear], and they're the ones on the lower rung of the totem pole, even lower than Mexican. And that is true still today.

So, yes, it was not the same. But in other parts of Texas later on, I found the discrimination still goes on even today. And that, I believe, is what gave me a feeling of not being sure what I wanted to do or where I wanted to be. But I knew that going to visit Mexico, my feeling was different. I didn't feel as comfortable as I used to. I felt many of the customs were not as I remembered them.

Oh, and then, of course, my mom had gotten married, and I found that when I returned I met her husband, who was younger than she was, who had talked her into selling the bakeries and opened up a meat market and a store. But they were opened up in his name, and when I began to question that, he suggested that what we should do is buy a plot of land somewhere and build a house. So we did, and we built a house. The plot was big enough so we built a big house and a small house, and the small house was to be mine in case I chose to be married, and the big house was for my mom and her husband. But the house being made of adobe and being made in an area of the city where there was no pavements, there were no sidewalks, it was, in appearance I guess, very rural compared to what I had become accustomed to, and although it was my own, I still didn't feel very comfortable, and that's when I began to think that I should stay in the U.S.

And when I met this girl and we decided to marry, one of the things we did was started looking into model homes. We signed a contract to purchase one. We picked the model home we wanted. My mother-in-law to be went and looked at the model homes and picked the colors that we wanted the house painted on and the rooms in the house, and she was very happy that her daughter was going to marry someone who was thinking ahead, because at that time I don't think any of the other sons-in-law had even ventured to buy a house. I was the youngest one and was going to be the first one. And meantime, we rented an apartment on Yandell Street, which is right downtown, in the heart of downtown. It was a nice apartment house. There were only six apartments, and we lived in one.

But one of the things that I've failed to mention is that this girl I met had a baby, and I didn't know that until we had dated several times and she said she had a surprise for me. So one day she brought her baby girl with her, and I immediately fell in love with that little girl, and I think that's what prompted us to get married. I wanted to make things right, and I wanted to raise that little girl. And so when we married, we moved into the apartment that I had and were waiting for the house that was being built.

My wife was raised in the town of Canutillo, which is about seventeen miles north of El Paso, and at that time it was in the county, but it was not part of the city like it is today. And so for all intents and purposes, she was raised in a community that had probably a population of about twenty-five hundred people, a very small town. Everybody knew everybody else. They had a couple of motels for people who came by the highway and needed to rest before they got to El Paso. They had three gas stations and two grocery stores, a very small town, one church, one high school, and one elementary school.

ESPINO:

Was she Mexicana, Americana, or was she--

HOLGUÍN:

Well, her parents were--I think her mother was from Chihuahua, probably of Tarahumara descent. Her father was, I think, an Isleta Indian. Isleta is the tribe that used to be up close to Albuquerque, but then part of the tribe moved to about ten miles east of El Paso, to a place they named Isleta also. Isleta, I guess, is a border town with the valley of Juarez. I forget which little town is on the other side. But that's where the Waterfill & Frazier whiskey distillery. And I recall him talking about--he was a sheepherder, because I remember he used to take the grandkids to the caves where he used to get the herd and get away from the bad weather, like when it rained or it got too windy, and the kids used to like to hear the stories he used to tell. A wonderful man he was.

So she came from a very small city. She also, for some reason, had not completed school. I think she had dropped out of the third grade. So when we talked about getting married, there were some concerns on my side of the family, not so much from my mother but from all my aunts.

ESPINO:

Your tutors.

00:28:57

HOLGUÍN:

They felt that there was a big difference in culture, there was a big difference in education and orientation, and they felt that the marriage wasn't going to work. But I was determined to prove them wrong.

ESPINO:

Was she very beautiful?

00:31:15

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I don't know. You'll get to see a picture of her later on. No, it was just you fall in love, and you never know really why. But, yes, I thought she was, and once we started living together, I found that she was very immature, very selfish, and so we started having problems almost from the start. Once we started living together, we started having problems, and some of them were really not resolvable, because she was very--how would I say it--very determined to have her way. And whenever we had disagreements, she would go, get on the bus and go to Dad in Canutillo, and that pattern became such that at one time she left, and unlike other times when I'd go and pick her up, I just let her go.

And my father-in-law came by the apartment one day and said, "What's happening?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Why haven't you gone for her?" I said, "Because I didn't take her over there to begin with." I said, "You're doing the wrong thing by accepting her when she goes and not asking why." I said, "If that's the way we're going to resolve our problems, things ain't going to work." I said, "You have an obligation to tell your daughter that marriage is something we have to work on." And he said, "Well, but you know, she's kind of crazy." And I found this to be true, not that she was crazy, but that she behaved in very strange ways at times. But then she is a Gemini, so she's two personalities. But anyhow--

ESPINO:

She didn't work? Was she a stay-at-home mom?

00:35:46

HOLGUÍN:

She's been a stay-at-home mom all her life. But at that time, we got to the point where I said, "You know, we have to split up." And that is when I went and told my mom, "You know, I'm going to go back and pick up where I left off," meaning, of course, go back to bullfighting. And so I picked up what I had in the form of what I needed and went straight to Mexico City.

Mexico City at that time had four bull rings. They had the old El Torreo, which had been rebuilt. They had the new Plaza México, which was at that time the biggest bullfight ring in the world, and then they had two smaller ones. They had Rancho del Charro, which they used a lot for a lot of ranchero roping and bull riding and all that, but also for bullfighting. And there was another one called Puente de Vigas, which as the name implies was a very modest bull ring made mostly of wood, yes. And so you had a chance, depending on the level of popularity that you had, where you would fight, and at that time I went to fight in el Rancho del Charro, and then I did one festival at Plaza México, which is the huge bull ring, beautiful.

And then we arranged to go and do a couple of fights out of the city, and in one of those, something happened to me that had never happened before. I found that I was not invincible. I found out that I was not immune to being hurt by a bull, and so a bull hooked me with the horns and started tossing me around, and to make a long story short, gave me a good beating. It didn't gore me in the sense that the horn penetrated my skin, but it beat me enough so that I had a lot of bruises and put me in the hospital. And even though I was in the hospital only for two days, it gave me enough time to think that maybe that's not what I wanted to do the rest of my life.

And so not knowing what to do, I packed my things, evaluated what I would be able to do, found that I had enough money to come back to the States, but instead of coming to El Paso, that's when I decided to go to Los Angeles. And although I didn't have any specific plans, when I got here to Los Angeles, I thought about my father, whom I had not seen since I was about five years old, and interestingly enough I started checking into the telephone directory for Los Angeles, which at that time was only one. And I looked it up, and I found my dad's name in there. So I called and he answered the phone. I told him who I was. He asked me a few questions, asked me where I was. I told him, and he said, okay. We talked a little bit more and hung up. I went in to take a shower, and when I was getting dressed I heard a phone from the lobby and found that someone was there to see me. So I told them to send him up, and the bell captain brought him, and that's when I met my father again. And he came with his wife, whom I didn't know either. And my father says, "Okay, we need you to come with us."

ESPINO:

How did you feel at that moment?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, many times--like I said, my mom brought me up to think that my father was a very upright person, a person who was well respected in the community, who had very high standards and all that, so that's the image I had of him, and at the time that I met him, I had no bad feelings. I was happy to see him, probably with a little bit of reservation. And when he offered to take me to their house, I agreed because I had not much of another choice. I was running out of money. And so we got in his old '39 Dodge, it was one of those square, boxy cars, and we drove to East L.A., and that's when I found out that I had three sisters and two brothers, also whom I had never met.

And so I was told to stay there. The following day my dad gave me five dollars. He says, "I don't know if you have any money, but these five dollars ought to hold you till you get a job." [laughter] So I went out to look for work, and the very first day I found a job in downtown L.A. setting type at a print shop, which again was not what I wanted, but I had had experience doing that in school. I worked at that for a while, but nearby there was a place where they were looking for someone, and it was Calloway Mills. They used to make carpeting, and that was off of 1st Street, right over the bridge coming in from East L.A. So I got a job there and I worked there for a while. I was getting good pay, so I went and bought a car so I had something that I could drive, and I stayed on until somehow in August of 1953, I had the urge to go back to El Paso.

So I told my dad, "I'm going to give you the car. I'm going to go back, because I need to go back." And my dad was concerned that I really had no reason to go. He said, "You have an opportunity to start your new life here, and you shouldn't be going out to where you already had bad experiences." But anyhow, I went back, and on the same day that I arrived in El Paso, my wife was going into labor. And I don't know how she found out that I was there. Someone must have called her. So we went to Canutillo, and we took her to the hospital in Anthony, and the doctor said, "Leave her here. We'll give you a call." By the time we got back to the house, we got a call that she had a baby. That was my firstborn, my son David [Holguín].

Interesting thing about Anthony, it is a small town south of Las Cruces, but half of the town is in Texas, and half of the town is in New Mexico, and right on the dividing line is a placard that tells you that. The hospital where my son was born has the entrance in the Texas side, but the rest of the hospital is on the New Mexico side.

00:40:26

ESPINO:

That's interesting.

00:45:32

HOLGUÍN:

Very strange. And I was puzzled when my son, who is now a grandfather, showed me his autobiography. Yes, it was an autobiography, because he put it on the Internet to advertise his avocation, and he said he was born in Canutillo. And I questioned him. I says, "What makes you think you were born in Canutillo?" So I realized that over the years, your memory deceives you, and you make up stories that aren't really there. Because he talked about being raised by a single mom, which isn't true. I raised him till he was twelve. He talked about being raised in Canutillo, which isn't true. We used to visit a lot, and he had cousins there. Canutillo, it's by the highway, and on the other side of the highway, parallel to the highway is the Río Grande, and so we used to be able to go across. But he talks about going swimming to the Río Grande, making mud figures, figuras de barro, and pretty much living there and learning from his cousins. I says, "You know, you stop and think about it, the only two cousins that you had there moved to Nebraska when you were a little kid, so that isn't true either." We had to revise his biography, because as I say, it was so full of errors. And he said, "But Mom never told me any of that." I said, "No, because you imagined a lot of that stuff, and your memory fails you in terms of what happened and when it happened." I said, "Think back and remember. We moved to California when you were a little kid, and we used to visit every summer."

We used to go there for Christmas sometimes, and he had six aunts, but three of them were not even married yet, were still going to school. And the two older ones, one lived here in California and later on moved to Texas, and the other one lived in El Paso, and she later on moved to Nebraska. But anyhow, I guess his memory failed as much as mine does too, and I guess everybody, if you haven't been keeping a journal with specific dates, you do have fake memories of what happened, and sometimes it gets muddled a little bit, and you have to think back and try to correct them as you go along.

I often thought of writing something, because I used to like to write a lot, and later on you'll find out how I got cured of that, but I did write a lot, later, and I used to dream of writing. At one time I was going to write the all-American novel about my experiences in the military, which I found out were pretty much the same as everybody else's experiences in the military.

But that was what was happening. My marriage was on the rocks from the very beginning, and it did not improve very much over the years. As we got older, we managed to tolerate each other's idiosyncrasies, and we tried to make a go of it, but inevitably, our marriage failed. And it's not because we didn't try, but I guess we didn't try hard enough. Our differences were such that I get to think back about what my aunts said, and it was very true. My wife was opposed to my continuing my education. I told you that when I got out of the service, along with working I was going to Texas Southwestern College, which at that time was a small college. Later on it became Texas A&M, and much later it became University of Texas at El Paso. But when I was going there, it was a little town and not bigger than East L.A. College was in those years. But my wife was opposed to my going to college.

ESPINO:

She was opposed, wow.

00:48:53

HOLGUÍN:

And even later on when we finally called it quits, her comments to me were that I was going to college because I wanted to be among the young girls, which was a very lopsided view of what the reality was. I really wanted to get educated for the simple reason that I was born into an extended family to whom education was very important, and I had been raised to feel that, and also I thought it was an intrinsic value in knowing, in learning. I was curious about a lot of things. I wanted to know more. Later on in life, I found that as I focused more and more on what I wanted to do, I wanted to know about myself, about my behavior, but I also wanted to know about social behavior in general, and so my major became sociology with a minor in psychology, and that followed throughout the rest of my life.

What's interesting in that is I found as I studied sociology more and more, that there was a very clear relationship between sociology and history, and one cannot exist without the other. But at that time I was struggling. When I found that things weren't working, we let the house go. My mom got sick and so I was constantly going over to look after her. I continued going to college in El Paso, and my wife got pregnant with her third child, my second child, and in December of 1953, Helen was born. She was born on December second. And at that time, things had gotten so bad that things just weren't working out. I had told my mom that I would probably be moving to California if things continued like that, so in 1954 my mom continued to get sick. I used to go to work and then go to school, from school come directly to the hospital, because by then she was hospitalized, and then, invariably, she died.

ESPINO:

In 1954?

00:57:02

HOLGUÍN:

She died in September of 1954. She got to know two of her grandchildren. And I remember being with my mom when she died. I was holding her hand, and I don't know if that's significant, because when my father died, I was doing the same thing. Once my mother died, the word got around. Apparently, a lot of people knew her, her being a businesswoman and all that, and so she had a large funeral. I remember people coming to the house, people I hadn't seen in a long time, people I didn't know, and I remember that people started scavenging and taking things. "Well, I want to take this to remember her," and, "I'm going to take that," until it got to the point where I got upset and told everybody to get out of the house.

And my younger uncle, who was probably very dependent on my mother, because he married young, and he had a marriage that he made work, but that's because he made it work, not because his wife made it work, he really suffered a lot. He went and I remember he got drunk with my mom's husband and came--I was staying at the house in Juarez, because that's where they had a funeral, and I was in this little house with the big house empty and feeling really upset, very lonely, and then when they got home about three or four o'clock in the morning, they were very boisterous and still making a big scene, and that's when I finally broke down. I remember I hadn't shed a tear up till that point, and then I got angry and we had words, and my uncle left, probably was hurt quite a bit, and my wife's widower did understand my behavior, and, of course, he didn't know me.

But that's when I found out that I wasn't going to stay in Mexico. I tried to find out about the property and found that as a U.S. citizen, I could not own property in Mexico, so selling the house was out of the question. He claimed everything that my mom had, the businesses and the houses, and so I decided then to come back to California, and I think that this time I was determined that I was going to make my last stand here in California.

I didn't want to go back to El Paso, I didn't want to go back to Juarez, I didn't want to go back to Mexico.

And although I didn't have specific plans for anything, because I really didn't have the support systems that I wanted--my family in New Mexico at that time was really pretty alien to whatever was going on with my life. I didn't get to see my aunt and my cousins for about ten years, yes, for about ten years, because I was busy trying to do something with my life. I got back here, I got a job. This time I got a job in Whittier, and I decided to continue going to college.

That's why I enlisted at East L.A. College again. That was a period where the campus was mostly little bungalows on temporary foundations. There was mud all over the place when it rained. They had wooden planks so we wouldn't get in the mud going from one building to the other. But it was interesting in many way, because I thought I was beginning to find a purpose in my life. I found a job working in an auto-parts store which was part of a chain of I think twenty-seven stores. As far as I know, that company doesn't exist anymore, but it was something like Pep Boys. It was owned by three brothers who had started in the egg business during World War II and then found that because there were no cars being manufactured during the war, people were fixing their cars, and so they went into the auto parts business. And in 1955 I went to work for them. I worked at their branch store in Whittier. I worked in there for a couple of years, and then I got promoted to assistant manager and got promoted to the store in East Los Angeles on [unclear] Boulevard, and then later on got promoted to manager, and I was running the store in Alhambra on Garfield and Main.

But somewhere during that time I was settling down and thinking that things were going to be all right. I was living with my dad, who had mortgaged the first house that they lived in and had built a new house in the back of the lot. They had built a three-bedroom house, very modern, and I was staying there with my two brothers. He had converted the garage into a large bedroom for the three guys, and the three girls lived in another room, and Mom and his wife lived in another one. It had a small kitchen with a dinette set and a small living room. But I was living there and then one day I find that my wife had somehow managed to save some of the money I was sending her and ended up in California.

ESPINO:

You didn't officially divorce her. You never officially divorced her in those early years?

HOLGUÍN:

No, not for many years. We had what they called a poor-man's divorce. We had just separated and called it quits, but when she got back, well, she stayed at my dad's house one night, and my dad said, "She cannot stay here. I know she's got three little kids, but she'll have to find another place." So we rented a house nearby, and I moved in with them, and later on we found a bigger house where we could live more comfortably and try to make a go of it. It seemed like things were going all right for a while. I was able to buy a car.

Well, during that time, we used to go back and forth to Texas, because that's really where she had her roots. I didn't go to visit my family in New Mexico except for one occasion, and that's the only time when she was able to interact with any members of my family.

ESPINO:

How as Los Angeles at that time different from--now you've traveled to Asia, you've--

01:05:25

HOLGUÍN:

Well, let me go back a little bit. One of the significant things I remember about El Paso and Juarez is that El Paso at that time was bigger than Juarez. Juarez was, for all intents and purposes, a very small, almost rural community. You could walk from the border to the end of town without much effort. El Paso was a little bigger, because there was South El Paso, which is basically where you might say the Latino community lived, and then there was East El Paso, which was much, much bigger, on the eastern side of Franklin Mountain, and that was mostly an Anglo community, but there were Latinos also. You find that today the reverse is true. Juarez is probably three times bigger than El Paso now.

But comparing those two to Los Angeles, Los Angeles was pretty big even in those days. I remember that of necessity, one of the first decisions I had to make was buy a car, and once I bought a car, well, we used to go and travel. I used to like to go to museums, like to go to the beach, and either one of those was a long drive. Those were the days when they had the railcars still, and you could take the electric cars from East L.A. by the cemetery, and that would take you all the way into downtown and then you'd transfer and go all the way into Long Beach. The railroad tracks were very evident along Whittier Boulevard and then on through Huntington Park and into the Bay Area. To go to Hollywood it was a big adventure. In those years was when you could still hope to see a movie star or two at a restaurant in Hollywood, because that's where they used to hang around.

It's not like it is today. There were a lot of acting academies, dancing academies. I remember one of my friends, whom I had met in El Paso, was a dancer, and I remember him taking me to the [Eduardo] Cansino Dance Studio and saying El Cansino was the father of famous Rita Hayworth, and I remember seeing Rita Hayworth in person and being really awed by her presence. And so getting to know the Hollywood scene was a big adventure, and I was constantly going to Hollywood, hoping to see somebody. In those days, big movie stars were in the Christmas parade. Big movie stars were in the Tournament of Roses parade, and I remember going to Pasadena to see the parade over the years, never missing a parade. Now that I live in Pasadena, I've only been to the parades three times in thirty-five years. [laughs] It gets to be very passe and sometimes even inconvenient.

But, yes, Los Angeles was a big city for me. Going to Long Beach was a big adventure, and, of course, in those years there was the Pike, something that people today don't know. But the Pike was like the big entertainment place to go, like Pacific Ocean Park was later on. They had like a carnival. They had a couple of carousels, they had the little crazy cars, they had the rotor. They had so many games, and, of course, in those years the sailors used to be there too, and so there was a lot of movement. I remember eating salt-water taffy for the first time and liking it so much, and over there they were always making it, and you could see the machines. And the games, all kinds of games that you could play. So Los Angeles was really a sight to see. There was always something to do, somewhere to go.

And my father, I remember he used to take the kids around, and sometimes we'd get lost, because that '39 Dodge he had was the first car he ever had, and when the kid would say, "Dad, you got lost again," he said, "No." He said, "I'm just taking you around for a tour." [laughs] We used to make fun of that. But his wife actually was more oriented to what the city was like and where to go, even though she never learned to drive to this day. She's ninety-one; she'll be ninety-one in May. She never drove, but she knows the city just like anyone else. She can tell you which route to take for wherever you want to go.

ESPINO:

Well, it sounds like you really took advantage of the city. Did you take your kids with you on these adventures?

HOLGUÍN:

You'll find out more about my kids later on, but I remember one of the things that they said to me as grown ups. They said, "Dad, we remember you used to take us here, you used to take us there, you used to take us to [unclear] Dam, you'd take us to see the snow. We used to go to the beach a lot. We used to go to Knotts Berry Farm." They said, "We used to go a lot of--." Said, "But we don't remember [unclear] being around." And it dawned on me that, yes, their mother never really wanted to go with us anywhere. But, yes, I believed in sharing everything I could with my kids, because I love my kids, and I felt that exposing them to all these things will make a better life for them.

They used to love to go to the museum. I mean, that was a must at least once a month. We went to the Museum of Natural History so many times, and each time we went was an adventure. Knotts Berry Farm in those years was open. You did not have to pay to go in. You only bought tickets to the rides. They had picnic areas. Even that didn't cost you. You could take your own lunch, your own drinks, and just set up at the--they had the green benches with big tables, and everything was free. The idea of paying for going in and out, that was much later. The only thing you had to pay for was to go to the alligator farm, which was across the street, and that was a lot of alligators. But, yes, I took my kids everywhere when they were little, and they remember that.

ESPINO:

So the job that you had at that time paid well enough that you could have a little bit of luxury in your life?

01:10:55

HOLGUÍN:

Not luxury per se. No, not luxury per se. I think we lived modestly. The fact that we traveled a lot was because of the sacrifices we made. Like in those years I was young, and I could drive, so in '58 we bought a house in La Puente, thinking that we were going to be able to make a go of it. I had bought a brand-new Plymouth in which we traveled back and forth to Texas two or three times a year. But in those years, it was easy to make things happen, because much of the outlying areas of Los Angeles were young people that were trying to make a go of it. And so you went to these model homes, picked the one you wanted and then moved in, and then you fixed it up as you went. Most of the landscaping in those homes, like we bought ours in the Hilldale Homes, which is along Valley Boulevard just on the other side of Hacienda Boulevard, yes, we did our own landscaping. I remember I learned a lot of carpentry at that time. I even learned to mix cement and put out my own walkways, put up a fence, a chain-link fence, and it was pretty much living up with the Joneses. Everybody else was doing

the same thing.

There were a couple of big places there around, both of them run by a big family, where you could buy almost any type of construction equipment or material you needed, and it was not expensive, and you did a little bit at a time. And in that setting, we lived there for about five years, and then everything fell apart. But I don't know, maybe you want to stop there? Because I think the rest of it that I'm going to tell you for a while is going to be painful. But it was the beginning of what I thought would be a good life, and doing all the things to the house and all that was a dream, and one day it all fell apart.

ESPINO:

Well, it sounds like what people say about the fifties. After the war, there was a little bit of prosperity. Especially people who came back from serving were able to go to school. I mean, not across the board, not everybody, but some people were able to, especially Chicanos, Mexicanos, were able to get an education, get better jobs, buy a house for the first time.

01:14:46

HOLGUÍN:

Well, see, in those years you could buy--if you were a Korean veteran or a veteran of World War II, you could get a CalVet [home] loan, which made things very easy. And, of course, the houses--I remember that house cost us twenty-two thousand dollars. It was a three-bedroom house. That house is worth about three hundred thousand dollars today. And I used to make about six hundred fifty, seven hundred dollars a month, but in those years, it was good money.

But, yes, there was competition, there was opportunity. I had missed my opportunity, because when I started going to Texas Western College, I started under the G.I. Bill, and somehow when I transferred here, someone messed up my records, and when I tried to get the G.I. Bill here, they couldn't find anything. So I went to college on my own for years, night classes mostly, while I worked in the daytime, and I think back now and I say to myself, how you can manage all that? Working full-time, going to school at night, and being with my kids and going, taking them everywhere I could, and they remember that. It's not like I have neglected them. I think the neglect came later on when we finally split up and then we went through a period where it was touch and go.

But, yes, there was some semblance of prosperity in those years. There was, you might say, not ambition but hope that things would be good, because people were friendly. People competed for the same things, but in a good atmosphere. We shared the same concerns, the same needs. People were working, people were paying for their house, people were fixing it up, and it was pretty much kind of keeping up with the Joneses type of a situation, so you didn't sense missing anything. It was competing in good spirit and everybody helping out and comparing who was at home, what they were doing with the landscaping and everything else, and some people were fixing their houses better than others, depending on their circumstance. But for the most part, everybody was doing things right

ESPINO:

The neighborhood that you moved into, was it primarily Latino?

HOLGUÍN:

No. No. I think in the Hilldale Homes, at the time that I remember, there was a Cuban family about five houses to the west, there was a Latino family across the street, and then another house about six houses to the east. All the rest were not Latinos. But I remember one thing. There weren't any blacks. And I remember that because at the time that we're looking around, we're looking around in the area up by the San Marino Freeway, which was one of the new house-development areas, and the one Hilldale Homes, which was further south, southeast, and I remember very distinctly twice, once with each one of the representatives of those developments, that they came to me and kind of whispered that there was one black family who was looking around, and it was whispering saying, "We don't want that kind of people here."

ESPINO:

Wow.

HOLGUÍN:

And at that time, again, I was not socially conscious to the point I'd say, that isn't right. You just say, well, I guess they don't want those people here, and I just accepted it as it was said. It didn't occur to me that it was really trying to keep black people out of the area, because now you're asking me, yes, there were no black people in the Hilldale Homes, and that was some five hundred homes that were being built. They're west of Nogales High School, in that area, north of the highway and the railroad tracks, and east of Hacienda Heights, that whole area there. It was all near where there Alta Dena Dairy used to be. Yes, I remember the Alta Dena Dairy. We used to go get fresh milk there. That was when you could buy certified milk. But I remember my dad making the joke that we're moving out in the sticks, and in part it was true, because the Alta Dena Dairy was very big, and it was, for all intents and purposes, what appeared to be a rural area. Everything around it was new homes.

ESPINO:

So the Alta Dena Dairy, was it like huge grazing lands as well? Like what you would see now when you drive up I-5 and you see those huge grazing lands with cows everywhere?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, yes. I used to see--in fact, there were two or three areas where they used to have sheep. They would keep the sheep on one land till they cleaned it out and then move them to another area, until the grass grew up again in that area, so, yes, it was very common. I used to walk with my son David [Holguín] across the Valley Boulevard, and there's a river there. We used to go fishing there. And, of course, you know the area around--what do you call it? I can't think of it. But up in the hills, it's a very, very affluent community now.

01:19:07

ESPINO:

Sierra Madre? Or La Canada?

HOLGUÍN:

No, más para acá. Why can't I think of--Diamond Bar. Yes, Diamond Bar was a ranch, open land.

ESPINO:

So I bet these houses were much cheaper than what you could expect to pay in the city.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, well, that's what I say, twenty-two thousand dollars for a three-bedroom house with a huge area. In those years it appeared reasonable, and I guess it was. You figure making six hundred dollars a month, you could afford to pay it. Payments were about $125, $150, so it was about a quarter of your earnings if you were making $600 a month, which was not bad.

ESPINO:

So this will be my last question, then we can stop so you can have a break. But how did you hear about this development, do you remember? How did you find out about it?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, we found out about it because at the time we were living on 4th Street in East L.A., and as you may know, 4th Street is now the Pomona Freeway, and we were right in the way of the highway construction. So eminent domain necessarily demanded that we move out, and we were kind of coached to look towards the east where new buildings were being built, and so that's when we started exploring into that area.

ESPINO:

What do you mean coached? Can you tell me--

01:21:24

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the people that would say, "Where do we move to?", he'd say, "Well, look towards the valley. San Gabriel Valley has a lot of new developments going on, and you'll probably be able to buy a home over there." And that is why we went to look around over there. There were many places being developed, just for the picking.

ESPINO:

So these were county officials who came, who were part of the city?

HOLGUÍN:

State.

ESPINO:

Did they give you a stipend to leave your home?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, yes. Yes, because we were in the process of buying the house when we found out that eminent domain was taking place. The house we lived in was a two-story house, beautiful. They called it the haunted house, because it was like the old homes, two-story houses with huge--and it was by itself right in the hill. I don't know if you could imagine, but 4th Street was coming in from [unclear] church, and then our house was at the end, and then below was a cliff, and the rest of the street was the cemetery, the Calvary Cemetery. We could see it over from our house. So, yes, we, like many people, got displaced, and that's why we ended up--it was just like when people, they were doing Maravilla. They displaced all those people, and they also sent them out to the valley, because the next group of homes beyond Hilldale was a lot of people from Maravilla. They call it Little Mara over there.

ESPINO:

So you call that the valley, out there by Diamond Bar Hacienda? Is that what you called it at that time, the valley?

01:23:03

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the San Gabriel Valley begins pretty much from Pasadena out in that place, and then, of course, there's the San Fernando Valley.

ESPINO:

Right. Exactly.

HOLGUÍN:

People in the valley over there don't talk about the valley over here, and people in the Antelope Valley don't talk about the other two. This is something that people who don't live in the area do not understand.

ESPINO:

Right. Well, because when I hear that term, the valley, that's what I think of is San Fernando. I don't think of San Gabriel, but that's interesting. Well, okay, we'll stop here and we'll pick up next time with the changes that occurred.

HOLGUÍN:

You know, when we formed this organization that my wife is the vice president--

ESPINO:

The seniors?

01:24:54

HOLGUÍN:

--we insisted that they needed an organizer, because most of the organizations are in the neighborhood of Sacramento. Well, they're there because they have access to the legislature, and they do a lot of lobbying over there. For us here, we're so far removed, even though the majority of the population is here, we don't have much clout in Sacramento. But we said, "You need an organizer." And he said, "Well, we'll get you one." I said, "No, we need more than one." And they don't understand that we have three valleys and then we have the plateau in the west side, and all these are communities so diverse and so different from each other, I said that, you might even say they don't get along with each other. This is why San Fernando wants to secede, has been wanting to secede for the last thirty, forty years. And people from the Pasadena area don't think of beyond El Monte being part of the San Gabriel Valley still.

ESPINO:

That's right.

HOLGUÍN:

And then even when you get to Cal Poly, which is the beginning of the Pomona Valley, they still think it's part of the San Gabriel. But, yes, there are so many natural divisions in the L.A. County that people who don't live here don't understand.

ESPINO:

And those divisions, like you're saying, are historic. They go back to this period. Well, I'm going to turn off the recorder now. [End of interview]

Session Four (April 23,2009)

00:00:13

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino. Today is April 23, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the SEIU offices in Pasadena.

Okay, Mr. Holguín, did you want to comment on something before we begin with my question?

00:04:35

HOLGUÍN:

Well, after the last meeting we had, I got to thinking that we really didn't cover much of some other things that might be considered contrasts between the two countries, because it occurred to me that, ironically, especially under the circumstances today, I was a U.S. citizen, and I was educated in Mexico in the public schools. But when I was coming to school here, I was educated in private schools, which kind of reverses the whole thing.

But what I thought was more interesting than that is that in Mexico, the system of education is run by a national office, which is the Ministry of Education, and so the textbooks that I used in the schools are standard throughout the country, and teachers are trained on a standard merit. It is not a domain of the publishing companies. It is not a big business, as opposed to here, where each state has its own system, because that's delegated to them under the Constitution, and the publishing companies are very quick to accommodate the school districts from the different parts of the country, depending on what their preferences are. And that means that some want to emphasize certain things, and so the publishing company will emphasize that. Others don't want to deal with certain things that might be considered inappropriate for children to learn, so they don't talk about that.

And as a result, you get watered-down history, and this is why today a lot of young people don't know that slavery was really an abominable system that existed for many years, that the conflict between Mexico and the United States was a minor thing, even though Mexico lost almost half of its territory. It was not a friendly succession that Mexico said, "You can have it." It was under conflict, armed conflict. And so in that system, those of us who had the opportunity, for whatever reason, to be educated in both countries, had to balance out the information that we were getting, because on the one hand we were saying, well, the United States stole our land, and on the other hand we'll say, well, they attacked us and we fought back, but we paid them for it.

And they don't say, for example, that the money that was supposedly paid to Mexico for that acquisition of Texas was really given to the settlers that stayed in Texas, who claimed damages to them by the country that was having the right to claim their land, because it was their land. But conveniently, we learned that when they

declared themselves a republic, the U.S. quickly recognized it as such, never consulted with Mexico or whatever, and so when General Santana came with his troops, he had every right to say, "We let you stay in this country under certain conditions, and you failed to meet those conditions, so we come to claim the taxes that you owe us, and we came to find out why you're not practicing your religion that you said you were going to practice."

So when you look at history from those perspectives, it kind of makes you wonder, well, what really happened? And unless you are really going into history very deep at the college level, you don't learn those things, because at the college level you begin to look at literature from the point of view of other countries that looked at what was happening here and said, "You know, that was so unfair.

ESPINO:

That's really interesting, and that brings me to my next question, because we talked about your experience in the Mexican school system, and I don't know if at that time it was called the SEP [Secretaria de Educación Pública] program, Secretaria de Educación Pública, that was [José] Vasconcellos, who helped--

HOLGUÍN:

José Vasconcellos, yes.

ESPINO:

--who helped initiate that national educational program. And then you were educated in the United States with a whole different interpretation of Mexico. And then you had children. They were also educated in the United States, and I wanted to talk a little bit about their education and if you were involved in their education, if you felt that they were getting an adequate education. So this was probably in the 1950s, when they going to the public school system here in Los Angeles?

00:07:00

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. It did happen that way. Unfortunately, what happened during the fifties was that I had not only gotten married but we started having children, and my children went to schools mostly in East Los Angeles, because that's where they grew up until we moved into the San Gabriel Valley. But I recall that whenever they came up and told me some of the things that they were learning in school, I would try to balance it out in some way, because my father had told me that as my brothers were growing up, they would come home and talk about what they were learning, and my father said, "Well, that's fine, but now you sit down and let me tell you what really happened."

And so I think it's parents' obligation to try to balance out the learning process of the children, not only in terms of behavior and manners, but in terms of the content of what life is about, and we learn from our own experiences many times, rather than from books, because you have, for example, people in this country and many other countries, who have very little schooling, and yet they learn from life, and they learn from others.

ESPINO:

Right, that's true. Were you satisfied with their education? Did you feel like you had to intervene?

00:13:29

HOLGUÍN:

I was never satisfied with the education system, mostly because I felt that they were too concerned with discipline and not too concerned with really learning, and I was able to confirm that even later on, when I got involved in education myself and was able to hear teachers talk about how wonderful their job was if it weren't for the kids. And I was appalled to hear that.

I also learned, as I got involved in my own education and rubbing elbows with other people in the system, that many professors with Ph.D.'s would brag about the particular field of study that they excelled in, but were bragging about the fact that they didn't know other things. Give you an example. I had one person who became a very good friend of mine, who said, "I know my history of Latin America real well," he said, "but I don't know anything about math." Or I had someone else who says, "Well, I'm very good at science, but I don't know anything about history." And I made the comment, "How can you have a doctoral degree and make a statement like that?" Because to me, having been educated in Mexico at one point, having a doctoral degree means that you are really a genius. You have a lot of knowledge about a lot of subjects.

And for someone with a degree such as that to say, "I don't know anything about this," and then teaching at the university or the school level that thing--see, because one of the things that teachers in Mexico do is, one teacher can be teaching courses, all the different courses that are available in the curriculum, because they're supposed to be knowledgeable about all the different fields of study. Whereas here, even though under the Fisher Act [1961], which was supposed to change the system and determine how teachers were going to be educated, they just changed the titles, but the system continued to be the same. Under the Fisher Act, which started in the 1970s, the idea was that a teacher would be able to teach any grade level, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and so they developed the curriculum at a university to do just that. But then when people got the degrees, they got assigned to special classes, and that's all they taught for the rest of their lives.

So in reality, the idea that a person with a teaching credential is very knowledgeable is not true. And so they become specialists, and sometimes they get assigned to a school where their specialty is not vacant and they're put to teach something else in which they have no expertise. So I found that in that system, there were people that were very critical about that. Notably, there was John Holt, who wrote several books criticizing the education system in the United States. There were others who criticized them from a different perspective, like Burrhus Frederic Skinner, who is well known for his studies on behavior of children; Jerome Bruner, who wrote much about the philosophical foundations of education and expressed much concern for the lack of responsibility in the education system for what they considered teaching kids.

So in that context, I used to see, for example, one of the things that I made a statement publicly that concerned a

lot of teachers, when they started talking about sex education. That was a very hot topic when my kids were going to school, and many of us were not really crazy about the idea, because we said, many children are brought up with the topic of sex being taboo in the family. It is not talked about. And yet here we have people with probably no experience in the field, who are going to be teaching our kids. Isn't that going to raise the curiosity of the children? Isn't that going to create a system where promiscuity is going to grow among kids in the schools, because they're going to explore, because they want to experiment, because they want to know? I said, the more you ask questions about that, the more curious they are, and that prediction came to be true.

Other things which support my idea that the system doesn't respond--there was a time when the President of the United States signed an executive order that the country was going to be going metric, and they allocated funds to train teaching staff to learn the metric system. Well, to this date, there's still resistance to that, when the whole world is metric, except the United States and England.

ESPINO:

Can we get back to that--that's really interesting, the idea that your kids were going to school at a time when sex education was being promoted as a subject in the schools. Do you have any recollections of exactly what happened? Did you receive a letter, or did your school have a meeting, or how did it take place?

00:16:54

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the polemics on whether sex education was good or not were public. We had meetings. People were talking favorably in some instances, and others were really not very convinced that it should be a topic that would be taught in school. And I, having been raised in a system where academics were really the only thing that was taught in school--because in Mexico at that time that I was going to school, we didn't even have sports of any kind, or any social activities, except after school. During school hours, everything was academics, and that's all we learned. And over here, I saw that there was a lot of concern with the social context, especially in middle school. They were concerned about the behavior of the kids. They're growing up, they're getting into puberty, and the whole idea of boys interested in girls and girls interested in boys and that whole thing.

So the creation of junior high, or middle school as they call it now, was one in which the social activity was the greatest concern, and they were not preparing kids for high school. They were coming out of a system where it was very tight in some area, but the main concern was behavior, and then they go into a system where they create a lot of social activities for the kids to interact with each other and get to know, and in that context you provide sex education, and what is it going to create? It's going to create curiosity among the kids. And since the social activity is paramount, there are going to be dances, there are going to be dates, there's going to be all that. And in other circumstances, when children were more naive and less interested in sex, that didn't happen.

But now you have adults publicly talking about it, and not always being sensitive to how children are going to learn that kind of stuff. It's very difficult. It's like saying, it's okay, but telling them to be cautious, telling them to take care of them, protect themselves doesn't cut it, because you tell a child, "Don't do this," and what is going to happen? They're going to do what you tell them not to do. It's just almost the contrary nature of a child to explore things they're being told not to explore.

ESPINO:

Did you ever think of sending your kids to a Catholic school after that, or before that discussion?

00:18:01

HOLGUÍN:

No, because I had gone to Catholic schools, I had gone to Protestant schools, and I didn't particularly care for the emphasis on religion, because both had it. I went to Lydia Patterson Institute, which was a Protestant school. I went to another school that was Catholic. It was Sacred Heart of Jesus School, and, yes, they taught us a lot about religion. And so I didn't want my kids to be too much influenced on that, because I felt that was my responsibility. No. Not only that, but also at that time--and we'll explore that a little bit later--I didn't think that I could afford to send them to private school.

ESPINO:

Okay. Maybe we can move on now to--last time we stopped at about the point where your marriage ends. I don't know if you want to talk about that, or talk about what kind of changes occurred in your life after that, and where you lived and what you decided to do for employment.

00:25:21

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. Well, let me just kind of cover the area of education, because it occurred to me that I went to eight different schools during my adolescent years and all that, and some of them were sometimes in the United States, sometimes were in Mexico, because it was back and forth kind of a situation. And because of the manner in which my marriage went, my kids were fortunate or unfortunate to be exposed to many different schools. My oldest daughter, for example, went through four high schools. Yes, my kids went to different schools because we moved about a lot, and we ended up in different schools, all of them in the general area, but not the same.

And I feel that that was not very great for them, because at one time my oldest daughter asked to be allowed to stay in one school, even though she had to travel almost all the way across three cities, because that's the way Los Angeles County is. We have so many cities within Los Angeles, and although they're in the same unified school district, the boundaries of where you can go to school at that time were very strict, and so we had to get permission to allow her to go and stay in one school. But even then we ended up with her going to the school where she finally graduated, and it was not in the Los Angeles area anymore.

But not being able to go to the same school all the time gives one an opportunity to see different ideas that are being exposed in the school, different people, different social class, and in that sense I think my kids learned a lot, just like I did. But, yes, my kids were exposed to a variety of schools, both at the elementary and at the high school level. But I was involved mostly because I wanted to have a say-so in what was being taught in the schools. I wanted to make sure that teachers were responsible, because I knew that from the very early period

when my kids started going to school, that teachers had a lot of authority in that period, too much, I believe.

And I remember that, for example, kids didn't seem to have any rights in school. And I know because one of my daughters was treated very unfairly by the school. In fact, I had to remove her from that school, because the system was such that Erin just couldn't deal with it. And I can tell you that because at that time I had to take that drastic measure.

In recent years--we're talking now about forty years later--one of my grandsons was detained in school, and my daughter and her husband, both being working people, could not come to pick him up. He was being detained in school, and he was not going to be let go until they spoke to the parents. So I had to go in their stead, and I was treated very unfairly. I was first treated like I had no rights. I was made to wait, sitting down in a basement with someone who behaved as if I wasn't there. I saw the vice principal come in and pick up some things and didn't even acknowledge that I was there. Little did I know at that time that she was the person I was going to face later on. But when finally I complained and they told her that I was there, they sent me up to another floor where I was made to wait a little bit more, and then I saw how they were treating another child. And so when I told them who I was, they sent for my grandson, and she was going to tell me what was the charge. I said, "Well, I don't want to hear from you." I said, "I want to hear from my grandson. I want to know why he was detained."

So my grandson told me, says they had a bully in the school that had been picking on him, and it had gotten to the point where it was the last straw and my grandson responded and, essentially, hit him back, and the other kid got the worst of it, so he was being punished for defending himself. And after I hear that, I say, "Okay, what is the story you want to tell me now?" He says, "Well, that's not the way it happened." I said, "Are you calling my grandson a liar?" And to make the long story short, I got the vice principal fired, because once you know what can happen, you can push and demand your rights, and children do have rights. I saw how they were being marched along the hallways by aides like they were little prisoners, and so I said to myself, my goodness, we haven't come a long way in the right direction.

ESPINO:

Is that some of your perceptions of your kids' education? Is that what led you to study education in college?

00:32:45

HOLGUÍN:

No. I think what got me to study education was more by accident, because like I say, in Mexico, almost all my relatives have been teachers, and mostly females. So being around teachers was very natural to me, but that was not the reason I went into teaching. It just simply happened that things were dropped in my lap, and I took up the challenge, because I really was expected to be--on the one hand, some of my relatives wanted me to be a doctor. Some of my teacher-aunts wanted me to be an engineer, an agricultural engineer, and so I really didn't have a perspective of what I wanted to be. But I was interested in history; I was always interested in history. I was interested in literature. So for me, education was something that had an intrinsic value. It wasn't something that I had to learn because someone expected me to, but because I felt learning was important.

For example, I self-taught myself English, because since I was a little kid I used to pick up English books, and even though I didn't know what they meant, I was able to decipher the words and break them down into syllables. Sometimes the accent was in the wrong place, but little by little I began to put them in the perspective of, yes, now I know that this means. So I learned definitions and I learned pronunciation pretty much on my

own, and listening to movies and things like that. Literature was another one that to this date I read. I've always, in my adult life, belonged to book clubs, mystery club, history club, the geographic society and the "National Geographic." I used to have volumes and volumes of "National Geographic." More recently, I've gotten away from that.

But, no, I did not plan to become a teacher. It happened by accident, mostly because as I learned, I wanted to share what I learned with others, with my kids. I remember my older son [David Holguín] used to have to listen to me always adding to what he was learning in school, and one day he said, "That's okay, Dad. I don't want to learn so much," because I think I was too demanding on their learning. But I'm not sorry I did that, because some of them became very curious, and some of them did not.

But one of the first things I began to teach the kids, for example, was drawing and painting, because I'm an artist, okay, and I learned that also on my own, to begin with, and then I had two professors that were mentors, that taught me about art. And so my kids grew up watching me paint. I do oil paintings and do portraits, and, of course, I do a lot of drawing. We used to draw cartoons and all that. Later on in my life, I published two little books, two little booklets, and so, yes, I wanted to share what I learned from them, and the progression was that just naturally I started teaching other kids as well.

I taught one of my uncles, who was a product of the revolution, I guess, or having his education interrupted by the revolution in Mexico, and he had not learned to read. I was still living in Mexico at the time when President [Lázaro] Cárdenas started what they called Programa de Alfabetización, because he was asking citizens to teach other citizens to read. And when I found out that my uncle didn't know how to read, well, I took it upon myself to teach him, and I was very proud when he was far away and he started writing me letters. So, yes, I guess it came naturally, because I've been doing that almost as far as I can remember with my own kids, and then when I started teaching at the college level, I had no real teaching experience except what I could share with other people.

I remember when I was assigned the first class, the Dean of the School of Education, who was a Chicano, [unclear] Hernandez, he told me, he said, "You're a natural. You can teach." And I said, "But how can I teach?" He said, "Well, all you have to do is if you don't know, just stay ahead of the class. Read before you assign them whatever you wanted to know." But my real experience was more or less on the job, because I got my first opportunity to teach in the Head Start programs, and I think the Head Start programs were the breakthrough for a lot of people who did not have the other opportunities that people have had. Children that are born into affluent families or well-to-do families pretty much are expected to go to college, and parents save money to be able to provide for their education. Among poor people you find that many times no one in the family has ever gone to college.

In my own family in the U.S., my father before he died, two months before he died he said, "You know, I used to be critical of you going to school while you were raising kids." He said, "But you were the trailblazer for the family, and because of you, your brothers and sisters went to college." So I was the first one. And anyway, not because he helped me, because whatever I did, I did on my own.

ESPINO:

And you always went to school at night. You worked all day, you went to school at night.

HOLGUÍN:

Sometimes had two jobs.

ESPINO:

And you were going to L.A.C.C. at that time?

HOLGUÍN:

No, East L.A. College.

ESPINO:

East L.A. College, and then do you remember how long you went there? I remember you said you went there for years and years.

HOLGUÍN:

Seemed like I went forever. Can you imagine? I had seventy-two units of college--

ESPINO:

Junior college.

00:35:16

HOLGUÍN:

--junior college, and didn't even consider going to a four-year college, because it was beyond my means. Where would I get money to go? So, yes, I would have continued going to junior college, because like I said, learning was important to me. So I don't care, I said, well, I want to learn this and I want to learn, and before I knew, a pattern was developing. I was very interested in human behavior, so I took the psychology courses. I was

interested in society's behavior, so I took sociology classes. I took political science because I wanted to know how systems worked.

And little by little, then I wanted to know about math, because while I was going to high school, we had a lady who was probably one of the most unforgettable teachers I ever had. She was an old lady already. Her name was Mamie Aisles, and she had written a book titled "Fun With Numbers." And she made math fun. A lot of us kids used to stay after school just so she could teach us all the little tricks that we'd do with numbers, and so I was interested in learning more. Sometimes I wanted to learn more than I should at the time, because there are certain steps that you do. I tried to take trigonometry before having plane-and-solid geometry, and I found that was a mistake, so I had to go back. Even at one time I took some high school classes at night, to cover prerequisites that I needed for trigonometry and for algebra.

But, yes, little by little a pattern began to develop, and when I finally went to four-year college, I knew that I--

ESPINO:

Can I stop you just for a second, because you're hitting your microphone with your arm. I'm going to pause it.

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, I'm sorry. [Recorder turned off]

ESPINO:

Okay, we can continue. Well, that was basically what happened. During the fifties, it was mostly working, raising the family, having fun with my kids as they grew up. I spent a lot of time with them.

ESPINO:

Do you remember when you finished, when you finally finished going to school at night and you obtained your first job with your education as your qualification?

00:37:28

HOLGUÍN:

No. My going to school at night was something that went through from, I would say, around 1954 to about 1967.

That was many years. It became a way of life for me to go to college at night. It was part of my activity. But it was also very important for me to be with my kids, so being interested in learning, I used to take them to museums, take them to the zoo, used to take them to the parks, and I think my kids knew just about every museum that was available. And I recall that my daughter Marian came to me once with her three kids and said, "Dad, I remember you used to take us to museums and all of that." She said, "My kids have never been to a museum." And I said, "Well, why?" She said, "Because I never had the time." She said, "But I want you to take them, because you made it fun." So it was fun for me, and I took my grandchildren to the museum.

But, yes, my going to college was a long process, and it was woven into almost everything else that I was doing.

ESPINO:

That was during the sixties, then, and that was a time when the dialogue of rights, civil rights--well, I guess that history goes back even earlier than that, but it was really, really vibrant during the sixties. Like the Mexican American Political Association [MAPA] formed in the sixties, and other political groups. The UFW [United Farmworkers of America] was founded. Were you involved in any of those political things in the sixties?

00:42:30

HOLGUÍN:

[laughs] Yes. Yes. We were involved with the formation of MAPA, because like I said, at the time that the War on Poverty began, which was in part as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, you couldn't help but be involved in some fashion. I recall that because of the Head Start program and even before that, I got involved in the special census that was taking place after the 1960s, which was the one that was done to figure out how they were going to divvy up the money for the War on Poverty, I guess. And then we have had the unrest in South L.A., during the Watts riots, so-called, so, yes, that was something where that surprised all of us, even though those of us who were not that involved in anything at that time, wakened the nation. The situation in the South was also something that was constantly in the media.

I remember also a program by a fellow named Paul Coates, who had a TV program that covered special events, and I remember he did a series of programs on the farmworkers as early as '62. And I became very curious, because I noticed that for the most part, the farmworkers they were talking about were Mexican, and that made me curious because having been raised in both countries, I would say, why is that? And so I started learning more about that. When Dr. Ernesto Galarza wrote "Merchants of Labor," I had also finished reading another book by a Mexican journalist [Mario Gil], which the book was titled "Our Good Neighbors." But the focus was on the opposite of good. It was a book very critical of relations between Mexico and the United States and the efforts that the U.S. had made to take over Mexico time and time again. He mentioned several invasions that are documented that most people don't know about.

And so in that context, I began to really awaken about our social condition, because up till then, it was just a struggle and struggle, and you were so involved with what you were doing that you don't see the whole picture. And suddenly everything opens up to you, and you realize that, wow, a lot of things are going on in the world, and in that context I became interested as to why did the Watts riots happen, got interested in the Peoples' March, when the people gathered in Washington, and was impressed by the hundreds of thousands of people that were there on the Lincoln Memorial.

We were having our own problems in the schools in East L.A. You began to hear about kids in school not being

happy, and we were forming groups. I remember we went from the Spanish Club at East L.A. College to the Mexican American Student Association, which interestingly is MASA.

ESPINO:

Okay, can I just stop this for a second, and I would like you to just tell me a little bit more about the Spanish--what did you call it, your first group?

HOLGUÍN:

The Spanish American.

ESPINO:

How did that form? Who was involved? Why did you decide to have a group like that?

00:45:44

HOLGUÍN:

Well, if you look back historically, and you'll see even photographs of Los Angeles, you'll find that prior to the 1960s there were really no Mexican restaurants around. They were all Spanish restaurants, Spanish food, when in reality it was Mexican food. But it was not kosher to talk about being Mexican. Mexicans were Spanish people. I remember when I moved to Pasadena, my next-door neighbor came to tell me about how nice her daughter had been married to a Spanish boy, and when I met the Spanish boy, he was a Mexican. But Pasadena was formed mostly by people who identified as Spanish, not Mexican. So in that context, the young people tried to make everybody think they were not Mexican but something else.

And so going from the Spanish Club to the Mexican American Student Association was a big jump into acknowledging who you were. But very quickly, within a year, MASA became UMAS, [United Mexican American Students], which is United Mexican Students Association. And very fast after that we had the MECHA group, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlán. You notice immediately that it went from English to Spanish and that it defined itself. It wasn't just a club. It had a vision. And in that period was when I was just [unclear]. We were jumping from one thing to another so quickly. MAPA [Mexican American Political Association] was being formed, and I had been asked to participate when we met out in Santa Barbara, also when we formed AME, which was the Association of Mexican American Educators, and the polemics that were going on there was very revolutionary to even call ourselves Mexican American, because for the most part, people had just begun to get used to the idea of being Americans of Mexican descent, and then to say, "No, we're Mexican Americans." I remember when MAPA was formed, the name itself caused a lot of dialogue for a couple of days. And I might say, well, what's the difference?

ESPINO:

Do you remember that discussion? Can you talk a little bit about that? Because I also have--one of my interviewees talked about that whole debate too.

01:02:07

HOLGUÍN:

Well, Bert Corona was one of--the keys in there was Mr. Borunda. There was a group of people that were very influential in setting up MAPA, and that was the Mexican American Affairs Association, which was mostly business people, but I guess they had a particular interest in that.

G.I. Forum had formed in Texas, and so they were also involved in that, but they had a little different focus. But they were concerned about becoming a political wedge in the system, because they felt they had no power up to that time, and they figured, we are growing in numbers, we need to have a voice, because G.I. Forum was formed as an answer to the American Legion. The American Legion even to this date, it's mostly white people, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars is another group that defines itself by that. And so what the G.I. Forum became, it was a forum. It was a group that were saying, "We want to have political clout, and we have the right, because we've been of service and we've served our country."

So the turmoil of the social revolution that was taking place was affecting everyone. I mentioned just the formation of the groups of young people was going so fast that during that same time José Angel Gutiérrez had formed MAYO in Texas. That was the Mexican American Youth [Organization] association. Corky Gonzales, fabled boxed, had formed his own group in Colorado, and Reies López Tijerina had started a revolution in New Mexico. So pretty much the focus began to shift a little bit away from the black condition, so to speak, into the Mexican American condition, because for the most part, this country had not heard much about Mexican Americans or Chicanos, because they were so geographically set up in a part of the country that many other people did not know we existed, and I guess it was becoming a thing to begin to learn about that.

César Chávez had started the movement to get the farmworkers organized. When César joined the Filipinos in the strike in the fields of Delano, that also caught attention, and the idea that we are a group to deal with became a little more pronounced, so that young people began to get involved. And then we had the walkouts in East Los Angeles, which really clinched the whole thing, because we had already a small group of people that were patterning themselves after the Black Panthers that was called the Brown Berets, and it's interesting that it was started by a young person who had been working with the mayor on a little commission assisting the police. And he himself, David Sanchez, saw disparities there in the way they were being promoted and the way they were really being treated in the barrio, so he formed the Brown Berets, and they were so critical, and I guess you might say they became a potential threat to the system, because the system was trying to deal with the Black Panthers, who were very visible already. And then you had the Young Lords out on the East Coast, New York, Chicago, who were also very active, and then the Brown Berets in East Los Angeles began to get involved with the walkouts, began to get involved with the hearings that we were having at the board of education.

I remember very vividly one time we were discussing a question of curriculum with the school board, and it was fairly full. That was when they were up on the hill. And then we heard [makes tapping sounds] the footsteps in large mass and wondered what it was. Well, it was the Brown Berets were marching from the halls into the boardroom, and I remember they were so threatening that we all just stopped to look at that. At that time they were very disciplined, and they were wearing uniforms, wearing their brown beret, their brown shirts, and they

came just to make sure that things were being taken care of.

I remember that the kids were being attacked at the schools, at Lincoln High School and at Roosevelt [High School], and then to a lesser extent at Garfield. But Roosevelt [High School] was the focus. Roosevelt was the focus, because that's when Sal Castro, who was a teacher that was kind of trying to get the students to do a protest peacefully, but to let them know that they were not happy with the way things were going, and even though the plan was already there, as I understand, the kids decided to throw a monkey wrench in the machinery and decided to walk out before the walkout that was planned, and that caught everybody by surprise. But the LAPD got involved very quickly. The police had [unclear], and they were pretty much in a state of siege in East L.A. for a long while.

I remember at that time we were having meetings at the All Nations' Club on Soto. I mean, that place was packed, and people were making comparisons with the zoot suit riots of the forties, because it was that bad. It was almost a free for all, and the kids couldn't be out on the streets on their own anymore. The police were everywhere. And so, yes, we got involved very quickly. I was then already teaching in Head Start, and I guess because of whatever ability I had, I had been picked almost from the beginning to be a teacher, and later on I was picked to be a trainer, and before I knew it, I was lecturing at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena. That's when it was over here on California. Now they've got two campuses now. And then later on, I went to the preschool lab at San Fernando Valley State College.

And so I got involved almost in everything was so intertwined, because in that context I got to meet Dr. Ernesto Galarza. He came to speak at Pacific Oaks College, and I was impressed by the manner in which he expressed himself, and so I approached him and we became friends, you might say. He invited me to his studio lab in San Jose, and I went there on several occasions. I got to meet Bert Corona in the same context and later got involved with him, because he was one of the first professors at San Fernando Valley State College [California State University Northridge] when we formed Chicano Studies over there.

And so my learning was such that I became like a sponge. There was so much to learn and so much to do that my whole life was involved in this social movement, and wherever called upon, I tried to respond and meet the challenge. And that's, you might say, the reason why I became whatever I became. It wasn't something that I planned. It wasn't something that I prepared myself for. It just happened.

When I went to college, I was inspired by a lady [Hope Hines] who became what I consider my best friend, because she understood me, she understood my situation. I guess she could see something in me that others couldn't, and she was the one that kept pushing me in the right direction, and got me to be a trainer here and a lecturer there. Then one day she said, "You need to go to college full-time." She and I worked together, because she was a certified teacher, and she and I worked together and developed what we called a team-teaching system in Head Start, where instead of having one class here with an assistant teacher, and another here, we combined the two classes, and instead of two teachers, the kids had four, and things were more coordinated and better planned.

But she kept saying to me, "You need to learn more, because in this environment, you only learn so much." And she asked me to explore, because I knew I couldn't afford it. I went to counselors at East L.A. College, I went to the counselor with the Council of Mexican American Affairs to try to find out what kind of scholarships were available. I couldn't find any. Most of the books on scholarships had to do with the children of people who belonged to different clubs, Lions Clubs, [unclear] clubs, and so on, and so I couldn't find anything. I spent two days looking through those books and couldn't find anything.

And in that context I met this kid, his name was Art Torres, who was having problems because he lived with his parents, had an older brother and a sister, and he convinced me that he was having such a hard time doing his homework at home, because there was too much activity interfering with his studies and all that, that he was saying he might have to drop out of college. And almost coincidentally, the husband of one of the speech therapists in the Head Start program happened to have a conversation with me in which I mentioned this kid, and he said, "You know, maybe we can do something about that." So he explored the idea with other people, and

they came up with a plan, and the plan was that they would rent a place big enough for Art Torres and other kids who had a similar problem, to live there, and they would pay the rent for the place, but they needed someone to be responsible for it.

So we found a place on Fickett [Street] Avenue, two blocks from Roosevelt High, and they asked me to be the head of the group. So we founded what we called The Hermano House, and we had eight young people living there. The plan was that they would be required to pay rent, but the rent would actually be paid by this group of merchants, and the money that they would be paying would be set up in a fund that when the semester was over and they got passing grades, they would get the money back, and that would help them through with their studies. So we did that, and we found enough kids that wanted to go there, so we had to interview them and take the ones that would appear to be more serious. We got Mexicana de Aviación, which was one of the airlines then. They donated office furniture. They donated six desks, tables and chairs and lamps, and so we were able to furnish the place very quickly. When we decided that we needed it make it look more homely, we had a couple of dances to fundraise funds and buy curtains and stuff, and we became a little group of guys that were really very supportive with each other.

I moved from my apartment to live with them, and that's the way we went for two years, and then things got out of hand, and it got to the point where I told them I couldn't be responsible anymore, because a couple of bad elements got in there with us, and they started pushing drugs, and--

ESPINO:

Oh, no. The students?

01:06:22

HOLGUÍN:

--started making a bad name. Well, a lot of high school kids started coming over to the house, and we couldn't be there all the time, so we couldn't control it. And so one day I told them, "I'm sorry. I can't carry this over." But concurrently, Mike de la Peña, who has become famous because he got married on the day of the moratorium, of the national moratorium, he was going to USC, and he found out that there were scholarships available, that there was a program being opened up at the university that was called the Education Opportunities Program [EOP], and he says, "Why don't you give me an application, and we'll see." So that together with what Hope Hines was telling me to do--we started exploring. I applied for admissions at four different universities. I got admitted to all four, and then it was a question of what kind of financial aid would be available to me.

I looked at the distances, because I was accepted at UC Irvine, to USC, to UCLA, Cal State L.A., and Cal State Northridge. So as I began to explore, I looked at the distances, the opportunities, considered the traveling and all that. Not wanting to stay too far from my family, I decided that Cal State Northridge, which was then San Fernando Valley State College, was my best option. So I went and I got interviewed for the financial aid, got to meet some of the faculty in the Chicano Studies program that was being formed, and I decided to go there. They gave me a good financial-aid package that included two grants, two scholarships, and some loan money, and I figured that would cover me. Oh, and then I would get also money for dorms, because at that time they had dormitories, because it was pretty much a commuters' college. And so with all of that and all this opportunity, everything got so that my life was just twenty-four hours of involvement with everything that was going on.

And I happened to meet the right people, and one of the things I learned, I says, that's when you really want

something, you'll find people to help you out to do it, because people counted on me by providing me the support system that I needed and the encouragement, and so I went on and my life really changed. After the first year at the university, I got elected to be the chairman of MECHA, and we had young people there that were--I saw them as good leaders. I mean, the only thing I had an advantage to them was my age. I looked young, but I was not young at all anymore. I already had my kids and my family made. But to even be nominated to be chairman of MECHA was--I don't stand a chance. I was running against Elvina Alarcon, who's Richard Alarcon's sister; José Galván; Frank del Olmo. I mean, those were the guys who were my contemporaries. [laughs]

ESPINO:

Incredible.

01:17:08

HOLGUÍN:

And then to be elected, I said, wow. I couldn't believe it. But again, I had to meet the challenge. We formed a very strong MECHA group, probably the strongest in the state. Later on I became statewide MECHA chairman, and we had a big convention at Cal State Northridge that was being looked at by the LAPD, because we gathered over a thousand people from all the universities. But the learning process was so fast that I didn't have much time to worry about myself. It was always looking at this, looking at that, taking care of this and taking care of that, and so came the time when I said, where am I? Because I really was taking courses that would be pushing me into a sociology major, but I was so interested in what was going on with the formation of Chicano Studies that out of curiosity I said, well, I'm going to take this course and I'm going to take that course.

And came the day when by my next-to-the-last undergraduate semester, I was almost double majoring, and so it became a question of, can I? And I found out that I could, so I ended up with two majors. I graduated with a bachelor's in sociology and a bachelor's in Chicano Studies, with a minor in psychology, which really covered the interests that I had. But in that process I learned curriculum development, because one of the things that happened is Rudy Acuña recommended me to be in the committee to develop the criteria, the curriculum for the specialist credential in early-childhood education, since I already had the experience working with children. They put me there, and I was treated like a colleague, so I behaved like one, with all these professors. And as soon as we finished that, then they wanted to do a teachers' credential program, and this is when Rudy said, "Okay, you guys [unclear]. We want you there, and we want you to do this."

And so what we did that allowed the department to really grow like you couldn't imagine was that my job was to convince the faculty of the School of Education and those that were contributing, to make sure that Chicano Studies courses were required to get a teacher's credential. So we were able to push for twenty-seven units of Chicano Studies to be a requirement for the credential, and that was what legitimized the department. It became the largest department within the School of the Humanities, and that's why later on we had a Chicano faculty as the dean of the School of the Humanities, and Jorge Garcia did a tremendous job as such.

But, yes, it was a great experience, and like I say, the learning that took place was such that when I taught my first class, I even had the luxury of flunking one of my students, because simply I held some standards for myself already, because I had been told by Dr. Rudy Acuña, I had been told by Raúl Ruíz, I had been told by Dr. [Rafael] Perez Sandoval, who was a USC graduate, I had been told by--what was his name; gosh, I forget--it was another professor that used to teach at L.A. [Los Angeles] Valley College, and they all told me, they said,

"You know, you are a late bloomer, but being one of the oldest students, we expect more from you than from anybody else." So the pressure was on me from all of them, and I think I raised up to the challenge, and I did the best I could. I finished up and got my undergraduate degrees with a 3.8 average.

But I created--among other things, I was able to get a dorm for free, because the person who had been hired by the university to run the dormitories was a fellow that came out of India, a very nice fellow, and he felt that by letting me stay there without having to pay rent would help me financially, and would help me keep the Chicanos in line. [laughs] And so that was no problem. The Chicanos were not a problem. To them, it was a threat. To me, they were my people, and I did that.

Little was I to know that very quickly I was not only teaching, but when Irene Tovar left the university employment, because she had been running the Chicano House in San Fernando, and there were some questions raised about how she was running it, that she resigned and went on to become--I guess the governor at that time appointed her to the Women's Commission or something in Sacramento, and she left a vacancy that was very quickly dropped on me. So I was running the Chicano House.

But then concurrently in that time, we had people like Sergio Hernández. I don't know if you heard; he's an artist. He used to be a cartoonist for the local newspaper "El Popo," and he also used to do a cartoon character for "La Raza" magazine, a very fine young man who was an artist. He helped me run the place, and essentially what we did, we were running like an Upward Bound and a talent-search program out of there, and that was the Rock House, which was a property that had been donated to the nuns, and they were letting us use it. It was a big place. So we were doing that.

And before I knew it, the director of the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] had been accepted to law school in Berkeley and was leaving, and they wanted to hire someone. I was approached to apply, but I told them I was not interested. I didn't think I had the background for that. But they said, "Oh, we want you to fill an application anyway and a letter, and do us a resume." So I said, "Well, when do you need it?" He said, "Like right now." So I wrote the application and intent to apply and a resume and gave it to them, and before I knew it, the committee, which was something that had been formed when they started the Chicano program--it was the Chicano Affairs Committee, and that was made up of students, faculty, and community people. They came to the Rock House to interview me, but they already had in mind that I was going to be the one, because when they asked me, they had already interviewed everybody else that had applied, and they weren't happy with anybody else.

So to make a long story short, I got the job, but I accepted it on the condition that Hank Lopez, who had been the assistant to the EOP director be retained, because they wanted to fire him. And they told me, "Your first job is going to be that." I said, "No." I said, "We need some continuity. He's the only continuity we have there." And they allowed me to keep Hank, and that was a good showing, because Hank was the backbone of the whole thing. He knew the program; I didn't. And I learned a lot from him. He had the formula for reviewing the SAT scores and the criteria for evaluating the applications and everything else, so they allowed me to do that, and then we ran a very effective EOP program until I left there. But at that time I was doing four roles. I was faculty, I was a student, I was director of EOP and director of the Chicano House.

ESPINO:

Incredible.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. It was fun. But, yes, it was incredible at the time.

ESPINO:

Can you talk a little bit about your--I know it happened really quickly, and you moved from Mexican American to Chicano within a few years, but that change, what was that like for you? Because like you said, you were a bit older than some of the younger students who were active at that time.

01:24:56

HOLGUÍN:

Well, being older and having been raised in two cultures, in two societies, I had no problem knowing who I was. I mean, you could give me anything you wanted, but I knew who I was. I didn't have an identity problem. And so I was able to see the progression and accept that. I said, "Yeah, it's going in the right direction." And like UMAS [United Mexican American Students] and MECHA came the same year. It was like people were getting used to UMAS, and, boom, MECHA was there, and MECHA became the most viable of all, because UMAS pretty much stayed only with some of the conservative groups, because MECHA, by becoming a movement, really gave rise to social action.

And in that context, we had a lot of kids that got left behind. We had a lot of kids that joined but had identity problems, because you know, when you've been raised in a society where you were not with your group but really removed, like not all the kids were from East L.A. We had kids coming from Mission Hills, from Granada Hills, from Oxnard, from all over the place. Some kids [unclear] some Chicanitos coming in from Watts, because many people today do not know that Watts was a Chicano community before it was the black community. I think blacks began to move to Watts after World War II, when they found out there's something besides the South, and we're more welcome in California. So the word got around, and you find that many people began to move in that area, and a lot of Mexicans began to move out. They began to move to Montebello, to Pico Rivera, to other areas.

And so in that context, we had a lot of kids that were joining because they wanted to belong somewhere. We had some kids that began to discover who they were. Some of them got angry, because having found out who they were and how they had been treated made them want to change things. And so we really, in our campus, but I think throughout California, became a more cohesive group insofar as what we wanted to do. And when someone today tells me that it didn't make any difference, I have to remind them that many of the professionals we have today, in law, in politics, in finances, in education, came out of that movement, and there was an opportunity made to them that would have not been there, and I am a prime example of that. Had I not had that opportunity, I don't know what I'd be doing today. But because of that growth, I was able to absorb and take advantage of everything that was available to me and use myself as an example when kids come to me and say, "I can't do it." And I say, "What do you mean you can't do it? You can do anything you want to do if you set your mind to it." And I will tell them, "You look at me, and let me tell you just the things I've done. So don't tell me you can't do it." And that encouraged a lot of kids to do that.

But to give you an example of how important it was, under the EOP program, we made ourselves available of funds from what was called the TRIO program. The federal government was providing funds for an Upward

Bound program, which allowed us to go into the schools and explore kids that were there, a talent-search program that would allow us to do tutoring and all that, and then a supportive services program. With all those three combined, we were able to go into the different schools in the communities, and we were so successful that even the EOP staff at Cal State L.A. was complaining that we were taking out there kids. And we had to say to them, "Look. If you're not doing the job, we're going to do it," because we had so many kids from East L.A. coming to Cal State Northridge, and it was a new world for them because it was not the barrio. And pretty soon they started populating the apartments around the university to the point where we formed our own barrio.

But everything was so fast for all of them and for all of us that we made mistakes, but we also learned a lot. And under those programs, we had made a commitment that we would be bringing in five hundred kids a semester, and when I visited the university back in 2000--yes, in 2000 I was asked to go visit, because they wanted to do something with the microfiche program that they were doing. They wanted some of my assistance. I talked to Raul Aragon, who had been my assistant when I was there, and he had told me that even after the earthquake, the university student enrollment was still growing and that the Chicano population was almost 50 percent of the student population at Cal State Northridge, when, in fact, when I started out, we just were a handful of people. And so the program was successful because not only were we able to bring young people in, but we developed a program that allowed for a great retention rate. Whereas the blacks, they were losing more than half of their people they brought in each semester.

ESPINO:

At Northridge?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes.

ESPINO:

So that money that you obtained for these special programs, that came from the state, or was that federal?

HOLGUÍN:

Federal.

ESPINO:

And was that in the seventies?

HOLGUÍN:

That was in the seventies, yes.

ESPINO:

So that was not War on Poverty. Those were not War on Poverty funds.

HOLGUÍN:

No, those were not War on Poverty funds. It was part of the Aid to Higher Education.

ESPINO:

Aid to Higher Education. That had nothing to do with economic opportunity funds. It was a whole different--

HOLGUÍN:

Right.

ESPINO:

--type of funding.

01:27:16

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. We just happened to take advantage of it. Just like another program that we took advantage of, which kind of mingled in with everything else, is the bilingual program. See, under Title VII, funds were provided for bilingual education, to accommodate Cubans. That was the exodus of the Cubans that came in. They never imagined the Chicanos were going to get into the picture and take advantage of it, which was also great, because it provided opportunities for people like me, who already had a bilingual background and had a bi-cultural experience to contribute into that and try to make it more legitimate, because we didn't need outsiders to come and try to teach us who we are or what we know. We had among ourselves a resource that was very rich, and so we tapped into that whenever we could.

And for me it was very helpful, because not only did I do that, but part of my experience, along with curriculum development, was that I was called in at Cal Poly Pomona, and we did a materials development, bilingual. I'll tell you about that later on, but I taught classes in curriculum development, and I taught classes in bilingual and bi-cultural education.

ESPINO:

Did you see yourself as a mentor to the younger student activists? Or did you see yourself as part of that collective activism that marked that period?

01:37:32

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I don't know exactly how to describe it, but I think many of the young people perceived me as a father figure, because some of them could see that I was an older person. Some of them never got wind until my own kids--I had four of my kids in college at one time. But I remember that when I let the students know that I could not be chairman of MECHA anymore because I had become part of the faculty and administration, and I had to let go, they came up with the idea that they shouldn't elect anybody MECHA chairman that was married or had any kids. [laughs] I said, "Well, was that a threat?" I said, "You guys nominated me. I didn't ask for it." But also, when I announced that I wasn't going to be running anymore, they couldn't find anyone to run, and so what they came up as an answer to that was they did a co-chair. They put a male and a female to run things together. But they didn't do as good a job as we wanted them to do, because like I told some of the folks that were there, we often stay in [unclear] positions too long, and we don't train the younger people to take our place.

I think our programs at Cal State Northridge were successful because some of us that were in the leadership, like Tomas Trimble, José Galván, and all, we were all older. We were all Korean War veterans, and so they had a different perspective on life. And we took those leadership positions, but I think out of that, the only young one that was there was probably Frank del Olmo. All the other guys were navy veterans, army veterans, and they moved on to other things in life. Three of them became lawyers, one of them became a parole officer in Ventura County, I think, but the older folks left and left a vacuum, and I think that happened not only there but in many other places.

It's still happening. You find so many organizations today that were created in the sixties or seventies that are falling apart or dissolving, because the founders are gone and there's no one to fill in the positions, or to

understand the historical perspective under which things were developed. Even with the seniors, now that I'm a retiree and I see that, I see a senior group like California Seniors, which are still resting on their laurels. "Well, we did this and we did that," but that's happened in the past. They're not doing anything today, really.

We have other groups, like the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, or MAPA. MAPA was dormant for so long, and suddenly it resurged and all that. LULAC [League of Latin American Citizens] is about the only one that's been active for sixty-some years, but that was created in Texas, and that's where it is the strongest. Over here we have a LULAC group here in San Fernando that is active, but to a lesser degree. The Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, I belong to the board of the local chapter in Los Angeles, and out of twenty-one members, there are only about six of us that are active. That's on the board. The national office is really involved in doing resolutions and that's pretty much the extent of it. They do resolutions. They meet once a year, and I don't see much happening.

I think when you've been active and seen the results for so long, and then suddenly you begin to notice that not many positive things are happening anymore, you begin to wonder where we failed. Our politicians--I don't know if you saw some of the recent articles in the paper, where it says Chicano politicians used to meet at Little Rito's or Steven's Steak House, and now they meet at very restaurants and away from the barrio. They've made progress, and maybe that's what it's about. We all wanted a piece of the pie, and some of us are getting a bigger share than others. [laughs]

And I remember that sometime we forget our leaders. When I last saw Dr. [Ernesto] Galarza, we invited him to come and talk to us at Cal Poly Pomona as we were developing the foundations of a curriculum program, and I remember I went to pick him up at the airport, and he looked as humble as he had always looked, because he was not a fancy dresser. He was wearing a coat and a scarf around his neck. But he was tired, and he pretty much had gotten to that point where at the university there was only two Chicanos--when they announced that he was going to be there speaking, there were only two Chicanos attending. I was one of them. But the rest of the faculty knew who he was, and all the gringos were there, willing to absorb the knowledge of this wise man who had lived so much, and the rest of them, they don't appreciate it.

When I invited Bert Corona to our local, when I say we don't honor our own people when they're alive; why should we wait until they're dead? And that's when we had a special thing for Bert Corona at our local to acknowledge his contributions and thank him for it, a lot of people already didn't know who he was, and that was in 1993. And Bert was very flattered. He'd been through the thick and thin of the Chicano movement and had been really a stalwart in many things, especially in politics. He had been an advisor to Bob Kennedy. He had been involved in so many different things, the foundation of MAPA, and we forget who they are so quickly. I've said it many times, and I'm still saying it. We deny our own history, when we should be so proud of it, because in spite of everything, we've done a lot of things.

I remember when one of the leaders of the labor movement came to us, what, five years ago, and she was one of the vice presidents of the Service Employees International Union. She came to us, me and Louie [Duran], and said, "You know, Louie, Ramón," she said, "I'm coming to you because you have become the largest minority in this country. We have to pass the civil rights banner to you guys, because it's your time." And I hope that we can meet that challenge, because we've been saying this is the decade of the Chicano for too many years, and it hasn't been. But maybe with the new president [Barack Obama] there's hope that things will change for the better for everybody.

ESPINO:

Okay. I think we'll stop here. That's a really important point to pick up on next time, is how through your life you've seen the change from those exciting sixties and seventies years to the later eighties and nineties. And I

also want to get back a little bit to some just specifics about MAPA, some specifics about MECHA. You've mentioned a lot of male names. I haven't heard too many female names, so maybe we can talk next time about women in MAPA, women in--because I know there were some involved, as well as in the Chicano movement. And we'll get back to that.

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, but I've mentioned names. I mentioned Anita Gomez, I mentioned [unclear], I mentioned Elvina Alarcon.

ESPINO:

But it seems like there were a lot more men in leadership roles than there were women.

01:39:55

HOLGUÍN:

Notably so, but my--and Rosario will tell you this--my belief has always been that if you want something done, you've got to rely on women, because women have been the backbone of the Chicano movement. I mean, you look at Dolores Huerta, [unclear] del Razo. There are many women who have come forth and who have been behind the lines, pushing, pushing, and supporting, and I think that's important to remember. I know that having worked with women mostly all my life, I've learned to respect women, and I've learned that when they make a commitment, they live up to it. Whereas men sometimes will do what is necessary, but many times it's to fit their own purposes or to fulfill their own needs. Whereas women are more sincere when they make a commitment to a movement.

ESPINO:

I guess my point isn't to question your perspective, but just if you could talk about some experiences where you've seen different people in action and the different [unclear], because it was a time of unity, but it was also a time of great conflict. So we can talk about that the next time, and I just want to get some of your memories and your recollection about that.

01:40:22

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. It's been a roller coaster, really.

ESPINO:

Okay, I'm going to stop now. [End of interview]

Session Five (May 1, 2009)

00:00:36

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is May 1, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the SEIU offices in Pasadena, California.

Okay, Mr. Holguín, we're going to go back a little bit to your experience at Cal State Northridge. You went there as a--well, you can tell me--you explained a little bit last time how you came to Northridge, but I want to really focus on the founding of Chicano Studies and your experience with the professors there and developing curriculum and that kind of thing.

00:06:21

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. Well, as I recall, as I went there, we had a lot of people really counseling the Chicanos that were coming in, and I felt that it was strange that young people would be counseling me, because I really knew what I wanted but had never had the opportunity, because counselors at the junior college were not very helpful to me. I had to learn to counsel myself and decide what courses I wanted to take.

So at Cal State Northridge, which was at that time San Fernando Valley State College, we had a lot of young people helping out, helping with the classes, and, of course, one of the things that they were doing is they were gearing the young Chicanos into Chicano Studies, to take some basic courses there, because they needed to keep the department going, unlike other universities, where they were developing a Chicano Studies program. At Cal State Northridge, they were setting up a department. And I recall that some of the teaching staff at that time were some professors. Notably, there was Dr. Rafael Perez Sandoval, who was a professor coming out of USC. We had Rudy Acuña. We had others out of UCLA, like Saúl Solache, who was a civil engineer. We had others that were well informed about history, like Bert Corona, who was founder of the Hermandad Mexicana Nacional. We had other people like Dr. Ernesto Galarza, who came and was lecturing. We also had others coming out of some of the community colleges in the area, and we had a couple of people out of East L.A. One of them was Raúl Ruíz, who was at that time the editor of "La Raza" magazine.

And then we had some young people who, interestingly enough, kind of gave legitimacy to the department by being who they were, like Beto Ruíz, who, as I recall, did not even have a degree at the time. But he was great because he knew the community. He played a good guitar, and over the years he became a very good teacher that people respected. I respect Beto tremendously, because he developed a music department within Chicano Studies, and I recall at one time he had so many followers that they had a s_____ on the campus, with about a hundred guitars, and it was just beautiful.

So Beto formed a Conjunto Atzlán and also formed a Mariachi Atzlán, and I understand that at one time in recent years, he had been performing professionally with his group and had been instrumental in founding the Festival de Mariachi, they call it, which is annually performing at San Fernando Valley State College, and they got many of the graduates of Cal State Northridge from that program to form their own young mariachis. So you go and you can enjoy two, three hours of mariachi music from different young groups. So that department kind of found itself in the area of the humanities by focusing on things that the other departments weren't doing. They were doing art, they were doing music, they were doing literature, and they were doing history, and they were always looking for good people.

Later on they brought Fermín Herrera, who was even teaching Nahuatl, and the department continued growing. Some other people that were teaching classes for the first time went on to get doctoral degrees, and as I understand, the department now has about twenty-one full-time professors, tenured, and I don't know how many assistant professors or lecturers. So it's one of the biggest departments within the School of the Humanities.

ESPINO:

It sounds like there were many potential faculty people to pull from, that there wasn't a desperate need to find people. It sounds like there were people available. Do you remember if there was any competition, or if problems arose between--who determined who would be allowed to teach there, when you had such a pool of people?

00:12:46

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I think Rudy [Acuña] was probably behind most of it. There was another professor who had been, I think, a minister or a Catholic priest, Dr. Gerald Resendez, who was very instrumental in keeping the kids spiritually clean. They used to look to him for counseling and moral-inspirational support. I don't see that there was competition, because everyone that was coming in had special talents, special backgrounds, and so they had like a rainbow of different emphasis that made the department colorful, if you may.

Raúl Ruíz, for example, had, I don't know, an orientation that was very critical of American society. He was very supportive of the Brown Berets and any group that was really working to bring about change. He focused his classes onto that. I remember, in particular, that some of the non-Chicano students that were in his class would take issue with some of the things he said, and so by having to engage in dialogue with them, he had to kind of line himself up to really study more and have his resources clear, so he could defend his position. I understand that later on he went to Harvard and came back mellowed out a little bit, but not totally.

And Dr. Perez Sandoval, he was very much into Mexican culture. He knew the Codices, he knew the Popol Vuh papers, and I guess he was from Mexico, because I remember that he had an accent. But I remember that he was very firm in his teachings and also in his expectations of the students. I recall in particular that the last year when we took the final, I got a group of students, because many of them had problems with how hard he was dealing with the subject, and so we did group study, and I remember that having been the only one that had a typewriter, the night before we had to turn in our papers, because he gave us the questions--it was a take-home test, and so we talked about, well, what does he mean by this, and what does he mean by that, and each one wrote what they could out of the discussion we had as a group, and then some of the kids that couldn't type asked me to do it. And I remember spending all night typing away, like term papers.

And he questioned. He said, "What happened here?" And I had to tell him that there was no cheating, it was just a group learning, and he accepted that, because some people picked up some of the ideas that he had, others picked up the other one, and when we put them all together, we understood the concepts that he was teaching much better. Because the culture of the Mexican people--and we're talking about before the conquest, in pre-Colombian Mexico--it wasn't easy. They had their own philosophies. They had their own languages. They had their own cultures, and it's not easy to learn something that you never knew.

So the department became stronger and stronger as the years went by. The teaching staff was selective, more and more. For example, María Pardo was--I think she came from UCLA. Ramón Pardo was her husband. I don't know if they're still married. There was another young lady who came to us, María Herrera, who I think today is a, what do you call it--I think she's at University of Santa Barbara as a--what are the people that run the university? Not a president, but--

ESPINO:

A dean? Provost?

00:17:15

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, something like that. But she came, and I recall when the students were interviewing her, somebody dared ask the question, "Well, why are you dressed like that?" Because she wasn't dressed in a typical manner that the girls were dressed at that time, with boots and very militant. And she said, "Well, I've been going to school on scholarships and working my way through, and I haven't earned money to buy my new clothes." [laughs] But María Herrera was hired, and she developed an outstanding program for the supportive services that we had under EOP [Educational Opportunity Program]. She was teaching, specifically, English, because a lot of the young people that were coming out of the high schools did not know enough English to survive at a university level. So she was filling in a tremendous gap, and develop a syllabus and a program, and she was practically developing a book on how to teach English to young people, young Chicanos. And I think she was excellent, very professional, and this is why she's what she is now.

We had other people we hired to teach math, and, of course, we used to use other students that were more advanced than the newcomers to help out as tutors as well. And so it became a supporting theme, where EOP would bring in the young people into a university under the supportive services program. We would counsel them, and, of course, we always counseled them to take some Chicano courses, because we needed to keep the department going, but we also needed the kids to learn about themselves. And I think one of the purposes of the department was to teach them about themselves, so they could form a strong self-concept.

I saw that working beautifully for some young people. I saw it not working so well for other kids that really had a problem with identity problems. I'll give you an example. There was one kid that had grown up in the Watts area, which had been a Mexican community at one time, and this kid had grown up among blacks. He spoke like black kids, he behaved like them, dressed like them, and he was not really being accepted by the young Chicanos in the class, and he had a problem with that. And I recall that he dropped out. He had to drop out, because he couldn't handle it. The pressure, the criticism was such, because young people are mean, and they're foolish sometimes, and so they were picking on him more than he could handle. That happened to some girls too.

But generally, most of the young people were developing a good self-concept. They were learning things that they didn't know, and they were getting angry. They wanted some changes to be made, and this is why MECHA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlán] was also very strong, because through MECHA they felt that they could bring about change. And, of course, one of the big changes we wanted was to have more kids get educated, and I think that was the main focus of most of the faculty in Chicano Studies. We wanted to educate the kids. We wanted them to succeed, and we wanted to have a good retention percentage, and this is why we formed the supportive services program, which was like a little school within the university.

ESPINO:

Do you remember the date of that, the supportive services?

HOLGUÍN:

It was right away.

ESPINO:

In '69 as well?

00:19:24

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, in '69, but in '70 it really got going. We had a little campus right off my office, actually, and had classrooms and everything in there, and a counseling center, and the counseling department, which was made up of mostly Ph.D.'s with psychology degrees and all of that, could not understand why Chicanos wouldn't go there for counseling. And we said, "Well, you don't understand what their problems are. The kids that we have in supportive services understand, because they come from the same background, and they're more sympathetic. They have found solutions to their problems, and they pass on those solutions to the newcomers." And the department got to start focusing on that, and they tried to recruit a couple of our kids that were already graduating and doing graduate work.

And we had one Chicano in the department of counseling who was, if you may, a Chicano with a Jewish accent, who came from Texas, who did not really understand what was going on. But he learned. He wanted to learn very much, but he was constantly being told off by the young Chicanos, because, "You don't know what you're talking about." And Nathan learned over the years to work with the kids a little bit better. But, no, we had our own counseling department, and that's what made us strong.

ESPINO:

Did you find that there was conflict between the students and Chicano Studies staff and faculty? Or can you describe the relationship between those two groups?

00:28:32

HOLGUÍN:

The Chicano students did not have problems with the Chicano faculty in the department, because I think the faculty were very understanding. I think sometimes some of them were not too demanding, and we kept saying, "You can't baby-sit these kids. They need to learn to succeed, because they're not going to graduate successfully just taking Chicano Studies. They've got to go into the other department, and whatever they're majoring in, they're going to have to be able to do it right and get the grade-point average that they need to graduate and go on to graduate studies or to a job."

And so there was no real conflict between Chicano faculty and Chicano students, and I don't think that there was a problem with most of other faculty in other departments as well, because, frankly, I think that not knowing and following the stereotype of a Mexican, they feared us, so nobody really wanted to ruffle our feathers, and that was our strength. We could do a lot of things that other kids probably wouldn't be able to get away with. For example, the department supported the farmworkers and brought out issues that the farmworkers were fighting for, brought about the reasons why they were fighting. It brought about how the white man had acquired the southwest. Our kids learned that it was through armed conflict rather than a friendly exchange.

And I recall that the classes became more and more factual than opinionated, because I remember even Rudy, and he might not admit it now, but I think Rudy was very opinionated in the beginning. He was angry, because as he was finding out about himself, because he had married a German lady when he was in the service, and so he was living in an Anglo community [unclear], and as he found out really who he was, he became angrier for a time, and it reflected in the way he brought about some of his class presentations. And that was projected onto the kids. But for the most part, the faculty was supporting issues that were going on in the community, which none of the other departments were doing.

And it was also kind of encouraging kids to go to MECHA meetings, to participate in demonstrations and picket lines. They would bring speakers. Like they would bring farmworkers to speak in the classes. They would bring the workers from General Motors to come and speak about why they were striking. The learning that was going on in Chicano Studies was based on the Chicano experience in the barrios, the Chicano experience in society, the things that weren't taught anywhere else, things that kids did not know or were aware were going on around them, and so in that context it was truly a learning experience, and kids were kind of waking up and saying, "Hey, look what's been happening to us. And it's not going to happen anymore."

And so they became more motivated to learn, to be prepared. When we formed Operation Chicano Teacher, the kids that were selected for that program had to be committed to follow through, because it was like when you study medicine. You're going to come into this program, but you're going to stay through until you get ready to get your credential. And in that sense we worked with them, tutoring, counseling, working with other departments to make sure that they understand why these kids were in their classes and would not baby-sit them. And in that sense, all these kids knew their mission was going to be to go back to the schools in the barrio and teach other Chicanitos more about themselves, and prepare them for college, because that's been the problem with our people. They don't have college-prep courses in many of the schools in the barrio. They're barely surviving.

We know that, for example, during the walkouts, almost 50 percent of the students did not graduate. They were dropping out and that was not acceptable. It was not acceptable to the kids, it was not acceptable to the parents, but the parents felt almost helpless to do anything about it. It was the action of the young people when they walked out that brought the parents together to say, we've got to fight for our kids, and that's how my wife got involved. She got involved with Title I, with Title VII. She became president of the Title I, and she used to go to the board of education and fight along with other parents. We're fighting for a more relevant education. We're fighting to make sure that they would be preparing the kids not only to go to college, but preparing them for life, because even to this day I find that most young people graduate not knowing what they're going to do, not even thinking beyond high school.

I remember seeing kids in Pasadena, I'd ask them, "What are you going to do when you [unclear]?" "Well, we're going on vacation." I said, "But then what? You're not going to go be back in school anymore. Have you thought beyond vacation?" "No." Typically, the answer is no. The parents have not talked to them about going to college, have not even talked to them about having to get a job. I find that you could almost indict the school system for not preparing kids for real life, because when kids graduate, they're lost. They're not going back to school. They don't have any work experience. They don't have any aspiration as to what they're going to be doing in life, and they don't know what to do. And many times parents have problems with their kids at that point, because the expectation is that they are going to work, but they've never been encouraged to look for work.

See, my own kids, they started working when they were very young, because we insisted that they work part-time and earn some money. My daughter, who is now a professional executive, was working when she was fifteen. She lied about her age. She used to work in the summer program, and she worked for the City of Pasadena in a summer program. And my granddaughter worked for the City of Pasadena when she was sixteen. With us it was an expectation. We needed to teach them good work habits. I think that the only one that didn't learn that was my younger son. For some reason, we missed the boat with him. But a lot of kids don't know that.

ESPINO:

I'm going to pause it for a second, because your microphone just fell off. [Recorder turned off]

ESPINO:

Okay, we're back.

HOLGUÍN:

And so going back to Chicano Studies, I think it was successful because we expected it to be successful, and we worked hard to make it so. The faculty got better and better as the years went by. Those that didn't cut it kind of faded away. There are some that came that probably could not live up to the expectation.

ESPINO:

Do you have any examples?

00:34:03

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I don't have examples in that sense, because a teacher would be here this semester, and next semester wouldn't be there. But we also had some success stories. Ricardo Romo is an example. Ricardo Romo came to us. He taught and all that, and I don't know if you do not know, he's the president of the University of Texas in San Antonio, so we have a lot of success stories like that, people that have gone on and been successful. The ones that were not, well, maybe there is a reason for it.

I mentioned Fermin Herrera. His brother Andy [Herrera] was also working with me at one time in the EOP program in supportive services, and they had a sister who came and was teaching dance at one point. We had two or three good teachers that were teaching dance, and they were successful in their own merit. The Herrera family now has a conjunto, Veracruzano, out of I guess Oxnard, in that area, and they play professionally. They've been in movies. They've been in--there's the documentary on public television, it's called "Mariachis." They perform in different places .

The department also formed Folklórico groups. We had a lot of kids that learned how to dance Mexican folklore dances out of the department. So there was music, there was dance. There was Flor y Canto. We formed a Flor y Canto group in San Fernando, formed by the students, in which they were doing art, poetry, song and all of that, and very successfully for a while. There is a museum downtown Los Angeles that is run by art students that were in Chicano Studies over there, so as you go around, you find that things are--my son David [Holguín] went to Cal State Northridge, and he became a counselor, worked with young drug addicts for a long time in San Fernando. Then he got married and decided to go and try his luck in Texas, because he's an artist. He was gone I think two or three years and he didn't do so well, so he came back. But he's made his living as an artist all his life, and presently he's still an artist. You go to his house and it's like you're visiting a museum, beautiful. Everything matches, even the towels in the bathroom.

So I think that the department has done well, and whenever somebody tells me that the Chicano movement and MECHA didn't do any good, all I have to do is point out to them that there are many successful doctors, engineers, politicians, people in different walks of life who have become people contributing to society in a positive way because of the education they received, and that was what it was about.

At the beginning, I recall when we had our first alumni association meeting. We were founding it. Some of the kids came up to the thing in Rolls Royces and BMWs and GM, and we knew they were rented, but they wanted to show success. And we said, "That is not really what it's about. It's not about bringing symbols of success. It's about being successful as a person that is important." And we tried to continue enforcing and encouraging that type of a thing.

ESPINO:

Well, I wanted to talk a little bit about this idea of identity that you're talking about, that success isn't about the

physical-material, it was about feeling good about yourself and who you are as a person, as a Chicano or Chicana, because at that time, Chicana feminism was also emerging, and the identity is somewhat different between men and women coming of age in the sixties and the seventies. Can you talk about any of the Chicanas who were active or teaching or part of CSUN [California State University Northridge] at that time?

00:44:35

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. I believe that Chicanas benefited more from the Chicano movement and from the education available to them. Notably, as you looked at people graduating, there were more females than males graduating. You saw them acquiring a very positive self-concept, so they wouldn't take any condescending attitude from males. They became leaders, and they were the ones, I think, that in many instances kept the whole thing going. Because my experience has always been that you can depend on women more than you can on men. Men are goal-oriented and many times are self-motivated for self-fulfillment, whereas women are motivated more by wanting to be supportive, wanting to be more family-oriented, wanting to help not only themselves but others. They're not as selfish, and when they make a commitment, they live up to it.

I found out, having been MECHA chairman for almost four semesters--no, three semesters--that whenever we formed committees, I would almost invariably always appoint women to chair those committees, because I knew I could count on them. I'll give you an example of something that happened. In the fall of 1970, César Chávez had been arrested because he had violated some order in the lettuce fields. And in solidarity with him, we went on a strike, and we started boycotting the cafeteria. Now, the cafeteria at the university is big, and they were doing real good business, being run very professionally.

And so as we began to boycott, we found out that we needed to provide some alternative, because we were telling people, don't go eat in the cafeteria, and the question was, well, where are they going to eat. So we set up our own kitchen outside the cafeteria, and we had a Chicano House off campus where we'd do the cooking. We'd bring the stuff in there, and we set up tables and all that, and so people began to buy food from MECHA, and most of the cooking was being run by the women. The guys were organizing the boycotting and the picketing, and we did that for almost a month, and we made the university buckle down, because we said, "Don't use non-union lettuce." That was the main issue.

And so as the Christmas vacation approached, the resolution was not made yet, and I remember that the day before school was out for the winter, they had a special meeting at the president's--well, no, at the Dean of Academic Planning's office, and it was with security guards and everything. We were talking about what they were going to do. And the manager of the cafeteria had to admit that they had been losing money, a lot of money, because people weren't buying food in there except for faculty and some students. They went into a secret meeting, and by the next day they announced that they were going to buy union lettuce. And so the last day before school went out, I remember we did a march. I recall that we went into the faculty lounge. I remember that I was wearing a jorongo and I was wearing a farmworkers' flag, and we went to the president and told him that if they didn't live up to their promise, we would be back. And there is a picture of me blown up in the EOP office doing that. That's what I was told.

And so we went back, somebody went and bought a union lettuce and brought it, and we broke fast, because we fasted for a week in support of César's thing. During that time, Dolores Huerta came a couple of time to visit and talk at the open forum to the people about why we were there, and why the farmworkers' struggle was going on, and so that kind of activity was ongoing, either with the farmworkers, with the strikers, with picket lines at different markets. We organized groups to go to Delano, to Coachella, to work in the fields with the farmworkers and bringing people out to join the farmworkers' union, and that was an awakening for a lot of the kids.

We went out and we saw the police, armed, right in front of us, between us and the farmworkers that were out in

the fields when we were talking to them with the [unclear] and all that, and that was scary, because the police were trying to provoke us to do something wrong. Because if you haven't been in the field, there is a little stretch along the road that you can walk on. Beyond that is the field that belonged to the farmers, and so the police were lined there, making sure that we didn't cross that line, and we had to yell at the farmworkers to come out and support the union and encouraging them to walk out. And many of them would walk out symbolically, knowing that the next day they'd be back in the field. But it was--I don't know if it's the proper word, but it was like a game, because we needed to show that there was support, and some of them would go out to work, but then when we called them, they would come out. And I don't know if they got paid for working half a day or whatever, but the students got to see how the farmworkers felt.

In Coachella, we were able to go to the common kitchen, the commodor they call it, and ate beans and ate tortillas with the farmworkers before they went out in the field, and they got to see generally how the farmworkers lived out away from the city. Because most of the kids had never been away from their barrios, so they didn't know what's going on, and seeing this is, like I tell you, living life, learning from reality what is going on, finding out the injustices and the exploitation, got them to action. And so pretty much they became self-motivated and would go out and create their own groups here and there, go back to their barrios and create picket lines in the markets and all that.

And MECHA got so big that we had to get permission to use the engineering conference room, which sat about four or five hundred people. The conference room was a theater type. It was [unclear] with folding seats and all that, and this is where we used to have our MECHA meeting, and it was always jam packed.

ESPINO:

I want to talk a little bit more about your work with César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and the UFW, but before we go to that, I just want to get back to the whole question of women and Chicanas at CSUN in the late sixties and early seventies. I guess specifically Anna Nieto Gomez and what your experience with her was, if you could just describe that to me.

00:47:54

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. I remember Anna as being seclusive in some ways, not friendly to men, being very outspoken, very critical about men not treating women equally, demanding that we acknowledge their presence and give them credit for what they did. That was pretty much--I think she used to write poetry, and she used to read some very heavy stuff, almost in a fashion of Sr. Juana Inez de la Cruz, hitting hard. And I think she's probably responsible for encouraging Chicanas to come out and speak up. Because like I said, she was always questioning why are we not included; why didn't you have some Chicana up there instead of just men; why didn't you have Chicanas in the faculty? Because we didn't. For a long while we didn't.

And, yes, I was not threatened by her, because being one of the older men, I understood why she was angry. I understood why she didn't trust men very much. I feel that some of the faculty resented her because of the way she came across, and because of the way she was getting some of the young ladies, students to come out and fight for their rights, and speak up and question. I think as a result of that, the Chicano Studies Department became Chicano and Chicana Studies, because now whenever you see it, you'll see that it's not just Chicano Studies but Chicana Studies as well. And I think she was--if anyone is going to be given credit for that, it would be her. But she got a lot of young girls to go the route of coming out and speaking up, not always in an angry

manner. But there were some young ladies that kind of joined her and made her stronger in the sense of making her presence felt.

ESPINO:

What exactly was her position when she first--that you recall--how did she come to CSUN? Do you remember that?

00:56:51

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I remember that she came in as a student, but I remember she was one of those that was given an opportunity to speak in the classes. I don't know if she was teaching a class full-time, but I know she used to speak in the classes, and that was not uncommon.

Many times we would bring someone from the community who had something important to say better than anybody who didn't have that experience. For example, we would bring farmworkers to speak, because César Chávez felt that the farmworkers were the only ones that really knew what it felt like to be in the fields and having to work from sunup till sundown, so it was not uncommon to see them come into the crowded room. It was not uncommon to see auto workers come and speak to the group. And these were people that were not public speakers. These were people that came to speak of their own experiences and the reasons why there needed to be change or improvement.

Likewise, they would bring people from the community who were successful, like, for example, Miguel Montes. There are two Miguel Montes, notably, one was a dentist that was very supportive of the movement in San Fernando, and the other one was the man who became commissioner of civil rights. He was kind of my neighbor up in Alta Dena, and we used to meet a lot for dinner. This started by accident, but then we socialized so frequently that we used to sit down and eat together. And Miguel Montes was one of those that just happened to be available at the time when the whole awakening took place, and he was appointed commissioner of civil rights, and he used to go by the title of Dr. Miguel Montes. It was not until some years later that he actually went back to the University of the Americas to get his Ph.D., because he said, "No, I only have an honorary degree, and I've overused it. I think it's time to make my title legitimate." So he went to the University of Americas to get his Ph.D., and that was because that was, for him, the easiest way he could afford it, and he didn't have to go to classes every day.

Unfortunately, he died, but he was quite a person, and he was one of those that when I got into the Head Start program, I got to talk to him, because I was lucky enough to be chosen to go to study at Pacific Oaks College. Because I didn't know very much about early-childhood education, but Pacific Oaks College was probably recognized as the best early-childhood education university anywhere in the United States, and if you visit the campus, you can see why. So I was lucky to go, and I was an avid learner. They recognized that I had some talent, I guess, so they got me to start lecturing and doing workshops, and I became an ongoing consultant for them for a long time.

That also got me a job at Cal State Northridge when I went, as part of my work-study. Instead of doing menial jobs [unclear], I worked in the preschool lab, and I used to work with the kids and lecture there too. The preschool lab was very unique, as far as I was concerned, because it was in a very large enclosure with two yards. One was a yard for the little children, and one was for the infants that were more able to work with bigger

stuff. And in the middle of that enclosure was a building with an administrative side, a lecture room with a two-way mirror, and then a classroom where the kids were. The lecture room, that's where they would lecture and would be able to observe the children through the two-way mirror. You could see the children; they could not see you. But the children knew the mirror was there, and they knew that sometimes there would be people on the other side, because they would get close to the mirror and try to look in, and they walked through there when they went into the restrooms in the lab.

And so for me that was, I guess, their learning experience as far as teaching became concerned, because I would be lecturing about what I knew and my experiences and what I knew about Mexican families and how they would be different in some ways from other families, but always emphasizing that parents want their kids to be educated, just like any other parent, and that their needs are probably different for other reasons. I didn't mention to them this, but I'd tell my wife, notice that in most Mexican homes, you don't find books, mostly because books are expensive, and many times the parents of the young people came from Mexico, and in Mexico, that's even less possible to buy a good book, because they're very expensive. So what they do is find comic books, and the comic books become the literature of the people, which has lessons to be learned too, but in a different way.

I find that, for example, I tell my wife, the only one in our kids [unclear] is the older one. My daughter doesn't read very much. My two other sons don't read very much. My younger son had a lot of trouble in school, mostly because he didn't like school. But when he got interested in Dungeons and Dragons, which was a fad of a particular period in his life, he read all sixteen issues of that, and he memorized the particular talents that each one of those characters had and become a very good reader. And I'm impressed by how much he knows. Now that he's older, he's constantly showing me that he knows a lot more than I gave him credit for. So I don't know why that happened, but I know that I've seen here, whenever I go to many of the homes, especially among the lay people--I'm not talking about people, educators and things like that--you don't find many books in the families.

ESPINO:

Well, getting back to Anna Nieto Gomez again, she was someone who was trying to develop curriculum as well that Chicanos would identify with. Like I think what you're saying is Mexicano families didn't have a lot of books, that sometimes maybe the kids didn't have books that they could relate to, or curriculum that they could relate to, and the Chicano Studies Department was trying to develop this curriculum. But can you just--I know that there was tension between Anna Nieto Gomez and some of the faculty at CSUN, and I just would like to know a little bit more about what that tension was about and the whole issue of tenure. Do you remember that?

00:59:03

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I don't know this for a fact, but my understanding was that she had had bad experience with men, and so she was angry at men, principally. But she was also critical that, from her point of view, women were not being treated fairly, women were not being given opportunities to speak up, were not being considered for important positions. And the fact that we didn't have women faculty for some time in the Chicano Studies Department, supported her notion that something was wrong. When we brought Maria Herrera, for example, that was one of the things we saw. We brought a couple of other ladies--Maria Pardo was one of them. I remember another lady that was a very, very good teacher, but I don't know why she did not stay too long.

But I think the question had been left there by Anna Nieto Gomez to say, why is that so?

ESPINO:

But why wasn't she appointed, or why wasn't she recruited as part of the faculty?

HOLGUÍN:

I don't know. I was never a part of the recruiting of faculty, so I don't know why that happened. Rudy [Acuña] can probably tell you more about how the department used to function, because Rudy had a vision of what he wanted a department to be, and oftentimes we know that he used to pull the faculty together and said, "This is what we need to do." He's not known as the grandfather of Chicano Studies for nothing, because he knew what he wanted, and he worked hard at it. And I think he wanted a quality department, not just a department that was going to cause trouble in the university. He wanted the young people going to the department to become something important, to learn, and this is why he kept sending kids to different universities. When Fullerton opened up a program for librarians, he sent a whole mess of kids to take library science. He'd send people to different places. He was pretty much in contact with the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, to Wisconsin University at Madison and Whitewater. I remember he was constantly sending people here and there and encouraging people to go on with their learning, not to give up when they got the bachelor's degree, but he'd say, "You've got to go on." And how many people he's helped, well, I would guess it's in the hundreds, because he was always very active doing that, and he seemed to always have somebody in mind to go somewhere.

ESPINO:

But was it run like a hierarchy, in the sense that he was the ultimate person who made the decisions? Or was it run like a collective?

01:11:12

HOLGUÍN:

Initially, he was the one, okay? Later on, they decided to start rotating, and the rotating was to give everyone some kind of administrative experience as well as curriculum-development experience. They would put Gerald Resendez at one time, they put Jorge Garcia at another time, and so on, and there was an idea that everybody had to get that experience, I guess to put on their resumes or whatever. Because Rudy was always thinking, we've all got to improve. We've all got to get up higher. And his vision was to see the department with everybody being a Ph.D., and I guess he pretty much got there.

When Rudy was ready to leave, he applied to the UC system at University of Santa Barbara, and I guess that's another story. But he fought that for years, and in that sense, one of the things that happened at Northridge is that the students opened up a Rudy Acuña scholarship fund, and that fund grows, and every year when we had our fundraiser, that's where the money goes. And everybody very actively goes and contributes two thousand

dollars, three thousand dollars here. I used to contribute for a while, but then when I retired I said, I can't do that no more. On a fixed income, you can't be too generous anymore. But a lot of people still do, and the fact that the Chicano Alumni Association exists is because, like in many other things, we've had to learn to do what we do our own way, because the system doesn't do it.

I found when I was applying for scholarships that I couldn't find anything that I qualified for, and this is why I had almost given up when Hope Hines told me, "Look. You have to find a way, because you owe it to yourself to go to college full-time." It was unimaginable for me to even consider that. But she kept pushing that, and then when that opportunity came and Mike de la Peña told me what was going on, then I applied and found that, yes, the doors were open, and I found a way to get in. And I think in some ways I have been like Rudy, in the sense that I've always encouraged young people to consider going to college, and I've always encouraged them to stop messing around with social programs and concentrate on more academics, because it's the academics that are going to get him to college. And then I kind of go here, go there, and all that.

My own kids, at one time I had David, Rosemary, and Helen going to Cal State Northridge, and I had Larry [Holguín] going to Cal Poly Pomona, and putting four kids through college was not an easy task. And I was very proud of them. I remember that when my daughter Rosemary graduated, I was asked to be the keynote speaker, and that was one of the highlights of my life, because we were having, as we have been for years, having a graduation Chicano style with mariachis and the whole thing, and so it was separate from the regular, because at Cal State Northridge they graduate a couple of thousand people a year, and we've been graduating our share of Chicanitos out of the university. And it was great for me to be speaking to the theater full of families of our own Chicanos that were graduating, and we had at that time about fifty-two young Chicanos getting their bachelor's degrees, and my daughter among them. So being able to speak to the group and tell them about my experiences and my vision and what their vision should be looking to, was a great honor. And I know my daughter was very proud. And she went on and became a clinical psychologist, so it paid off.

And Rudy would be the first one to tell you, when you become a professional, your kids have a better opportunity to go to college than the kids of someone who is a layman, who has a trade, but does not look to a university to get that experience. And I think he said that because he knows that I used to keep saying that not every kid is cut out to go to college. There are some kids that like to do other things. And I know that in the years of the sixties, we used to be very critical that our young people, our men were being geared into woodshop or mechanics, and the girls into homemaking. And I learned that there is nothing wrong with being a mechanic. There is nothing wrong with being a plumber or an electrician. There are good, honest trades that allow you to make a living wage, and sometimes some people are better at that than being students in college. Some kids just aren't cut out for college.

I know my Patrick [Holguín] went to college and dropped out the first semester. He said, "Dad, that just wasn't cut out for me. I didn't know what the heck they were talking about. I was not prepared. I couldn't compete with the other kids in the classes, because they seemed to know what the teacher was talking about. I didn't." And this confirmed what we knew, that in many schools our kids are not being prepared for life, much less for college. And so the idea of being concerned about education has always been one of our goals. Rudy's goals have been that. My goals have been that.

And I hope that more and more people get educated, because we're growing in numbers by leaps and bounds, and I remember when we were just--we appeared to be a handful of people that got lost in the shuffle. And now when you hear that we're forty-two million and growing, we're now a minority to deal with, and so we need to be more prepared, and we need to have more professional people. This is why I subscribe to "Latino Leaders," "Hispanic Today," "Hispanic Business," because a world that most of us don't even know anything about. You realize that we have a lot of Chicanos as heads of big corporations and all that, and that makes you proud. And when you see what they did, they all worked hard to go to college, they all worked hard to get educated, and they all worked hard to get where they are. Very few of them were raised with a silver platter and a silver spoon. Most of our people have worked hard to get where they are, and I think we need to be aware of that. I made my son David a gift of the subscription to "Latino Leaders," so he can find out--I said, "Look. That's five people that you know in that book." [laughs]

ESPINO:

Well, that's interesting, because that connection to the business community didn't seem to be important in the late sixties and early seventies for a place like CSUN. You were talking a little bit about your relationship with the United Farmworkers and with César Chávez, because at the same time you're making professionals, and you're teaching them about their identity and their heritage, you're also bridging the university to the larger community. Can you talk a little bit about that, your work with the UFW and your relationship with César Chávez and Dolores Huerta? Or any other farmworkers that you might have met.

01:20:12

HOLGUÍN:

Well, let me start by saying that probably my first understanding of the farmworker was through "Grapes of Wrath," because that shows pretty much what was happening to the people in the fields that were here, and the ones that were coming out of the Dust Bowl and trying to find a living in the farms of California. Later on, I saw a series of TV programs by Paul Coates, depicting life in the fields and how the farmworkers were being treated and how they were living.

And then I heard about a young man that was raising hell in the fields of Delano and got curious about that, because I didn't know much more than that. And the one that got me into that was my son David. He said, "Dad, did you know that this man César Chávez is doing these things out there?" And I said, "Well, no. Tell me about it." And so we found out that they had walked out in the fields of Delano, joining the Filipino farmworkers, and that they were going to start picketing in certain markets. And, of course, some of the markets in the barrio were the targets, and this is how we began to get involved, just joining the picket lines for a while and carrying picket signs and pretty much parroting what the farmworkers were saying, not really knowing, except what I had seen.

We had gone on a couple of marches, and then when I went to CSUN, César came, because he came several times to our campus--I'm sure he went to other campuses too--and he spoke about [unclear], and I was impressed, and César had an uncanny ability to pick people in the crowd and know who he could count on, because I saw him do that time and time again. And one day he told me, he said, "You know, we need someone to go out to San Fernando and start organizing over there." And I said, "Well," I said, "I know, but I couldn't find anybody." He said, "Well, you can do it." And I said, "Me?" He said, "Yeah, you can do it." I said, "But what would I do?" And then he told me. He said, "Look. There is a church over there. I'll give you the address. There's a man there that has a mimeograph machine and they'll let you borrow an office, and they donate paper, and you can start making leaflets and passing them around in the community." And I said, "Well, I'll try."

But he said that to me in such a way that it was like he knew I could do it. And I went, and I found out that I could do it. We started making pamphlets. The guy that was there helped me out. He now works at the federation, L.A. County Federation of Labor. His has his office there. But he was a young man that was doing leaflets and organizing in the San Fernando Valley, and, of course, that got me into getting MECHA organized and going out to picket lines and all of that. We got involved politically as well, and I can tell you about that later on, because at one time we tried to form a La Raza Unida party in California. We almost succeeded.

But going back to the idea that young people sometimes need someone to show them what they can do and encourage them and support what they do--and in that sense, people develop a good self-concept, because when they know that they can do things, they are able to do it, and they feel good about themselves. The young ladies are the same way. Young ladies learned that they could be involved in the movement and yet be respected. They

knew that their family counted on them to become educated, so they work hard at being educated. They learned to be outspoken, and they learned to behave with pride and pretty much set the vanguard. Rather than the men, I think the women set the vanguard for the movement outside the so-called leadership of the people, the men that were there already.

I recall that of all the committees that I formed as MECHA chairman, I would say about 90 percent of them were run by women, and all the committees were very active and very successful, whether it be fundraising, whether it be whatever they were. And the self-concept is so important, because when you feel good about yourself, you can do almost anything.

I find my wife and I are very proud of our little great-grandson, who is only two years old, and he already has a tremendously good self-concept, because he's been loved, he's been guided, he's been supported, and he already knows who he is. And as he's learned to talk, he's very, very articulate, very sure about what he wants, he has a very good sense of propriety and property. He says, "This is mine. You can't sit there, because that's my uncle's," all of that kind of stuff. And wherever he goes, people like him because he's very outgoing, and he's a happy boy.

And I think we find many of our young people, as they were going to college, they had not been successful in high school, they had barely made it, and they weren't too sure they were going to make it in college, so it was a question of not only helping them to survive, but guiding them to be successful, and I think that we were very effective in doing that with most of the young people that went.

ESPINO:

And you would say both the female student population and the male population?

01:25:36

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. I mentioned to you that there were more females graduating than males, because the expectancy, I guess, at home was, if we're going to let you go, you're going to have to prove to us. And so they had that extra motivation that sometimes the boys didn't have, because in our culture, unfortunately, there's still much of that, "You don't need to go to college. You're going to get married anyway, and you're going to be raising kids." And if they were allowed to go, it was almost that precondition. "You're going to go, you're going to prove to us that it was worth it." And so the young ladies had that motivation--we've got to prove to ourselves and to our parents that it can be done, and they did it. And I found that most of the girls were very good and very sure of themselves, very sure of themselves, and I think that as they learned more about the history and about their interaction in society, they even became more aware and more sure of themselves. And so I was very proud.

My own daughter, for example, had been married to a young man that she thought was very bright. He had joined the service, and they married while he was in the service. So for two years while he was in the service, she still lived at home with her mom. When he came out of the service and they began to live as husband and wife and they had a baby--but we found pretty soon that the guy couldn't keep a job. And, of course, she hadn't learned to be a wife either, because they hadn't lived together. And in that setting, I realized that that was not what I wanted for my daughter, so I talked my son-in-law into considering using the G.I. Bill to go to college and buy himself some time while he figured out what he wanted to do in life.

Having done that and having convinced him to apply at the university and get the G.I. Bill and all that, and knowing that he was going to get compensated also for the family, then I talked my daughter into going to college. And I remember her very words. She said, "Dad, I'm not smart enough to go to college. He's the bright one." Well, guess what? The first year of college, he got put on scholastic probation. The second year he got expelled. He just wasn't keeping up with the work. And in that context, he wanted my daughter to drop out. But I had already convinced her that she could do it, and she had already found that she could do it, and so when he asked her to drop out, she said, "Uh-uh. My dad invested in my education, and I'm going to stick it out." And so she stayed on. He left her, left her pregnant with her second child, without money, and she made it through anyway.

When I found out from the girls that, "Do you know that your daughter is working at the mall in the cafeteria?" I said, "Why is she working there?" They said, "Because Frank left her." So I went to her apartment and I found her there, and said, "What happened?" She said, "Well, this is what happened. He left me without money, but I got enough tips at that so we can make it through for a couple of days." And that's when I just told her, "Don't worry about it. I will help you through," and we went on. She got divorced, had a second child during the semester break, never missed a day of school, and went on and graduated with honors, and I was, needless to say, very proud of her. But she's an example of someone who had a poor self-concept and came out fighting and very successfully.

ESPINO:

Wow. That's a beautiful story. Well, I think we're going to stop here. Thank you so much for sharing that with me. [End of interview]

Session Six (May 8, 2009)

00:00:53

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is May 8, 2009. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the SEIU offices in Pasadena, California.

Okay, Mr. Holguín, we're going to jump back a little bit and talk more in depth about the ideology that many Chicanos had during the 1960s, maybe late fifties, regarding the Bracero Program. You talked about your experience growing up and seeing the braceros walking across, or waiting in line to get across the border. But later on, as you became more involved in the Chicano movement, some very prominent leaders, like César Chávez and Dr. Rudy Acuña, had a position against the Bracero Program. Could you talk to me a little bit about what that argument was about and how it evolved?

00:10:45

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the basic argument was that what we understood, that anyone in business is trying to get the most out of someone for the least money, we find that that is not only moral but that sometimes that particular circumstance

allows the employers to abuse the rights of workers as human beings. Namely, the program that I spoke about with Paul Coates on TV let the American people understand what was happening in the fields with the workers. It was also expressed in "Grapes of Wrath," how people were starving, and the contractor would come around and pick whoever they wanted, and the rest of them just had to sit and not work or anything.

So in that setting, we understood that the bracero was really being exploited, although some people said, "Well, they had a choice," and the choice was, well, we don't work, we go back to Mexico, which was a circumstance that was not acceptable to them, because they were here precisely because they couldn't make a living and provide for their families in Mexico. Whatever the circumstances are, it's something else that we could talk about at another time.

But I recall that early, when I was still fairly young, probably even before I went back to college, there was a book by a journalist from Mexico. His name was Mario Gil, G-i-l, who wrote a book entitled "Las Aventuras de un Bracero," the adventures of a bracero, in which he posed as a bracero. He worked with his hands on the ground, rubbing them on rocks so they could get calluses, because the immigration officers, that's what they looked for. They looked at the hands of a working man. And he was able to get through. He said from the onset, they would be put on flatbed trucks and taken out into the fields, and then they were pretty much put in a place where they had no answers to anything except to go out to work in the fields. The idea that everything that was provided for them they would get on credit, because they came without money, and when they got paid, everything that they had incurred in the form of credit would be deducted from their pay, so that they had very little money left to send home.

And this fellow also talked about how they would bring in merchants to sell them stuff, besides the general store that was on the field. And he even talked about the fact that from time to time, right after payday they would bring prostitutes in campers, and the guys, having been away from home and women, they would just line up there and spend most of the rest of the money they had, leaving them very little to send home. So in that context, we found out also that there were things such as, they didn't always have access to potable water, they didn't have restrooms, and they didn't have a shady place to get away from the sun, and if you ever go to the fields and you find out how they work, the sunburn on you during the harvest time is really bad. And to be under the sun from sunup to sundown is really very debilitating, especially if you don't get a chance to eat properly and hydrate yourself a little bit with good water.

So all of these conditions were really, to me, unacceptable, and being a man who supports unionism, those conditions were not acceptable for working, and that was what I was opposed to. Also the fact that they didn't have much to say about how much they were going to be paid. And a lot of people don't know, there was a program that I don't know really how it happened, but we hear about it from time to time, and that was that the employers in the field would keep part of their salary on the premise that they were saving their money for them for later, so that when they went home, they would have money with them.

The story that came out later on, when they went home and they didn't get any money, was that they had turned that over to the Mexican government for them to distribute, and to this date, so many years later, people are still arguing about that money that they never got paid. It was a situation where the government here said, "Well, we gave the money to the Mexico," and the Mexicans said, "Well, we never got the money," and it's playing with a little hidden ball that nobody knows where the money went. But a lot of people didn't get what was owed to them. And so the exploitation came in so many ways that when people say, "Well, we can get Americans to do that work," it isn't true. Most people would not work under those conditions.

I recall reading about a situation in Texas where they tried to do a program where they would take the trucks into San Antonio, for example, and advertise very loud and say, "We will hire you and pay good wages," and all that, "so you can work in the fields." There were no takers. I mean, people don't share the idea of working from sunup to sundown for miserable wages.

And so in that context, I see that it is inappropriate to do that, and this is why I'm not only against the Bracero Program, I'm against also the program where they bring people to work with workers' permits. I had experience

with the County of Los Angeles, where they were doing a program that was supposed to improve the way they serve people in the Department of Public Social Services, and they were developing a program they call Leader. They kept it pretty much under wraps, but they kept talking about it, they kept talking about it, and they spent millions of dollars with consultants and all that, and finally when we got involved in the program with a new director of the department, they disclosed that they had a group of people doing research on the Leader Program. And so we asked to be told where it was. We arranged to be invited over there. We had a group of people from the board and the labor committee to go, and we found that the county was pulling staff out of different offices to go and work over there, to learn what they were doing, but depriving the particular office of staff, because they were doing something else somewhere else.

And when we went there, we found that in this particular instance, they had about eight young men, mostly men, from India, that were doing all the computer work, all the testing, all the programming, with just the leadership of four or five people conducting the thing. I asked to be allowed to speak to them, so I went and I was allowed to, and I found that they were paying prevailing wages in their country, not wages comparable to what we earn here, but what there were people, the same type of work, doing in India, which was very little. And what they earned was so little that they had to live four or five or six people in one apartment. And again, they were secluded. At the end of the workday, they were taken over and taken to that place, and they were not allowed to go anywhere.

So there was exploitation right here, and it was very interesting because I was angry. I brought that to our union staff and to our board and said, "This is what we found." And very conveniently, no one did anything about it.

ESPINO:

That's really an important point, because that takes me back to why the decision was made by somebody like César Chávez, who was organizing workers in the fields but opposing this other type of worker, because it seemed like he chose to eliminate the Bracero Program--that was his desire--and not organize them. Can you talk a little bit about why that decision was made, or what was the ideology of that?

00:16:53

HOLGUÍN:

Well, from what I understood, César had tried to organize the braceros, but he had found little response, because the braceros, like I said, were fearful that if they started getting organized, they would be deported. They would be sent back to their countries, and that's not something that they wanted to do. And it is interesting to note that César Chávez was not successful during the period, until they did away with the Bracero Program. Suddenly the organizing came out, and we had a worldwide boycott on the grapes, because he developed a system in which he knew that the workers could tell the story of the farmworker better than anybody else, because they were the ones that experienced the kind of working conditions under which they worked, and although they were not well educated, they knew what was going on. So they could tell a true story about their experience that was more convincing than a theoretical situation by a college student who'd never been in the fields, and in that sense, César said, "I'll take them anywhere."

And during that time, there were other things going on, and they began the idea of creating agit-prop theater, where the campesinos, the farmworkers, would get together and provide skits telling the story. They put on masks and little signs around their neck and said, this is the patroncito, this is the worker, this is the coyote, and they would pretty effectively tell the story in a very short time, where it was entertaining and yet was

politicizing people. And wherever they went, that would be. And out of that was formed the Teatro Campesino, which was more sophisticated and had more props and everything else, and it allowed the Teatro Campesino to go into the cities, to go into the universities and really present good skits that would get people to understand why César was organizing, and get people to understand why people from the fields needed the support of the people in the cities. Because although the farms are all around us, most of us never bother to visit a farm, and so we don't know the working conditions that people had, and all we know is what we hear from someone like that.

So once you understand, you are very sympathetic to their plight, and you're willing to support. I began to get involved simply by joining a picket line at Safeway or whatever markets that were around in our neighborhood, and getting other people to support them. I said, "Even if you walk for ten minutes or half an hour, it would help them, because we need to show numbers, because that's the only way that people respond. And also, people get away from those markets and don't provide the support, and the markets begin to lose money, and that's how they respond to the arguments that the farmworkers have." And so little by little this movement began to grow, and I recall that as far as France, people were having boycotts against the grape growers.

And I remember that finally in 1970, I was invited to go to Delano. I went with my wife and two of our kids, my youngest one, and they were signing the contract with the Giumarra brothers. They were at the big union hall in Delano, and I remember it was packed. And there were pictures of us came out in a magazine. But I remember that once the contract was signed, I was carrying my son because he was little, and he was only two years old, and César came and he said, "Oh, how are you?" I said, "This is my younger son." He said, "Oh, good." He said, "Look. I've got this basket here of grapes," and I remember he gave my son a bunch of grapes and said, "This is okay to eat now." And you'd be surprised to know that we found that my son is allergic to grapes. [laughs] So we never forgot that.

There is a picture--there was a picture of my son with César in some early flyers when we still had the UFWOC; that was the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee.

ESPINO:

Were you a member of that organization, the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee?

00:18:24

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. And my son David was too. David was very supportive of the farmworkers. I don't know if it was because i was involved, or because he found out on his own, but he was only about sixteen when he joined the picket lines and started making flags, and he even made a poster that César or the farmworkers used for a while. It was a very interesting, very colorful poster that they stopped reproducing it, because it actually was rainbow colors, and when you do reproduction, you don't use too many colors, and it was too expensive. But that was my original experience with it, and, of course, later on when César came to the university and got me more involved, I began to learn more in organizing groups to go and help out in the fields.

And working in the fields was another experience. That was a period, I recall, when the UAW [United Auto Workers] had signed a contract, supposedly, with the growers.

ESPINO:

The United Auto Workers? UAW.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. And the Teamsters; I'm sorry, it was the Teamsters.

ESPINO:

It was the Teamsters.

00:25:47

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. And you know, a lot of these Teamsters were big guys that when we're standing in front of them, they surpassed us by maybe one or two feet in height. They were very big, and there is an example of that in one of the movies that the farmworkers did, which is entitled "Fighting for Our Lives," in which César is talking to the leader on the other side, and they're saying, "Well, but we are union." He said, "But then you are not in favor of the farmworkers, because look which side you're on," because he was on the side of the farmers. That fight carried on for almost two years, and it sometimes got people confused, because we'd be successful in one area but not in another one, and people said, "Well, the strike is on now, and now it's not on," and all of that, because each time that we signed a contract with one ranch, it was a victory. But then there was a fight to go on somewhere else, and I think over the years, people got confused and maybe tired of saying, "Well, what is it? Are we still on? Are we not on?"

And not having the big resources that a big industry has, it was difficult to keep people informed, because the victories and the struggles got mixed in the shuffle, and sometimes we ourselves that were involved didn't know what was going on, and I think that hurt the movement for a while, because the struggle of the farmworker was sustained for a long time. To the day that César died, the struggle was still on, and now Artie Rodriguez is following on the same pattern, but people don't understand that the farmworkers are still fighting for the same working conditions that they wanted twenty years ago, or thirty years, or forty years ago. Things haven't changed. It's just that they're least able to bring the message forward, because there are so many other things, and also because in the farming industry, many things have happened. Technology has improved. They're able to do harvesting now with machines in some areas. They are able to do the planting and the weeding and everything else with machines, so that there's less and less need for the hand of a person to do the work in the fields, except the harvesting of things that are very close to the ground.

But I feel that as long as the farmworkers or any working person is not able to earn a living wage to support a family, something is wrong with our society, because everybody's labor is important. I was telling my young son that jobs that some people don't look forward to, like picking up garbage, are necessary to do, because a lot of

people aren't willing to do it, and yet if we had no one to do that, our society would be a big mess, like it happened in New York, where the trash was all over the place and they didn't know what to do with it. And they still don't know what to do there. What happens to all the trash that people in New York make? They load it up in barges and put it out to float in the ocean, I guess. I don't know.

But, yes, I believe that everybody should be able to do that, because being very supportive of education, I think that working people should be able to aspire to buy a home, to send their kids to college if their kid wants to go to college, or put them in a training school where they can learn a good trade. I think the unions, very aptly so, are more and more involved in setting up an apprenticeship program, because we know that in the trades, people can make a good living.

I was concerned about one of my grandsons, that having grown up and having graduated and didn't know where he wanted to go in life. And having dealt with my mechanics for thirty-four years, I asked my grandson to come and see what they do. And the owner of the shop--it's a third-generation ownership--told him, he said, "Some people do not become mechanics because they don't like to get their hands dirty." He said, "But every mechanic we have here is a multiple-house owner." He said, "The one that has been here the least is sixteen years. They get training, they get good money, and it's a good job. You join our apprenticeship program and I guarantee you, once you complete that, you'll be making very good money. But even during your training, you'll be making at least thirteen, fourteen dollars an hour," which is a lot more than the minimum wage.

Because the minimum wage doesn't begin to cut it. By the time we get it approved and all that, the cost of living has gone a few notches higher, and people should not have to put their family to suffer because we don't treat workers fairly. That's one of the main reasons why I'm against not just the Bracero Program or any workers' program like they're proposing nowadays in lieu of the immigration reform. It is not acceptable. There's no guarantees to the people they bring.

ESPINO:

Did you actively organize against the Bracero Program? Did you do anything specific?

00:30:05

HOLGUÍN:

No. By the time I really got involved, the Bracero Program was over. But the interesting question that needs to be asked is that the Bracero Program was created to bring working people for the duration of the war [World War II], and as you know, the war ended in the mid-forties. And yet it was twenty years after that that the Bracero Program was still going, and the argument was always that, well, it would cost us too much to buy vegetables and fruits if we didn't have braceros in the fields doing the work. And that isn't really true, because if we had to pay more, well, we have to pay more, but we should not have to enjoy a good life at the expense of other people suffering by not being able to provide for their own family. That's pretty much one of the reasons that I don't believe that any working program is acceptable unless there are some guarantees, and even then, if people are going to be here and working here, they should at least be able to aspire to qualify for legal residency at some point in the future.

I was telling my son yesterday--he came to visit, and my neighbor across the street is a gentleman who when I met him was buying a house. His family was in Mexico. He was here illegally. He was a chef at one of the convalescent homes in Pasadena, of which there are many, and he was struggling to bring his family. Finally he

was able to gather enough money, and he brought them, illegally. He had a wife, a son, and four daughters. But like many Mexicans, he wasn't used to buying anything on credit. He saved his money, and when he had the money to buy the house, that's when he did. Later on as the kids were growing up, he started talking about adding more space to the house, and at the same time that the amnesty period came around, I talked to them and advised them to take advantage of that, so they did. We helped them get their papers, signed some papers as witnesses and as character references, and they all became legal. Their son and daughters all became citizens. One of the daughters even became a policewoman.

But this gentleman gathered enough money; when he was ready to enlarge the house, he went to Mexico and brought a contractor and did an interesting thing that I was never able to do. He told his contractor, "This is what I want done. I'll give you half of what you want now, upfront, and I'll give you the rest of it when you finish the job." And the man finished the job within a month, and added a big, big room to the back of the house, and Mr. Rico paid him off and took him back to Mexico.

00:30:57

ESPINO:

That's interesting, because that's part of the whole informal economy that the Bracero Program was sort of part of that, even though it was part of the legal immigration policy. But that informal economy is also what the farmworkers had been a part of, and so organizing them was such a huge achievement.

But I think we'll move on to your time at Cal State Northridge, and we've talked a lot about that, and I guess it's time to talk about--maybe you can give me the actual date that you left CSUN [Cal State Northridge] and started working for the L.A. County.

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I didn't leave CSUN to go work for the county. Actually, what happened was that things were going on at the university where as I graduated and was hired, I was given faculty status. I told you I was an assistant professor.

ESPINO:

What year was that?

00:37:54

HOLGUÍN:

That was in 1971. So I was working doing some teaching, and I was also an administrator of the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] program, and in that context I was learning more and more about the operations of the university and the associations. As a director, I was part of the Deans and Directors Council,

where we had regular meetings about policy in the university and such. I was responsible for solving almost any problem that arose that had to do with the EOP students, and in that context also, the demand for someone to start teaching about bilingual or bi-cultural education began to grow. I was contacted by the dean of the School of Education and he told me, "Look." He said, "They are looking for someone with your experience to teach at L.A. Valley College, and [unclear] to teach at L.A. City College, and East L.A. College also needs people." And I said, "Well, but I'm only one person and I cannot respond to all that." [unclear]

So to make a long story short, I began to teach classes at L.A. Valley College. I learned as I was there that L.A. Valley College was developing a very interesting program that was also beginning to grow at East L.A. College, and that was like a learning center. The learning center was predicated on the idea that in the junior colleges, there are many people who cannot go to school during the daytime, but are, in fact, working people that can only go to school at night. And I was very, very much identified with that group, because up to a certain time I had accumulated seventy-two units at a junior college, which I could not use for transfer. So I understood why it is that people do that. And these programs were such that my brother Roger had just come out of New York, working for the Ford Foundation, and had some connections and made a proposal to get some money to start a learning center there.

The learning center constituted making arrangements with some of the professors to provide their lesson plans, to allow for recording of their presentations in class, to provide tests and all that, so that students who were working and maybe missed class or whatever, or wanted to repeat, they could borrow--they used to do cassettes, and they could check them out and if, for example, they were driving a truck or whatever, they could just plug it in and be listening to the lecture while they were working. And I liked that idea.

Additionally, the Valley College was doing not only that, but actually creating little packets so that people could basically study at home. And that idea became so interesting that we started the same thing at Cal State Northridge, and the old library became the learning center after they finished the new library. So the word got around. Long Beach called me and they wanted to set up a program, so we went and set up a program over there.

So we did a lot of interesting things during my tenure there. Our own supportive services program was very successful. We had a high retention rate among our students, which the black EOP did not have, and the university noted that the dropout rate among the black students that were brought in was terribly high. Very few students were staying; less and less were staying. And so the blacks began to look at our program and asking, "Well, what is it that you do?" So we explained to them what we did, and the idea of merging the two as one began to develop, so that by the time I decided to leave, we had negotiated merging the two programs and incorporating the staff from the black EOP into our supportive services program, so we would have a good tutorial program, we would have a good counseling program, and really allow for black students to stay in college and be successful.

In that context, there were other things where too much demand was being placed on me by putting me on committees, because I had been under the wings of the dean of academic planning. So I was constantly going, and I was spending too much time on committees and not enough time on the program, and relying more on the staff, and most of them are still there. Raúl Aragon, who was my right hand, is still there. Hank Lopez, who was my assistant, became a professor, and he works now and teaches political science at the university.

ESPINO:

You're talking CSUN right now.

00:42:07

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. And in that context I figured, well, I had never planned to be an EOP director. As I told you earlier, I had been drafted into that program when Mike [unclear] left. I figured I had done what I needed to do, and I had been made an offer to go and work with the community, to run one of the Head Start programs. Little was I to know that as I turned in my resignation from the university, the Chicano Studies faculty had a meeting and called me in and really tried to convince me to stay. But I felt that while EOP was very supportive of the Chicano Studies program, I felt that the reverse was not true. The faculty as a group, like I told them, I said, "You are on a tenure track. You all continue with your education to become doctors," I said, "and you really don't have much support for EOP except that you want it to bring more people and to solve the problems of the students." And so I left.

I was assured that I was going to be selected as director of the Azteca Head Start program, which is in East L.A., and that was my preference, because I'd be working with the community. Little did I find out when I interviewed, that the board was influenced by the president, and I had been the president of that board once, and they decided to hire someone else who had nothing to do with education. And so I was left out on a limb.

But fortunately, since I had been doing a lot of consulting work for years, the University of Redlands called me and wanted to talk to me about working for them. They had an idea that they could develop a program, because they were the training center for southern California Head Start program, from Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and all down to the Mexican border. I think there were ten counties that they were responsible for, and the people they had in the program were, I call them theoreticians, because they always talked about what they could do, but they never did it. And whenever someone came up with an idea, they found reasons why they couldn't do it.

And in that setting when they called me in, because I had done some work for them, they asked me if I'd be willing to work for them, I said, well, what is it that you want done? And when I found out, it sounded very attractive, because it was along what I wanted to do, because I wanted to develop materials. I felt that Head Start people needed more training, that they needed more uniformity in the programs and all that, and so once we talked, they asked me how much I would want to earn, and so I pulled a figure out from the top of my head, and I said, I want so much free of taxes. Whatever taxes you have to add on to a salary, and I spelled it out for them. They asked me to wait and they would be meeting with the president and the vice president, so I told them, I want to go and get some coffee, and I'll be back.

ESPINO:

Can I just stop you for a minute, because you're blocking your microphone.

HOLGUÍN:

Sorry.

ESPINO:

Okay, that's okay. It's good you're so comfortable that you forget that you have it on.

00:51:47

HOLGUÍN:

And so I went down to the coffee shop and on my way I went by the post office, and I noticed that there were some Latinos there. I went into the cafeteria, and I noticed in the kitchen there were some Latinos there. In those years, they weren't using throw-away dishes, they were using real dishes, so they had dishwashers. I noticed the groundskeepers were Latinos, but I had already learned that they had no faculty that were Latinos except two people. One of them was a Cuban lady, who was a part-time teacher, and the other one was--he was a gringo born in Mexico, because his parents had been missionaries, and so he was born in Mexico and that was his claim to be Mexican. But really, he was an Anglo, and those were the only two representations.

And so when I told them what I wanted to earn, I returned to the office, and they came and told me that what I had asked for was acceptable, and to show you how little prepared they were, at that point they asked for a resume, and they asked me to write up my own contract. So I did, and I devised the contract and the requirements for the position that suited me to a T, and I don't know that there was anybody else anywhere that could meet those qualifications at that time. And I was hired. The next day I went to work and almost immediately I was assigned to the affirmative action committee, whose role was to come out with a plan that would bring more ethnic diversity to the university, both among the faculty and among students, and we worked on that.

And also, I remember that one other person on the committee was a gentleman whose name I won't mention, who was a Harvard graduate with a Ph.D., who insisted that he was not black, he was a Negro. He was very emphatic about that, and he had no use for President [Gerald] Ford, because President Ford was not educated, couldn't even speak correctly. That was the context in which he was at.

So once I was given the task, I figured, okay, that's easy. I found at the meeting with the staff and looked at the way they were doing things, the lady who was running the program was Mary Shillings. She had a Ph.D., and she had been with the university for some time, but she had been a director of this special training program for some time and had not produced anything. I don't know if Washington was looking at that, but I know the university was looking at that. And so within two weeks we figured out, well, we needed to do something, and they asked me if I could come up with a plan. I said, "Yeah." I went home that night, I began to write. In those years I was still typing and was a very fast typist. I used to type about eighty words a minute. So I put out an entire program for training during the night. The next day I took it in. They looked at it and said, wow. They took it to the president, and they were very impressed, made copies of it right away, and decided that was the way we were going to run.

What I didn't know was going to happen was that the administration realized that something was wrong, that how can a man come in and immediately produce something that you guys collectively had not been able to produce in two years, and so they asked Mary Shillings to resign. And she gave me a very moving speech getting old, about losing your ability, about not knowing, about the education that you had was not sufficient to carry on a task, all of those things. And I was empathetic; I had empathy for what she was saying, and I was sorry to see her go, because she was a nice lady. But she was a theoretician, and in a program where you need to be productive, you can't have that.

So immediately they put me in charge of the program, and we developed a training program where, with the

cooperation of several departments, we were able to arrange with several community colleges to align with the classes that we wanted to give and actually provide a training program with scholarships and all that. What we would do with some of the participants, we would go to their worksites with video cameras and someone who was a mixer, and we would actually videotape what was going on in the classroom with the little kids. And at the end of the day when the kids were gone, then we would get the staff and look at the video, and there's nothing more productive than for someone to see how they perform, and many of them didn't realize how much control they had over the class, when control is not what you want.

What you want is a learning environment, and when you're controlling and doing all the talking, there isn't much learning going on. We find that to be basically true. You learn some by listening, some by seeing, but you learn most by doing, and in that kind of a setting, that was my experience, that you provide a learning environment for the kids, and they pick it up from there, and they do their own learning. They own the teaching interaction, and that was the type of a program that Hope Hines and I had created, and it was so successful that the word had gotten around.

The program came to be known as the Free Flow Learning Environment, and although it appears to be very easy, because Pacific Oaks was sending people to observe at our site, and the comment that they kept hearing, they said, "You go in there and you don't know who the teachers are." Because we had parents working along with the kids. And my idea was that although many parents said, "But we're not teachers. We don't know anything," my response to them was, "You have lived many years more than your kid, and you know a lot more than they do, and because you know, you can teach them too." And, of course, we would train them also to do certain things and not to do certain things. But in that setting, what we did is we placed ourselves strategically throughout the whole place, and at the end of the day we would get together, and then each one of us would give input like, "Juanito came this morning and went to the table, picked out some blocks and started building." And we talked about that. "And then he left there." And then one of them would say, "Well, then he came to my area, and he did some role playing, and he pretended to be the dad. He went to work," and that kind of stuff. And then when he left there, someone else said, "Well, then he came to my--."

And so in that setting, we would go through what each kid in the place was doing and plan for the next day. So the next day, the kid would come in and pick up where they left off. See, that was continuity of learning. And very seldom we would get them, sometimes for reading, but many times we would say, "Okay, we're going to have a reading coordinator over there, and whoever wants to read will come." It was not that, "You all have to sit down around me and read." The teacher was not the focus at any time.

ESPINO:

Can I just interrupt you for a second? Because I'm just curious. This is the Head Start program that started in the 1960s with the War on Poverty funds. Did they give you a curriculum to follow, or did you develop your own curriculum?

00:56:39

HOLGUÍN:

No, well, that was the problem. See, the idea was there, but they weren't providing anything. What we did, we wrote a proposal, and I had to go to Washington and present it. What happened, when we went to Washington, it was an awakening, because we had a program that I thought was ideal, and what they said, "Okay," they said, "we like your program. We want you to deliver it, but we can't give you the money you want." It was, again, the

whole idea, we want the most we can get from you for the least money. And so what I had to do is accept, because we needed the money, and then go back to the university and say, "We have this, but we need this and that." And then the university very willingly was able to supplement some of the things that we needed, like people from the other department, like the TV people that were doing a television program and all that.

We also got some of the teaching staff at the university to create some classes for our trainees. We'd get our trainees to go to different community colleges, because they came from a different area. We coordinated with Chafeey College over in the valley; we coordinated with East L.A. College; we coordinated with Cerritos, El Camino, most of the colleges in the area. That was the kind of uniformity that we had to do, because what Washington really had in mind at the time was what they called the Child Development Associate Program. They were thinking a credential, a national credential for people working with children, where they'd be in Head Start, in daycare centers, because that was part of the other problem, of working mothers having to have a place for the children to be cared for. And so the Child Development Associate Program became the focus. That was who we were training people. And I developed a newsletter. Maybe I'll be able to find some copies of it to show you what we used to do with that. It was a newsletter that we had about eight pages. It was a lot of fun putting that out too. But we wanted people to know what we were doing, and if you look around, you'll find that the Child Development Associate is still in existence. The programs are [unclear]. There's one over there on Lake Avenue.

So there have been many things that we started that continue. It's like planting the seed and watching it grow without you, and that was for me very satisfying. So I worked with the university for a while. I had programs that we were doing very successful, was constantly being invited to do presentations at conferences and conventions everywhere, both on teaching methods as well as production of literature on children. I had written a couple of books that we mass produced through the Unitarian Church. One of the books was titled "¿Cómo te llamas?" and it was based on the actual experiences of a little boy in East L.A. who enjoyed coming to school. The other one was "Blanquita." "Blanquita was about a little white rat. That created a lot of problems for me, but it was very enjoyable for the kids, except for one mother who didn't want her kid to be around the rat, and she went all the way up to the top to try to get me to remove the rat, and we eventually did, but it was not without a fight.

ESPINO:

You mean remove the book?

HOLGUÍN:

The rat.

ESPINO:

The actual rat?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. I wrote the book out there.

ESPINO:

But you did have a real rat?

00:59:20

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. [Espino laughs] Well, we had the rat because we had like a little zoo. We had little snakes, a rat, rabbits and so on, and so we had one area that the children could go in and feed the animals and all that, and we had an aquarium, a terrarium, and that was part of the learning experience for the kids. So my argument was we were running an experiment, because somebody had a male rat and they brought it and they mated, and so Blanquita was pregnant. We talked about how many little rats it was going to have and what color they were going to be, because the male rat was black and white, and Blanquita was white. That's why we called her Blanquita.

And what really happened, at one point we were making guesses, are all the little rats going to be white, are they all going to be black and white, are they going to be a mixture? And so kids were taking guesses at what it could be, and we were looking forward to the little rats coming in. The mother of this little girl was very insecure and very protective of her little daughter, who was anxious to learn, and she was the one that didn't like us to have animals around, not just Blanquita but all the others. And so I had to defend my position for having them there, and I told them, I said, "As long as this experiment is over and Blanquita has her breed," I said, "we'll give it to somebody else." Well, will you know that this little girl loved Blanquita so much that shortly after Blanquita had her little breed, she brought herself to finally hold Blanquita in her hand, and not knowing, she squeezed her, and Blanquita died as a result of that. But we never told her that. We simply said, "Blanquita is gone." But everybody except that girl got to have one of Blanquita's little brood, because she had fourteen, fourteen little rats.

ESPINO:

And this was when you were at the University of Redlands?

HOLGUÍN:

No, no.

ESPINO:

This was before.

HOLGUÍN:

That was before, yes.

00:59:29

ESPINO:

When you were with Hope Hines and you were still--this is before CSUN.

HOLGUÍN:

When we developed that program that I told you about.

ESPINO:

What school was this, then? Does that Head Start still exist, that classroom environment?

01:13:26

HOLGUÍN:

Well, that center we called the Downey Center. Some people used to think that it was in Downey. It was not in Downey. It was on Downey road by the cemetery in East L.A. It's still there, but it's not what it used to be, because all the surroundings have changed. They've put buildings in the cemetery and all that. But I was using that model when I was teaching at Redlands and really bringing out for people to understand that there's more than just coming into a school and basically playing with the kids. I said, "It's not that. You have to plan what kind of learning you want to go on. You have to be supportive of what the children are doing and watch what

their interests are and what the skills are developing."

There's so much into human development, and it starts when they're very little. In those years, Jean Piaget had written several books about that. Jean Piaget was a Frenchman, I think, who wrote mostly about how children learn, how children learn numbers, how children learn to speak, and his basic premise was that all children go through certain stages in life and that certain things come before kids can go on to the next step. He never said that a kid goes to this step at a certain age. He simply said the stages are always like that, like a child doesn't learn to run before he learns to walk, and he doesn't learn to walk before he learns to crawl, and so on, and the same thing with speech. And he began his theories on his own child.

He said that one time as he was taking his kid to the daycare, the child had noticed that things were along the right of the road in a certain way, and when he picked him up and they were coming back, his kid said, "Dad, why are all the other things on the other side of the car now?" And he says, "Why do you say that?" He said, "Well, when we were going to school, the things were on this side, and now that we're coming out, they're on this side," and then he began to understand that children learn in particular ways, and the concept of how things are is not the same as when you're grown up. He wrote many books about that.

But in the U.S., he became a fad in those years, such that the industry, the education industry, you might say, began to develop tests to test that kids be at a certain level, and teachers began to use that as a measure of where the child was, thinking that if you failed this here, well, you were not where you were supposed to be, and that was not what Piaget had intended it to be. And he said it very clearly many times. He said, "That was not what I was saying. I said a child may reach this level at age two; other children may not reach it till three or four. But there is invariably some step that they have to go through before they get there, and if a child hasn't learned to walk well, he's not going to learn to run." That was his premise, not that he had to be running at a certain age.

And so I had really read almost all of his books, and I was very saturated with the idea that, yes, you can control what kids do. You just have to listen and pay attention and pick up what many people were saying at the time, start where the child is. But they weren't. They were always expecting that they had to be there. And so developing programs or curriculum for young children takes with it a lot of responsibility, and that's what I tried to teach when I was at Redlands, that working with young children is a big responsibility, and if we could teach not only teachers but parents, the world would be a lot different than what it is.

Because in my own experience, I've seen many kids that were so fearful, they were afraid to look themselves in the mirror. And I have pictures of a child looking at himself and looking almost terrified, had never seen himself in a mirror. So I told my kids, I said, "Now make sure you have a big mirror or two big mirrors in the house, so they can get used to seeing themselves and know what they look like," because you need to learn to like yourself.

And so the program at Redlands was very successful in that sense. I was developing audiovisuals for the conferences and all that. In that setting, a couple of things happened. Some of the people that I had working with me at Redlands had been directors or supervisors in the Head Start programs, and now they were working for me, people whom I respected, because they were knowledgeable. And one of them went on to University of Redlands to get her teaching credential there, because she was not an officially credentialed teacher at the time.

And the other one went on to work at Cal Poly Pomona. Cal Poly had gotten a big grant of eight hundred thousand dollars, I think, that we had the first year, to develop curriculum materials, and the proposal had been written primarily by Cecilia Suarez, of whom I spoke earlier. The university, I guess, had committed itself to the program and to be supportive, and the grant had been to develop preschool and primary school materials, bilingual. In that setting, Gloria Gomez, who was formerly Gloria Fernandez, had given me a call and said, "Ramón, we've got a problem here at Cal Poly. We are behind schedule." This was already the end of the year, and they had been funded in September, and they had produced nothing up to then. Again, they were theoreticians. And she said, "We need some help. We need materials, we need references and all that. Can you help us out?"

And I said, "Well, let me see what I can find, and I'll drop by on my way home," because coming from Redlands, I had to go by Cal Poly and then go on. So I picked out whatever I could, and then I went to Cal Poly, found the bungalow where they were, and we met. I was telling Gloria, "Look. This is what--." [unclear] using some of Ernesto Galarza's little booklets that he had put out and some other references that I felt were important. And basically, I was giving her my spiel on what I had done. And she had been working for me, but she needed a job where she felt more comfortable. As I talked with her, unknown to me, the director of the program was within earshot, listening to what I was saying, so when I finished with her, I left the materials and said, "When you're finished with the materials, make sure I get them back."

And I walked out, and the director was waiting for me outside the building. And he said, "Oh, by the way, I'm so-and-so, and I was listening to what you said, and I liked what I heard." "Oh," I said, "well, that's interesting. Gloria had asked me to come by and help her out a little bit." He said, "Well, everything that you said makes a lot of sense to me." I said, "Well, I'm glad that you like it." And he said to me, "We have positions open, and I would like you to apply." And I said, "Well, what position do you have?" He said, "Well, we have production, we have curriculum development, we have graphics." And I said, "Well, if you can make the description of the jobs available to me, I'll consider it." I said, "When is the deadline?" "Oh," he said, "the deadline is tomorrow."

So I went home, I read the description of the jobs, I told my wife, "What do you think?" She said, "Well, so you qualify for all those things." I said, "I know, but I don't even have a resume." She said, "Well, get busy and write one." So I wrote up a resume very quickly, and I wrote a cover letter of my intention to be considered for the thing, and on my way back to Redlands the next morning, I dropped the cover letter and my resume. That afternoon I got home, and I already had a telegram or a letter-gram, inviting me to go for an interview the following day, which was a Saturday. So I went to Cal Poly the next day, and they had the council's room at the Kellogg Foundation, which is a huge room with blackboards, university lecture-style. We had the faculty from the university, the director of the School of Education or the teacher-preparation program; we had a couple of faculty from Chafeey College, a couple of faculty from El Camino College; we had several teachers from the Pomona area as part of the interviewing panel.

And so when I was called in, I started answering questions. They seemed to be interested, and then they asked me, "Well, can you explain how you would do this and why [unclear]?" Well, that was right up my alley. I said, "You have some chalk?" I started writing on the blackboard, and I gave them the entire curriculum that I had already developed, production and the whole bit. Then I answered all the questions they wanted, and then they thanked me and I left. As I left, I saw John Figueroa. John Figueroa is a man who used to work for "Alphabet Soup" on TV, and "Carrascolendas." That was programs that were developed along the lines, sort of like the "Sesame Street" programs, but bilingual. He had also been in the staff of Raúl Ruíz or "La Raza" magazine, so he had a background mostly in production in audiovisuals and all that. He was a Puerto Rican, came from New York, and he was being interviewed for the production program. So I wished him good luck and I went home.

That same afternoon I got another letter-gram. It said, "You've been hired. We need you to be at the Kellogg Foundation tomorrow."

ESPINO:

Sunday?

01:16:14

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, Sunday. It was coming up to New Year's. I went and then I found out--well, I accepted the position, okay, because obviously I had already turned in my resignation at Redlands, for the main reason that when we presented our affirmative-action plan, Armando [M.] Rodriguez, who was the head of the board and was president of East L.A. College at the time, had adamantly refused to accept the program where we were making a recommendation that the university would be hiring more Latino faculty or bilingual faculty and making an effort to recruit students of the ethnic background that represented the community and the language target for the program. And so in that setting, almost things happened simultaneously. When I heard that, I had presented my resignation in protest, and at the same time, I was accepting this other job. So when I told them, I said, "I presented my resignation over there, but it's going to be until the end." He said, "Okay. We'll accept you here, and you can stay there until your target date is over."

And as we met, it was all newly hired staff for the most part. We were getting to know each other, and I was to learn at that time something that I guess changed the course of my life in academia. It turned out that Washington did not want Cal Poly to develop primary-grade materials or preschool material. They wanted materials in middle school, high school, and academia, university level. And I said to myself, oh, my god. Oh, my god. What did I get into? But fortunately, I probably had more qualification than anybody there. Alvera Martinez, I don't know if you know, she's in UCLA.

ESPINO:

Vilma?

HOLGUÍN:

Vera.

ESPINO:

Not Vilma?

01:18:27

HOLGUÍN:

No. No, Vera is an administrator somewhere in UCLA, because I've seen her name. But she came in as an administrator, and John Figueroa got into production. Oscar was a photographer. I got hired as a curriculum developer. Gloria Gomez, who was the one that had called me in, who was going to be in charge of the curriculum, but interestingly enough, once I got in there, she also couldn't handle the job, and as we started doing things, for me it was a learning experience, because we had to develop junior high material and high

school material in social studies. And I said, "That's not my background at all, but I always wanted to take on a challenge," which meant for me learning a lot of stuff. But I had learned from the dean of the School of Education that you can be ahead of whatever you're doing and stay afloat.

And so in that process, we began to look at the guidelines for bilingual education from the state. We looked at them and said, okay, how can we do this? And we had also come up with the idea to--in cooperation or in collaboration with University of Florida, we would be adapting materials from an English program into Spanish, and that was the intermediate science curriculum study, was ISCS, all science. That was a good learning experience. And then I had to develop an entire program in social studies, and we had four years to do it. That was what we were told.

ESPINO:

And was this curriculum supposed to address the cultural concerns of Chicano-Chicana students?

01:20:31

HOLGUÍN:

Most of the cultural concerns and about English concerns, so that the social studies program that we developed was in a format where as you opened the book, one side was Spanish and the other side was English, and the adaptation of ISCS was from an English program that was already very successful, into Spanish. So we had to go back and forth to Florida from time to time and talk about what we were doing and developing.

All told, in the course of four years we developed forty-eight books. I developed a manual for teachers that was very simple, and we developed two books of reading for university level. The way we went about that was we created two seminars, one on language development and one on cultural development. We invited the cream of the crop in the country, and most of them accepted the challenge. Their task was to pick up a particular topic from the ones that we had and present a paper in a symposium where we would have faculty from the university, people from the community, professors, teachers, and even students, and in this symposium, they would be presenting their papers, and we would be giving them critiques on that, and then they had to revise it to address the critiques, which was questions and challenges and all that. [Recorder turned off]

ESPINO:

Okay, we had a little interruption there.

01:29:40

HOLGUÍN:

So we went about the task, and Gloria had to quit because she couldn't handle the pressure. We were actually under pressure to produce, and the first thing we had to produce was at least a manual, which was my

responsibility. And I went home and I got busy. I got Phyllis to write a couple of sections for the book and then we put it out and that was there.

The symposiums were such that I remember my task was to review every book and raise questions, challenges, along with the critiques from whoever had been at the symposium, and give them back to the authors for revision. In that setting, I remember Cecilia Suarez presenting a position which I felt was very poorly written, poor language, concept not supported, with a bibliography that I guess 50 percent of it had nothing to do with what she wrote; it would just look heavy. And so I presented her with what I expected her to do, and interestingly enough, she said, "I am not going to do that. I'm going to pull my materials out." And I said, "But why?" I said, "You know we agreed that you would respond to the critiques and challenges." "Yeah, but how dare they come up with all of that stuff?" She said, "This is an excerpt from my dissertation." I said, "So?" She said, "Well, it went through my dissertation committee and they approved it." And I said to her, "I'm sorry, but it doesn't speak very highly for your dissertation committee, because I don't have a Ph.D., and I can point out to you this and this and this and this." And she said, "Well, you can forget about it. Take my stuff out."

I talked to Mario, and he said, "You know, she's very pissed." I said, "Well, I'm sorry, Mario, but you're a writer." I said, "When you wrote stuff that you weren't too proud of, you used a pseudonym. You didn't use your own name." He said, "Well, I know." I said, "Why?" "Well, because it was just crap that I put out." [laughs] And I said, "Well, talk to her, because I think what she's got to say is an important perspective. It's for the most part good, but it has to be rewritten more professionally." So it took about two more weeks and then she came to me and said, "Ramón, okay, so tell me what I need to do." So we went over it and I told her, "You need to address this. You need to explain this. You cannot assume anything." I said, "One thing you need to learn when you write is you never assume knowledge on the part of the reader. You have to explain things from scratch, describe things." And so she wrote it; she rewrote it finally, and it got included in the book.

But my experience there was that during the period of symposiums, I was fortunate to be able to rub elbows with some of the cream of the crop in the country, both in language development and in cultural development. I'll never forget Walter Curry, who was a professor at the University of Arizona, who told a beautiful story about being a Native American, and every time I read it, it makes me cry. Because when we talk about diversity, we don't even know what we're talking about. And I think that's why it was important for us to bring different people with different backgrounds to give their theory.

We brought a couple that wrote a very controversial short book. It was called "Institutional Racism." And this lady and this guy were Jewish. He was working for the National Commission to Save Paperwork or something like that, to eliminate paperwork, and while they were working on that commission, they developed twenty more forms. [laughs] And he was telling me, this is how ridiculous government works. And I found that this radical lady who had written most of that stuff was very sensitive, very naive in many ways, and very, how would I say, very unsociable, really, because we arranged to stay at the dorm at the university in [unclear], and we had a little party and we were dancing, and I took her out to dance and she freezed when I touched her. And I found that, yes, she didn't have that kind of a background in her life.

But I talked with some of them and I said, "You know, I feel so honored that we're able to talk to you," I said, "when I don't know anything and you guys know so much." And I learned one thing. Three of them said, "But you know a lot more than we do. So you may not have a degree, but you learn from life, and that's important." So I learned to feel comfortable, and during all this process of these years, we were developing materials that are very first-rate, because the person behind the whole plan was a Native American from Washington, a Yakima, very knowledgeable person. He was helping a lot of people write proposals that got funded, and he was pushing us, because he insisted that we approach the whole task with management by objectives, which if you don't know, means that you set yourself a task and in the period of time you say, I'm going to be here by this time, and I'm going to be here by that time, and I'm going to be here by that time, and then you stick to it come hell or high water.

And as you'll see, we were developing so many materials that we had a list, and this one was here, while this one was over here, and every Monday we met, and everyone that was responsible for their part would say, "Okay, on

this project here, where are you, and where are you?" And we had color coding. We had a wall about this long with butcher paper that we used to meet and do things. And in that setting, of course, we were able to do most of the stuff we set out to do. We had meetings with the community. We tested the materials in the schools. We had a fellow who later on went to work with the people that do the SATs. He developed all our questionnaires for all the materials that we developed, in other words, our testing. And he helped us test all the materials in the schools. We would bring in a group, so we'd go to a school, and what we found as we developed our social studies material is that the kids, which is contrary to everything that we read, the kids that were Spanish-speaking that had come from Mexico, who were the same age as the kids that were born here and at the same grade level, the Spanish speaker would pick up the concepts from the books better and do better on the test than the English speakers.

ESPINO:

And these materials were in English or in Spanish?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, no, we would test the Spanish speakers with the Spanish--

ESPINO:

In Spanish, okay.

01:32:15

HOLGUÍN:

--and the English speakers with English, because we wanted to make sure that they were comparable and that kids would understand what was happening, and that was very good experience. So we developed two books of readings, one on language development, one on cultural development. We developed twenty-four books that included the students' boo, the teachers' manual, and the test book. So you figure twenty-four times three; that's how many books we put out in the ISCS Program. And then we did twenty-four books in social studies, and we approached them from the standpoint that we would do like one that would reflect psychology, one that would reflect sociology, one that would reflect a little bit of history, but there were little vintages of actual experiences that we would write.

My time was to come up with a concept taken out of the state guidelines and then develop a basic idea about how we were going to get those concepts developed. And the storyline then would be given to--we'd hire writers. Some of the writers didn't pan out; some of them did. But we'd give them the storyline and then they would develop the story. I would review it for content. We had Carmen Almodovar, who had been an editor for

"Harper's," who would review it for grammatical structure and concept and then would give it back to the writers for a rewrite, and then we would edit it again. So the material was good quality, and like I said, we would develop it on the premise that as you opened the book, the Spanish would be there first and then the English would be here. If you were not an English speaker, you could read the stuff here and read it over here and know what a particular sentence meant, and we felt that that was a good learning format.

ESPINO:

What happened to these materials?

HOLGUÍN:

That's a good question. The ISCS, of course, was already successful in English, and as we developed and tested it, it was picked up by Silver Burdett [Press]. That's a publisher up in Palo Alto, California. They developed it with color. In other words, they got what we did with pictures and everything, but then they went into their own picture file and replaced those with color pictures and all that. But the entire packet was available to schools; I think for $360 you could buy the packet. That was $360 for each student.

ESPINO:

And who purchased these, school districts?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, being developed with federal funds, we could not copyright it. That was one reason why I left the program. Mr. Ortiz was an ambitious man who felt he could make money on this, so he was holding back on the material on the premise that we would eventually copyright it and get royalties out of it. My concern was, we need to get these books out in the field, because they're necessary. Because we used to go to book fairs and all that, and most of the stuff that was commercially available, it was by publishers who wanted to sell their product, not necessarily have what we felt was needed. And so Silver Burdett picked it up, because we couldn't copyright it. You had to wait, I think, a certain period of time, because during that time it's--what do they call it?

ESPINO:

Free access?

01:36:56

HOLGUÍN:

When it is up for grabs. And Silver Burdett picked it up. And then the other materials, the social studies materials, were picked up by "Aguila Volante" series in Fort Worth. They were part of the national chain of bilingual education, and they wanted to put out materials too, so they did. They adapted some to their own needs, did a little changes here and there, but basically they used the same format that we did, and most of the materials were also available. The books of readings, well, those were picked up--I forget who they were, because Carmen Almodovar, who had been our editor, called me one day, and she told me who had put out the books. Someone had picked it up and put them out commercially.

We did a video script also that was very interesting. It was called "A Dream Deferred," in which it talked about bilingual education and why it was important and all that, and cultural education. And we worked for years very diligently. I used to take stuff home and work on it sometimes at night. I continued teaching at L.A. Valley College.

While I was at Cal State Northridge, we had also worked on getting another community college started in the valley, because originally Cal State Northridge was San Fernando Valley State College, and it was supposed to be in San Fernando. It never got there. It got up north a little bit. And so the community still wanted a college nearby, and so we started working on the idea of another one, and we got the okay to go ahead with it. So Mission College began as an institution where the campus was the whole valley. We used to teach in rooms in the churches, in community colleges and businesses and whatever we could find, and then I started teaching again. I started teaching three courses. I used to teach, I don't even remember where, but there was one around San Fernando Road, one was in Van Nuys, and so my cup was pretty full by then.

ESPINO:

Sounds like it. And then something that we didn't talk about is when you married the second time. Did that happen within this period? Probably we should stop now, and we could talk about that next time, because when you talk about your wife, I'm not sure if you're talking about your first wife or your second wife, and we'll stop there. Okay? Thank you, Ramón. [End of interview]

Session Seven (April 21, 2010)

00:00:49

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is April 21, 2010. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the East Los Angeles Library, and this is actually a make-up interview, because the last one we did, where we covered many of these topics we're going to talk about today, did not record.

So let's go back. Last time we finished talking about your work with the Kellogg Foundation and the curriculum development, but I want to go back to what happened before that, before you started there, and that is the whole Chicano movement, your involvement with the Chicano moratorium, and your activism around that, because it's the fortieth anniversary and people are talking about it, and I know it has brought up a lot of memories for you. Can you talk to me about your role and how you became involved in the demonstration and activities?

00:08:23

HOLGUÍN:

Well, when I first heard about the moratorium was through some of the students we had at Cal State Northridge who were Brown Berets. They mentioned what was going on and so I decided to get involved, because I was not in favor of the war in Vietnam, and like many other people I was willing to come forth and let people know that I was against the war, and the moratorium was one vehicle by which Chicanos were going to let people know that we were also against the war.

It had come about because we knew that during the peace marches in Sacramento and San Francisco, Chicanos who were involved in the war against Vietnam were also speaking against that, and we found that at every rally after those marches, we had people like Bert Corona, like Rosalio Muñoz, who were scheduled to speak but really were not out to speak until everybody was leaving, when people were tired, wanted to go home and all that. So Rosalio had decided that they were going to do the moratorium Chicano-style. And so we started to meet. We used to meet at Cleland House, our neighborly service over here in East Los Angeles and began to organize.

We had one march, as I recall, in December of 1968, '69, and I recall that in particular, because if you look back at the record, it poured literally cats and dogs. We marched from Belvedere Park down towards what used to be Laguna Park and now it's Salazar Park. It poured so much that by the time we got to the park, I remember removing my jacket and actually wringing it out, and it was just soaking wet. But it was considered very successful. We felt that the thunder and the rain added to that importance of why people were marching, and plans were made to have another march the following year and getting prepared to help a national moratorium, which was scheduled to be in August of 1970.

We had one more march, and we sent organizers to places like--I remember we sent Victor Mendoza to Dallas, Texas; we sent Jose [Vasconcellos]--what's his last name; it'll come to me--but we sent Jose to San Antonio; we sent people to Macallan, Texas; we sent some people to Colorado; we sent a couple of people to Chicago. And so their task was to organize a march and just kind of test the ground, see if people were ready in those cities to have a march and make a commitment to become part of the big one.

During those years, we were organizing. We were having meetings. I can remember there was the basement of a building on Atlantic Boulevard here in East Los Angeles where we had one meeting about security, and I remember that many groups wanted to join that. Various groups wanted to provide security. There was another group named BALA, which was, I think, mostly parolees, and they very much wanted to be the security, and, in fact, at one point I remember one of the members of BALA pulled a gun on Rudy Acuña and was insisting that they wanted to be, but we pointed out to them that as parolees, they weren't allowed to carry guns to begin with, and so they were already breaking parole and it would be a big risk to have them involved with the group, since we did not want any problems. And finally they decided to organize our own security, and there were volunteers that agreed to be that.

Also, there was a group from New York, yes, the Young Lords from New York, who were a very militant group. They were promoting violence, and again we didn't think that it was advisable to have them there. But anyhow, my role then became to try to organize people in the valley, and for that purpose we organized the MECHA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan] at Cal State Northridge, we organized the MECHA at San

Fernando High School, and we organized the MECHA at L.A. Valley College as well.

By the time August twenty-ninth came around, we had a large enough group, I would say about three hundred people from our group. My wife [Rosario Holguin]--and I have a picture of that somewhere to prove it--was at that march with two of her oldest kids, with Jesus and with [unclear]. When we met at Belvedere Park, the northern part of Belvedere Park, there was a lot of enthusiasm, high expectations, but also visible were the L. A. Police Department.

ESPINO:

Can I just interject this for a second. That march, the first one in 1969, December, did you see police at that one as well?

HOLGUÍN:

No. Well, like I said, it was really raining very hard and only crazy people were out in the open getting wet. But there were people actually on the street watching the march, but I don't remember at that time seeing the police or expecting to see the police, because there was no reason for it. It was a peaceful march that was simply demonstrating against the war in Vietnam.

00:09:17

ESPINO:

And when you were meeting with these different groups, the Young Lords, the BALA, the Brown Berets who were wanting to do security, were you worried about security? Was that an issue for you, do you recall?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, whenever you are organizing anything in large scale, you want to provide security to mostly--it's internal, to make sure that people stay in line and follow the rules and such a thing, not provide security against anybody on the outside, but to prevent people from infiltrating and creating problems for the group. So in that sense, the security was more to keep order within the marching group.

ESPINO:

Do you remember that discussion, what people talked about as far as who was going to--

00:30:48

HOLGUÍN:

Well, we talked about what we knew happened to other groups and what had happened to different places where the troublemakers infiltrate to bring the police on the group to politicize the community, which is one way of doing it. You try to bring in the police and claim police brutality and that kind of stuff. So our purpose for security was really to just stay in line and keep us following the rules.

But when we saw the police at Belvedere Park, it was evident that they were prepared for trouble, because they were wearing their riot gear. They had their buses lined up right within view of the marching group, so we knew that they were there for a particular purpose, and it happened during the march. They claimed that there were rocks being thrown at police cars, that there were remarks being made about the police, and when we got to the park, we were still in very high spirits. We felt the march had been very successful. We had a big flatbed truck on the Eastmont Street side of the park, and the platform was being used as a stage. We had speakers there and people performing there. We had groups from different parts of the country singing, playing music, dancing.

And I was with my wife and our two kids sitting, watching the events. Bert Corona and Rudy Acuña were sitting with us. My wife had prepared some chorizo [unclear] burritos, and we were eating, and at one point, one of the group from the San Fernando School was going to perform some folklore dances, so I told my wife, "Let me get closer so I can really enjoy the kids' dancing." And as I was moving forward among the crowd, I heard Rosalio [Muñoz] from the platform say, "Please go back and sit down. Please go back and sit down." And I looked back and I noticed like a wave of people sitting down and moving up, and then I noticed the police behind them, coming in towards the crowd.

So then before I could do anything else, I looked where my wife and our kids were, and they weren't there anymore. So I worried and I started moving back towards the crowd, and I remember Rudy saying to me, "No, you stay here, because we need to protect the crowd, and we need to make it a human chain." So we were holding arms, blocking the police from coming in. But the police came in anyway, because they were breaking the chain with their batons. In fact, they broke the arm of one of the kids that was next to me, and he had to be sent to the hospital. It took a while in the melee to find out what had happened and to find--I found my wife, but we couldn't find our kids.

Later on we found out that one fellow, a friend of ours from San Fernando who knew them, had picked them up out of the tennis courts, which is where they had the kids, and the kids were being maced by the police while they were in that enclosure. After we got my kids, I told my wife, "We need to get the kids out of here," so we walked over to my Mom and Dad's house, which is five blocks from the park, and then we found out Mom and Dad had decided to go to San Diego to visit my sister, so there was nobody at home. The house was locked, and so we just stayed in the patio for a while, and then finally we called somebody to come and pick us up and take my wife and the kids home, and then they brought me back.

And as I reported to one of the Red Cross places, they gave me a Red Cross armband, and we walked back to the park, and it looked like a battleground. There were police all over the streets within the periphery of about five or six blocks around the park, and there were people all over the place too, because of the armband that we had, they let us walk in and go into the park and find people that were hurt and provide them with some first aid, and told them to report to an area where there would be doctors taking care of them.

Much later, things quieted down and I went home, and we just stayed there trying to figure out what went wrong. Later on, of course, what we learned was either through the press or through the media, where much of the blame for the turmoil had been placed on the marchers. I recall as we were at the park when the police came down on us, that we looked down Whittier Boulevard, and you could see big lines of smoke further down into

Whittier Boulevard shopping area, beyond Eastern Avenue, and what appears to have happened is that those people who were angry at the system, at the war, at the exploitation by outsiders into our community, started burning down some of the establishments. But it's interesting. Most of the establishments that were being burned were businesses owned by people who did not live in the community. Latino-owned businesses were not damaged at all.

The next day, of course, we learned from the media that the marchers had caused problems, that we had gotten out of line and all that, and there was a lot of conflict, because we also had people on our side who had been taking pictures, namely among them Raul Ruiz, who used to be the editor of "La Raza" magazine and who had been in the Whittier area where the Silver Dollar Bar used to be, which is where Ruben Salazar was killed by a policeman. The city later on appointed a blue-ribbon commission to investigate what happened, and supposedly they heard testimony from different people testifying to what had happened or what they saw happen, and this commission ended up with findings that, yes, Ruben Salazar had died at the hands of another, but they did not really do anything, as far as I know, to the policeman who was photographed shooting the teargas bomb into the club. I have the magazine where all of that is recorded, and I'm sure a lot of people have that magazine as well.

I remember that Irene Tovar was in the blue-ribbon commission, and she felt that it all had been a farce, that the police had come forth with their evidence to what they were saying, which made their statement believable. We had very little to provide in the form of evidence except the photographs that Raul Ruiz had provided, and as a result of that, of course, we had another demonstration which we hoped would be peaceful. That was in September sixteenth, which is the traditional Mexican independence parade that we have going through East L.A.

We had been given permission to participate in that march, but at like other periods, the march was supposed to end at East L.A. College, and for some reason, the committee in charge of granting permission by that withdrew its permission, and people were not allowed to rally at the college. And so they were bottlenecked outside, and, of course, that created other problems, and we had the police intervene again and arrest other people. I recall we had a lot of young people from the college or the university arrested, and then we had to organize lawyers and people to set up bail and all that till you let all these young people out to go home. And we stayed through the night until we got sure that everybody got released. But that was pretty much my involvement with the moratorium up to that point.

The next moratorium, we had a march in January the following year. Again, we met out there by the Maravilla Projects, and I remember the Conjunto Aztlan was singing movement songs, and since they were missing one singer, they invited me to go and sing, and we had that song recorded by someone who included it later on in a little film called "Yo Soy Chicano." And I remember because my voice was very evident there. But my son and my whole family, my ex-wife and my whole family was there and marched. And this march again was to end up in Whittier Boulevard, and it did end at Whittier Boulevard with the police actually firing at the marchers. And as I understand, they killed at least one or two persons. My son for many years after that did not get involved in those kind of marches, because he was actually scared, and he was still really young. At that time he was only about nineteen.

But our struggle within the movement continued. We continued to speak against the war in Vietnam. We continued to support the farmworkers. We continued to support the UAW [United Auto Workers] workers at the General Motors plant in Van Nuys, and we began to organize for what we wanted to be a political party in California, following the pattern of La Raza Unida party in Texas, and having had some of our kids, including my son, involved with Jose Angel Gutierrez in Texas, we decided that we were going to have that project. Those of us who were in the universities had gotten together with other colleges and as part of our master's research we were going to do a hypothetical takeover, a political takeover of the city of San Fernando. But our real task was to start registering people to vote, and also campaigning to get people to vote Raza Unida Party.

We had gotten together with people at University of California in Santa Barbara and also with the people at Cal State University in San Diego. The three groups were supposed to organize and gather enough people registered Raza Unida Party to make it an official party in California, and for this purpose we were able to get help from

well-known groups that could attract people in, like Cheech and Chong helped us with a fundraiser, "El Chicano" helped us with a fundraiser, The Midnighters helped us with a fundraiser.

We had also organized to let people know that La Raza Unida Party was already in existence in Texas, and for that purpose we brought a fellow Chicano who was running for governor in Texas. I forget his name right now. It'll come to me maybe before this meeting is over. But we brought him to speak to the universities throughout California, and then we organized a big fundraiser in the city of San Fernando by the dam in a club that is kind of isolated from San Fernando proper. We had brought music, and we had set up a bar, and we had instructed the people at the bar not to sell alcoholic beverages to minors, because many of our students were still under twenty-one years of age.

But we had Dr. Julian Nava, who was a professor at the university and a member of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education. We had professors from the university, from both Pierce College and L.A. Valley College. I had teachers from the San Fernando High School and members of the families of the students. My wife [Rosario Holguín] and I were there, present. Again we were in high spirits. The candidate for governor [Ramsey Muñiz] was to speak, but also we heard already that the L.A. Police Department was present outside. Again, they had buses already, which means they expected to do something, although there was no reason to be afraid of anything except that we were exercising our right to create a new political party and endorse a candidate, official candidate.

At one point I noticed something strange, meaning that there were a lot of gringos among the crowd, and they were gringos shabbily dressed, not dressed as people who had any business there. I pointed to my wife at one of the tables and almost at the time that I told her to look in that direction, we saw a fellow pull out a knife and drop it on the table where the kids were sitting and then pull a gun on them. And, of course, the kids reacted and other people reacted, and that gave cause for the police to come in, and they started bashing heads and arresting people and creating a lot of problems.

Again the fundraiser was not successful, needless to say, and we spent a good part of the night trying to bail people out, well, trying to find out who got arrested and trying to bail them out, with people putting up their houses as collateral and anything else that they could in order to get the kids out. We had one young lady that was pregnant who was arrested. She was a minor, and they claimed that she had been drinking, when, in fact, many of us had seen secret agents placing beer cups in front of them, to say they were drinking.

After that arrest, we spent almost four or five months fighting the LAPD and fighting the charges, proving that all these kids had not been doing what they were said to be doing and that the whole thing had been planned by the LAPD to disturb our activities, political activities, because the people in San Fernando, meaning those powers that be, were really afraid that we were going to be successful creating a new political party. And, of course, we had already a couple of Chicanos running for mayor of the City of San Fernando at that time.

ESPINO:

Do you remember some of the lawyers that you worked with around that? Do you remember names or organizations that helped you with the jail terms?

HOLGUÍN:

No, I don't remember.

ESPINO:

If it was Católicos por La Raza, Richard [Ricardo] Cruz?

00:47:33

HOLGUÍN:

Well, we were too young yet in the field of law to really have any significant number of Chicano lawyers. Rudy Acuña had suggested that we concentrate on hiring Jewish lawyers because they were the best, and so we did. We hired a lot of the Jewish lawyers in the area of Encino, which is where the best lawyers concentrate, and even then it took us a long time to beat the charges.

But meantime, I continued with everything else that I was doing. I had been asked to teach a couple of Chicano Studies courses, basic Chicano Studies 100, and to teach also a course that was titled--I think it was Community Involvement in the Chicano Community, something to that effect, which was Chicano Studies 101 or something like that. But meantime, I was also teaching courses out of the School of Education already, and that was mostly in the area of child development.

And I had, through the recommendation of the dean of the School of Education, who was called Phil Hernandez, I had been contacted by the Learning Achievement Corporation. I don't know if I had mentioned that before. The Learning Achievement Corporation was getting in the game of bilingual education, trying to develop audiovisual materials, using their traditional characters that they use in cartoons, but they needed someone who could give them advice in the areas of culture and language, and everywhere they went, my name had come forth. And Phil said, "You're the only one we know at this time." He said, "In time I'm sure that you're going to have a lot of competition, but right now," he says, "take advantage and do the best you can to increase your career."

So I went and I arranged for an appointment and interview with them. They told me what they wanted, I told them what I could do, and so we agreed they were going to pay me a thousand dollars a week and I would be on call. So it took them a long time, but every time I went, they would have a thousand dollars for me, which came in very handy, because I had to pay child support and my income at the preschool lab was really not that significant, and my financial aid was just barely enough to pay for my room and board and my books. So that money came in very handy.

I had learned to rub elbows with Ph.D.'s already through the department, and all of these people with whom I was working now were all Ph.D.'s, professors in media and whatever. But they were very respectful and listened to what I had to say and implemented much of what I contributed to them. In six months their material was over. They developed film strips, records, and modified cartoons and all of that, so they could sell the whole thing to different Head Start programs and different preschool programs as a package. But that was very helpful to me, because it helped me through college and it helped me to provide the child support that I needed to provide.

Also because of Phil Hernandez, I was contacted by L.A. Valley College, where again I was contracted to teach courses in child development, and there I was teaching Mondays, Wednesdays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, three hours each night and four hours on Saturday. On Saturday, I had a class of 150 people. You would believe it was

a big university class, one of those studio type with blackboards surrounding the front and with a microphone and the whole bit. But all of that was a very good experience for me for many of the things that I did later on, because I had to develop lesson plans, I had to do more research, I had to have more expertise in the field of psychology, and so all of these just added to my experience.

So by the time that I left Cal State Northridge and went to Redlands, I was pretty much, you might say, the only person around with the kind of experience that was needed in that field. And so the director of the training program at Cal State Northridge had already hired me as a consultant to do workshops for the different Head Start groups throughout, and when she told me would I consider working for them, I would say, "Well, what is it that you have in mind doing?" And when she told me, I said, "Well, I do," and very interesting--at that time I felt so cocky that I had every reason to be, that when she asked me, "If we hire you, how much will you want to make?" and I told her. At that time, let's see, that was in 1974, I think I told her I needed $18,000 a year after taxes, and they were surprised, but they said, "Well, we'll have to talk with the president and the vice president," because Redlands was the funding institution for the Head Start training program for the ten counties in southern California.

So I told them, okay, yes, I'll go get some coffee maybe and check around, and I'll come back in, say, half an hour or so. She said, "Okay." So I went, and meantime I went and I looked around. I saw that people working in the post office of the university were Latinos, people working in the cafeteria were Latinos, people working in the fairgrounds were Latinos, but I learned that as faculty were concerned, they had one Latina Cubana teaching part- time, who was called--she was not a part-time faculty. She was something else, but she was not really a faculty per se. She couldn't expect to get tenure. And they had a gringo born in Mexico of gringo parents, who spoke good Spanish and knew the Mexican culture well enough. He used to do charreadas. In fact, he was the head of a charreada group in Redlands. He was the other so-called Latino. There were no Latinos in the faculty.

So when they came back and accepted my terms, I was told to write the contract and to write a resume. It's interesting that they would hire me without knowing what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to do a description of what the program was going to be. I presented them, and they gave me time to turn in my resignation at Cal State Northridge, because I had never really wanted to be an administrator. I had been hired as an assistant professor, so I was allowed to teach, but there was already the rumor that they were going to make all EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] directors student-affairs officers of some kind, and I didn't particularly care for that.

So moving to Redlands was strategic for me, because they were also talking about commingling the Chicano EOP, the black EOP, and the Native American EOP, which would mean that they would have to name one director, and the staff had to be reshuffled to fit whatever the new structure was going to be. Since I happened to develop the new structure, I had made the recommendations which they followed. I recall that the faculty of Chicano Studies under Gerald Resendez, who was the chairman at that time, called me to a meeting, and they were asking me to reconsider, because they heard about my resignation. They asked me to reconsider, and I mentioned to them that, in fact, they had not been very supportive of my activities as the EOP director and had many of the problems which they had been blamed on our recruiting, which was not so. I said, "You are all here on a tenure track." I said, "You're all continuing your education and eventually all of you will become full-time professors, fully tenured, and you'll have your career assured." I said, "Under the EOP program, there is no assurance of any kind, because the program is subject to defunding anytime," because it was always a political thing. So I told them no. I said, "I think you're going to have the program in good hands. If you are supportive when they need the support, I think you'll make a good team," because we developed, actually, the backbone of the English and math program in the supportive services under EOP, and we helped develop Operation Chicano Teacher as well.

And so we parted company on good terms. I think they understood that being an administrator was not what I considered my career to be, and I left and went to Redlands. My first task was to develop a curriculum for the training of the Head Start staff throughout the ten counties, so I went one night and I sat down and started writing and writing and writing, and went on until I had it all down, and then I typed it. Next morning I went and said, "Make some copies of this, and you can keep the original." She looked at it, the director of the program.

Immediately she went out to the vice president, who arranged to meet with the president, and we presented the classes.

The first thing that they told, they said, "Why is it that you had this program for six years, and you haven't been able to produce anything like this?" Because [unclear] she had good staff. But the staff always talked about what they ought to do and then why they couldn't do it. It was all rhetoric. And really, none of them had the expertise. It was all rhetoric. And through the few years that I had been involved in the whole thing, I had really developed the expertise to be able to tell what to do, because in order to develop the curriculum for Chicano Studies and for Operation--for the specialist credential for the educational psychology under the department of School of Education, and that was the curriculum for the early childhood education. We had developed that too. So I had two sets of experiences that really helped me do what I had to do.

Interestingly enough, they asked--

ESPINO:

Was it Operation Chicano Teacher?

00:52:10

HOLGUÍN:

No, no, [unclear]. What we had was the training center, and what happened was that they asked Mary Schiller, who was the director, they asked her to resign. And I remember when she called me to her office, she cried. Essentially what she was saying--she was talking about her ineptness to be able to do a job that needed to be done and how it was that someone younger, with a vision of what needed to be done, was able to come forth and prepare something so quickly. And then she told me she was--she didn't tell me that she was asked to, but I knew that she had, because prior to that she had never talked about retiring. And so she told me she was going to be retiring at the end of a certain period, and they were going to be looking for someone.

Well, meantime, I began to develop the curriculum for the training, okay, and when I developed the curriculum for that training, I was asked to submit a proposal to Washington, because the university was willing to put forth resources, but they needed money. So they gave me a staff--I think she was the assistant to the president--to help me write a proposal. She knew how to write proposals. I had the expertise on what needed to be done. So we got the guidelines and we started writing, submitted that, and as soon as we presented it over there, they called me to Washington to defend my program. I defended it, they funded us, and I started preparing the CDU [Child Development Unit] program, because what Washington wanted to do was to have a child-development associate certificate issued by Washington, to people throughout the country. They wanted to standardize things, and that was never to happen, because each state has its own idea of what education should be and how things should be conducted.

But they did approve the program. I did develop it, and the training of the program included having Head Start teachers taking classes at University of Redlands and allowing also us to visit--there's a worksite--to observe and to videotape. And then what we would do is, the university arranged to provide me with a couple of camera people, a guy with a mixer, and we would go into the sites and record what the teachers were doing with the kids. Then when the kids went home, we would meet with the teachers and show them what they were doing and explain to them what they could improve on and where they needed to really go into some training. Because some of them dominate the environment so much that all you could hear was the teacher's talking, and that was

not my style. My style was, you let the kids do the talking, and you listen and then learn from the kids, because they are the ones that are learning, and they tell you the progress they're making just by their behavior. And that's why we had become, as a Head Start training teacher, we had become the observation site for Pacific Oaks College. They used to send their trainees to observe at our site.

ESPINO:

Can I just ask you before you continue--that brings up a point about your--I mean, I know Head Start has been written about a lot, and as someone who was there in the very beginning, can you just talk to me about what your view of Head Start was, what you thought about it, just how you understood it? What did it mean to you?

01:03:10

HOLGUÍN:

My view of Head Start was that it was prepared too quickly. It was started with outsiders coming in to train, mostly gringos who had good intentions and who had the preparation, but they were not committed to stay for long. It was, to me, for most of them an adventure. People that were hired to actually work with the children in the work sites were community people. Some of them did not have a college degree of any kind. Some of them were going to college. Some of them had associate of arts degrees. But for the most part, they didn't have any teaching experience, and while their intentions were good, their approach to the program was not that good.

They, at the beginning, were mostly babysitters. And then as they went along, they learned little by little, because they used to provide workshops for them to teach them how to read books to children, how to instill in them the idea of a dramatic play, the idea of teaching them games and so on, so it was still pretty much more like an entertaining program. Not to say that the children were not learning, because children learn from their environment. Children are constantly learning; that's their job. When they are children, play is their job, and to play, they learn. And so irregardless of what experience the teachers they had were providing for them, the children were learning very well. But the teachers needed training, and the training was being provided little by little.

Some of the people took advantage of that and got into teacher programs at the university and became bona fide teachers, many of them. Those that had family to support, because many of them were women, single parents, could not afford to go to college or did not want to, and so what they did mostly was learning what was being taught to them through the different training programs that were being provided. Most Head Start programs were allowed monies to send trainees to a university, Pacific Oaks College, and so Pacific Oaks College built its reputation becoming one of the Head Start teacher-training centers. The other one was Cal State Northridge, and so we used to get them over there when I was over there, and I used to lecture over here to them.

Also, many of the programs would call me from time to time to provide inservice training for their staff along lines that they felt they needed to have. So I could say that the program became a little more sophisticated as they went along, to the point where they began to compete with the kindergartens in the public schools. They were too eager to try to teach the kids how to read. They were too eager to have the kids follow patterns, and set up curriculum plans where the children would be doing this here, would be doing that, and so they would break up the morning or the afternoon into different segments of what they considered a curriculum.

The program that I was teaching was more along the lines of understanding how children learn, such that through observation and through audio perception, they could see what children were learning and improve,

because when I was training them, we would work with the children in such a way that we would have team teaching. We would call two teachers, two assistant teachers, and at least two parents working with the group, and each parent was assigned a particular area, each person, such that as a child left this area, he would go into another area of interest for that child and get involved there. Our role was not to pull a child out of one place because it was the time to do that, and put him somewhere else. Children would eventually be interested in everything that was going on.

And so when we ended the day, we would sit in conference, and we will say, okay, we would follow each child. When this child was doing this at this particular time and then he left here to go there, then the person in charge of that, I'd say, what happened when that child got there? And so that way we would follow the progress of the child throughout a whole day. And once we kind of did an assessment of what everyone had been doing, then we planned the day for the following day, so that we would be building up. And the reason for that is that many times teachers had done, let's say, one session of four or five months, and they've learned and the children have gone. Then the new children come in, and they try to teach them where they left off. But they're new children. They haven't got what the leaving group has learned, and so something is lost there.

Eventually, I think, all of us that worked in that, as those of us who were interested in early childhood education grew in numbers, we began to promote the idea of what Jean Piaget was promoting, really, and that is, learn how children learn, and that way you know what they are learning. Because, see, he had developed a lot of things to test where children were, but he never said, "At a certain age, the children should be doing this." What Piaget was saying, "A child has to go through these stages before he gets to that other stage and before he gets to that other stage." More or less the notion of, a child learns to roll before he learns to crawl, before the child stands, before he learns to walk, before he learns to run. In that same context, children learn a lot of other things, but it doesn't have to be at the same age for all children.

Some children learn faster than others, all depending on what an environment is like, depending on what influence their parents and those around them have, depending on what they have at home, and so we tried to promote that more and more, because what we saw happening was that teachers, including kindergarten teachers, they began this notion they would sell the Jean Piaget kids, and then they would test kids to see if they were ready for that, and if not, then they were not quite developed. And I said, "But that was not the purpose. The purpose is, put the stuff in there and see what they do with it, and then once they play with it, ask them questions. Get them to think." Because Piaget was very concerned with cognitive development.

My daughter was telling me they went last week to visit [unclear] in Arizona, and then they went to the Grand Canyon, and in the Grand Canyon, they went to an area where they had films, where they had these helicopters going through all the different areas and showing animals and all that. And my daughter was telling me that as they were showing the film, my great-grandson, who just turned three, was able to name all the animals they were showing in the film, and people were surprised that he was so smart. Then my daughter said, "Well, you ought to see my dad." She said, "He's worked with my kids and my grandchildren all the time, and they learn on their own. We just provide the environment for them."

ESPINO:

That's a great philosophy.

01:05:52

HOLGUÍN:

And so if you look at children, you'll find that that is the case. I remember in Head Start when we had here in East L.A., for example, we'd bring children and I would ask them, "What is a mountain?" They didn't know what a mountain was. I said, "Have you ever seen one?" "No." They never bothered to look north and see the Sierra Madre mountains over there, or if we were in the valley, the Santa Susana mountains, because they're not encouraged to see. When they go "Andale, andale," they don't allow the children to explore, to see what's in their own environment, or they're not encouraged to learn the names of things or what things are for, and that is the best way for children to learn. They say you learn by seeing, you learn by hearing, but you learn most by doing.

So I was very happy that during that course that I was in Redlands, I was able to motivate people to start thinking along those lines, and at every workshop that I did, I encouraged them to kind of shift their thinking a little bit and think more about the child than about themselves. Because there were many people that they got hired as teachers and retired as teachers. They never really improved very much except what they learned in the training that was provided for them.

So I think that the Head Start program was a success, because the people running it were able to make progress as they went along the way, and also because parents began to understand their role as parents a little bit better. I recall when I used to ask parents to volunteer, many of them were reluctant because they said, "Well, I'm not a teacher. I don't know what to teach them." And I would say to them, "You've learned a lot of things in life that your child doesn't know. You can teach him that." And so I never had a problem getting volunteers. People wanted to volunteer in my program, and they wanted to learn.

ESPINO:

And that's how you met Rosario, isn't it, through her--she was a parent?

HOLGUÍN:

Rosario became a teacher.

ESPINO:

Can you talk to me a little bit about how you met her and what the situation was? This is your second wife.

01:29:53

HOLGUÍN:

Well, we met--our personal circumstance was not the best. I was separated from my wife, but not yet divorced.

She was divorced. Her husband had--she had her husband deported to Mexico, and she was raising three kids. She was a volunteer in the program. As I learned later on, and I know she wouldn't mind me saying this, because I heard her say it, she was involved for two reasons. One, because she could come and get something to eat, and the other, because she could bring her kids as assistants to her, I guess, and they would also get a chance to eat and be exposed to the whole thing.

Later on, of course, I became her two sons' first teacher, and she learned a lot from me, because she was a very strict mother, very strict to the point where I had to intervene at times when she tried to correct her children or punish them for things that children do naturally. Children are not mean by nature. Children do strange things because they don't know any better. They're curious. They want to explore. They want to see what happens if, and if you let them or you encourage them to try things and advise them that some things have a risk, they learn. They learn very fast. So I got her involved. Then I got her to apply for a job within the Head Start program. She became an assistant teacher, and later on, since she had already been involved with a welfare-rights' organization as a volunteer, she knew how welfare works, and she knew how the Head Start program worked, because she had been involved from the very beginning. And as such, she got to the point--oh, I also encouraged her to go to college.

So she started going to college and then she became an assistant teacher, and later on she became the community worker for the Head Start program. So we worked pretty much hand in hand in many areas. Also, later on as the kids graduated from Head Start and went on to schools, she got involved with the Title I and Title VII program advisory committees of the schools, and became president of the Title I programs in LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District].

She had gotten very militant and learned very fast. And then like I told you, after the first year of Head Start, I was going to have mid-term exams, but it was not till later, so I was going to go get [unclear] and just, I don't know where, I invited her to come and have dinner with me, and she accepted, because it was early and her mom didn't know that she was going anywhere. So we went to the Shakey's Pizza here in East Los Angeles, and that was really what you might say the first time we went out together. I took her back home when we finished. I went on to take my exams.

We used to talk a lot during the time that I was developing the team-teaching approach with Hope Hines, who was my mentor. Hope Hines was also a mentor for a lot of other people, including Rosario, because she felt that Rosario had a lot of potential. And so we used to talk about what we were learning and about what we're going to do. A year after that first year, I asked her for a date. By then I knew her, I thought, enough. She said she would tentatively accept, but I would have to ask her mom for permission. So I went to her house, asked for permission to take her to the movies, and her mother said to me, "You can take her, but you have to take a chaperone along with you." At that time, her cousin from Mexicali was staying here, and so I had to take the cousin along with us, and we went to Alhambra Theater to see the movie "Fahrenheit 457." I remember it so well.

After that, we went to my apartment, which was in Alhambra, and I prepared something, some dinner for them. We ate and then I took them home. A few days later, I learned that her mother had beat her up. I don't know what she meant by that, but I knew her mom was very strict as far as her behavior. Especially since Rosario was a mother with three kids, she didn't want her to make another mistake, and reprimanded her as well for even talking to me. But it's interesting that up to the point that we had that date, the mother used to get along with me really well. After that, we had problems. I went to visit Rosario once at her house and we had some disagreement about whether I should be dating her or not, and she told her grandson, I guess, yes, her grandson Hector --I think, she made up a story or exaggerated the story about our discussion, our argument, because I remember Hector came to the house--I was still there--and was ready to pick a fight. We talked and we talked and he finally calmed down, and we agreed that I would have to behave very carefully with her, because I would have him to deal with.

And so, since then I had already been convinced by Hope Hines that I should go to college full-time. I had set up the Hermano House. I think I told you about that already. And during that time, Mike de la Peña, who was at

USC [University of Southern California]--and they were encouraging people to apply for four-year colleges, so I applied. He told us about the EOP program, about the availability of financial aid, and so I applied to UC Irvine, because it was new. I applied to USC, because they had prestige. I applied to Cal State L.A., because it was close to East L.A., and I applied to Cal State Northridge, mostly because it was a transit university. It was still a college at the time. It was San Fernando Valley State College.

To my surprise, I was admitted to all four, and I told Mickey, and Mickey said, "Well, it's up to you." And then when I went to UC Irvine, I had to consider the distance and the isolation from everything else at the time, so I decided, no, I'm not going to go there. I went to USC. I decided that USC was too much of a problem in terms of traffic, transportation, and a place to stay, so I ruled it out. Then it was between Cal State L.A. I went to Cal State L.A., and I had a lot of reservations about Cal State L.A. because it was still fairly small and there was all kinds of construction going on, and I didn't want to have to deal with that. Also, parking was a big problem.

So I went to Cal State Northridge and I liked it. I liked it mostly because they had a summer program with Chicano Studies already started. Classes were still being developed, and the professors were learning as they went along, just staying a little bit ahead of the students. But I liked the attitude. I liked it first of all because I knew that overall it was mostly white students, but their group that was welcoming us was mostly Chicanos. There were people like Beto Ruiz, like Raul, like Gerald Resendez, who had been a priest, and some of the students as well, and they greeted us with open arms. I liked that. I liked that they talked to us like they knew why we were there and how they were willing to help us out, and so I accepted and got an appointment to interview for financial aid.

I was very fortunate that in the financial aid they had a couple of Chicanos and then they had Hank Lopez. Hank Lopez was a graduate student of the university. He had been one of the students who helped take over the administration building of the university a year earlier and was assistant director of EOP; Mike Verdugo, being the other one, also being an activist, very sharp fellow. And I told them, I said, "I don't know if they're going to be able to get enough assistance, because I have a family to support." When they met with me to offer me the package, it was a very, very handsome package. I was getting two scholarships, an EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] grant, some loan money, to the point where I could figure I could work it out. Oh, and they gave me allowance to stay at the dorms of the university. They used to call it the Southside Zoo. I figured, well, with that and then the work study--I was going to be working at the preschool lab by arrangement already, because they knew me. So I figured I'll be able to swing it.

So when I reported to the dorms, I paid the first semester. We used to pay--that's the first thing we had to do with our check, make the payment for the dorms. And the dorms were very [unclear]. They had a library, they had a cafeteria, and the food went along with what we paid for the dorms; had a swimming pool. They were not coed. They had one side of the dorms was for males; the other side was for females. And, of course, the university was right across the street.

Within that year I got elected to be the chairman of MECHA [Movimiento Estudiantil de Aztlan], which I did not expect. I don't really know why they nominated me except that maybe a lot of the young people there saw me as a more mature person. Certainly I was at least twenty years older than most of them there. I was already thirty-eight, thirty-nine, but I looked young enough, I guess, and behaved adult enough they respected me. So when they made the nominations, I had two opponents that were, I think, worthy. One of them was Jose Galvan, and the other one was Evie Alarcon. And I figured, well, I'm not that militant, I'm not that much of an activist really, but when we went out for them to take the vote, we come back and I was told I was the new chair, and as such, we began to do a lot of interesting things.

We began to form committees, fundraising committees, cultural committees, and so on and so forth. And every time someone would come with an idea, I would name that person in charge of a committee that was just created, and almost concurrently, they hired a new housing director who had come from India, a very fine gentleman. He had a strange notion that Chicanos were a lot of potential trouble, and he didn't want that in the dorm. So he called me to his office one day and made me an offer that I couldn't refuse. He said he would let me stay at the dorms free of charge, provided that I could guarantee him to keep MECHA in line. And, of course,

that was my job anyway, so I saw no reason why he would be concerned about that, but I saw no reason why I should not accept the offer.

So I stayed at the dorm for two years free of charge. We used to organize the guys and go--and I have pictures of that--put on my jorongo and get the guys and get people that played guitar and go down the hallways singing "Yo Soy Chicano" at least once a week. MECHA made a lot of progress. Many of the young people that were there had been participants in the walkouts of East L.A., so they knew why they were there. They knew that many of them did not have the preparation for college and voiced their opinion, so we very promptly created the supportive services program, in which we provide tutoring. Out of that we decided to provide regular classes in addition to what else they were taking, classes in English, classes in basic math, classes in geometry. Basically, those three. And then individual tutoring in other topics on an individual basis.

We would hire--since the supportive services also had money, we also had work-study money available to us from the programs, we would hire other Chicano students that were good in whatever particular subject it was, to tutor people that were needing that kind of tutorial assistance. And so the program became very successful. As the years went by, it became well known throughout California, and the black EOP tried to imitate that, because we were committed to the university, to parity. Whatever money we got, we had to share it with the Black Studies EOP. But they never could equal what we offered, even though they tried.

And I'm saying that because subsequently, by the time I left to go to Redlands, we had already begun to commingle their programs into ours, and we had begun to train their staff by our staff so it could be more effective, because within two years, the retention rate of the black students was nowhere equal to the retention rate of Chicanos. We were keeping ours and increasing in large numbers every semester. They were losing. They would be losing a large percentage of each group that came in each semester, so that in no time at all we had a lot of Chicanos on campus, and they didn't have any blacks on campus. And so Chicanos also, by virtue of their pride, I think their wanting to learn and become efficient and effective at whatever they were going to do, they studied hard and did very well.

And one of the best-kept secrets in the early years was that as we had every group, part of the tutorial we did before they registered was we counseled them to register in at least a couple of Chicano Studies classes. That way we ensured that the Chicano Studies Department was going to be there. And, of course, the enrollment in Chicano Studies got so that pretty soon gringos wanted to take Chicano Studies courses, and when we revised the requirements for the teacher-credential program, and since I was on that committee, we made it a requirement that anyone who was in the teacher-credential program had to have at least two courses in Chicano Studies, so we had a lot of gringos coming. [laughs]

And no other university in California did the same thing, and they were complaining that, why were we growing so much, what were we doing? I said, "Well," I said, "when we met in Santa Barbara and we developed the plan of Santa Barbara, there were several universities that submitted their proposals." I said, "We followed ours," even though Rudy [Acuña] will say now that we didn't. But we followed it pretty much. Other universities didn't, because what they had to offer was borrowing a professor from this department to teach this class, borrow a professor from that other department to teach this class, and then when they hired teachers to teach Chicano Studies classes specifically, they would be hired part-time because of MECHA's influence to not get teachers too comfortable so that they could be tenured. And we all felt at Cal State Northridge that that was a big mistake, because that was one of our goals, get the faculty to be tenured so the department would be a bona fide department. Other universities had Chicano Studies programs, but not departments.

Cal State Northridge as of today, as I recall being told, has twenty-three full-time professors, all tenured, and like seven or eight part-time professors.

ESPINO:

Can I ask you just a quick question, that you mentioned that gringos started taking classes as well in Chicano Studies. Do you think that, just looking back and probably it's relevant today, that these Chicano Studies classes are something that more than Chicanos should be taking, that other students should be taking them as well?

01:33:15

HOLGUÍN:

Definitely yes. In the beginning, I think--and Rudy might kick my ass for this--but I think it was mostly giving them just a basic knowledge of Mexican history and a lot of politicizing, because we had a lot of Chicanos coming in from parts of California where there were no Chicanos. We had Chicanitos coming in from black communities, who sounded more like black kids than Chicano kids. But because of the gringos coming into the program, some of them came because it was a requirement if they were taking a teaching-credential program; some of them heard that it was very good; some of them just wanted to learn what we were about; and there were some of them that really were doubtful and came in trying to challenge what was being taught.

Because, you know, there were many people who were very good in history, but they had never heard anything of Chicano history or of Mexicans or anything in all their career as history students. So the professors, even Raul Ruiz, who was the most politicized of all, had to begin to amend his approach, because he had to defend what he was teaching, and so they had to learn and become more knowledgeable of Mexican history and later on of Chicano history as well. Let me emphasize here that at the time that Chicano Studies began, the basic books that were available for us to use were "Sons of the Shaking Earth," by Eric Wolf, "Labyrinth of Solitude," by Octavio Paz, "North [from] Mexico," by Carey McWilliams; there was a little book of readings where they had some writings by people like Dr. Ernesto Galarza, by a couple of professors from UCLA, and that was about it.

ESPINO:

I don't hear anything by or about women.

HOLGUÍN:

No. At that time there was nothing. Later on, Chicanos began to write their own, which we all felt it was about time. As Chicanos began to graduate from universities and got their Ph.D.'s, much of what they wrote about was dissertations in Chicano history. They began to write about [unclear] in Texas, who some people think was the father of the Chicano movement. Others began to write about [unclear]. They began to write about César Chávez. Dr. Ernesto Galarza wrote "Merchants of Labor." Then he wrote "Workers in the Field, Spiders in the House," or vice versa. He wrote another book, I forget which one.

Rudy Acuña by then had written a couple of books. One of them was "Cultures in Conflict," and the other one is "Mexican American History," which was a history book I guess for intermediate or high school. But proliferation pretty soon got very strong, and as more professors graduated from universities, they began to write more and more, and before you knew, there was enough that we could do, that was good quality. Rudy Acuña

had written "Occupied America," and I think for the first couple of years, two or three years, he had to defend the book, because traditional American historians challenged many of his terms, challenged much of what he had to say about how things happened, and so he had to defend it in history journals, and as the result of all that, he revised the book. I don't know how many revisions he has made now, but the book is so much better now than the first book.

And so to answer your original question, I think the quality of history by Chicanos can stand its ground on its own, and I think we can be proud of that. I read so much, because I used to have my eye on every book that came out. I used to go to university over there and university [unclear]--

ESPINO:

Let me pause it. [Recorder turned off]

ESPINO:

Okay.

01:43:24

HOLGUÍN:

I was spending so much money that I realized that I was beginning to have a library of my own, and pretty soon realized that I couldn't afford all the books that were being published, because publications were coming out everywhere, and I was so joyful that it was happening, because whenever someone says, "Well, what does Chicano Studies offer?" I says, "Look around you. Look around you." We know more about ourselves now. A lot of people we have in politics, a lot of people we have in the professions, in law and medicine, in merchandise--look at the publishing industry. Once there was a magazine named "Nosotros" that did not survive. Now there is a magazine "Nosotros" that's been around for years, and many others that have survived on their own, and they are by people who have been successful in almost ever field and endeavor. And it's all because the opportunities have been there.

I say look at--we have a university president in Texas who was one of our fellow students here at Cal State Northridge. We have a lady Mary or Maria [unclear] over at UC Santa Barbara, who is chancellor. A lot of Chicanas began to write and voice their concerns that were being ignored by Chicanos, or they felt were being ignored, whether they were or not. My argument to Anna Nieto Gomez was not in terms of not wanting to recognize the role the Chicana had, because when I went to school in Mexico, we knew about [unclear], and we knew about Sr. Juana Inez de la Cruz and other women, Paz Adelitas and so on, who were part of Mexican history.

I took issue with us having to use the term Chicano and Chicana or Chicano/Chicana, because in the Spanish language, that is, as far as I know, still unacceptable. When you say, "Todos mismso, todos tuyo." Cuando decimos "los Mexicanos," we mean tu y yo. Los Chicanos mean tuyo. It's not [unclear] and it's unnecessary. Chicanos is all inclusive, and that's the only issue I have with it. I said, maybe when academia real Espanola or

la academica Mexicana que existe ahora, they'll find that, okay, we need to give you the terms separately, for whatever reason. I don't have a problem with it. But that's because when I see it written, I still think that it's incorrect to put a word-slash-something, in English or in Spanish or in any language. But that's the only thing.

I feel that Anna Nieto Gomez, among a couple of other ladies whose names I can't recall right now, but I have their books of poems, I think they began to express mostly through poetry, and through poetry they came out with very strong messages for the men, very strong messages for society, very strong messages about their contributions in society to the family, to education, to the labor field, to so many different things, to the education of children. It's no accident that like in English, many people in the teaching profession are females, and that is true for Chicanos as well. That was one field which was widely open for them.

And you have now people like--well, I could name a few, but I won't, for fear of leaving any out, but they're excelling everywhere. They're being given awards. They've given recognition certificates everywhere you go, and they excel for their dedication to the field of teaching and to the dedication of whatever field of studies they have chosen. There are more women university professors, Chicanas, today than there ever were. And so I think that Chicanas have not only contributed in their labor field, in the fields, in the farms, but they have contributed also in many other fields.

And I think we began to recognize--I remember in particular that when I ran the MECHA in Cal State Northridge, at least 50 percent of the chairs of the committees were women. And I recall, and I say it now, and I said it then, that if you wanted something done, you could depend on women, and I think that's true today as well as any other time, because men are too concerned with many other things that have nothing to do with being Chicano, and women are, so I take my hat off to them anytime.

ESPINO:

Well, on that note I think we're going to stop. Thank you so much. That was wonderful. [End of interview]

SESSION EIGHTMay 12,2010

00:00:40

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is May 12 [2010]. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the East Los Angeles Library in East Los Angeles.

Last time we finished off talking about your experiences during the Chicano movement, especially with the Chicano moratorium. So I want to move into your transition from the scholarship that you developed, the curriculum that you developed with the Kellogg Foundation and how you got involved in the union. But you said you had a detour before you took that position with the union. Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

00:12:41

HOLGUÍN:

Well, during the fourth year of working at Cal Poly Pomona, I was beginning to have some reservations about what we were doing, because some of the stuff that we were doing was not being published for use in the public domain as it was supposed to, and the director, through the advice of Mr. Leonard, who was his mentor, had decided that we should be going into the production of materials, bilingual-bicultural materials, for Native Americans, for Chinese, for Korean, and for--there was another group that he wanted to target.

And my concern and reservation stemmed from the fact that while I had learned considerable gains in the area of curriculum development and curriculum writing, I did not feel comfortable using that and applying it to other languages and other cultures. My understanding, as I had experienced in life, is that if we're going to start in those areas, inevitably people who were familiar to that culture and those languages would be coming in and taking over, and it was already evident. Because I had looked at some of the materials they were developing, and they were very sophisticated too, and their concerns were very much along the lines of Americanizing the kids, very much dealing with the history of the U.S., with the language in the sense that they're in a different country, they're not going to go back to their country, and therefore they need to do this.

Whereas in the Spanish, we were still dealing with culture as it's constantly being fed through immigration. You have people immigrating from different Latin countries every day, and the language is being used every day, evident when you look at newspapers. In those years, there were still many theaters that were showing Spanish-language movies and also we have many radio stations, many TV stations, and I figured that the rest of it was going to be true with other languages. And now that we're in 2010, it is evident. With the new system that we have now in television, to me from what I've seen, there are more Asian-language TV stations than there are Spanish-language TV stations. They've just proliferated to an extent that they're all very sophisticated, and their effort is not just to Americanize but to let the people who watch their program also know about their languages and their cultures in their own countries, which I think is a bigger step than what we've done.

And so in that context, by the time that we finished writing the proposal, and I was given the task to research what was available in all those languages and cultures, so I knew, and I said, "We don't stand a chance." But anyhow, we used to talk among ourselves in the staff, and someone in the staff told the director, "You know, Mr. Holguín is not very crazy about going into this next stage of the program." And by the time we got to the last day, they pulled something on me that was very interesting. Because just the week before, the university had given me an award in recognition for the so-called outstanding work that I had done and the contributions I had done to bilingual education, and the director had given me a certificate also acknowledging that.

And then on the last day of work, we were really just winding up, packing our stuff, because at that time we didn't know if we were going to be funded. The day went by. People were given their last check and were let go, and here we were approaching five o'clock and they hadn't called me. So finally about five or seven minutes to five, I'm called into the director's office. The production coordinator is there with him, John Figueroa, and they asked me to close the door, and at that time they begin to lecture me on the fact that I haven't been cooperative, that I have been bad-mouthing the program, that I have not been an asset to the program, and they were going on and on. And essentially what they were saying was that even though I had just been given an evaluation two weeks before, that they had to give you an evaluation at the end of the program. It was evident to me that they were going to keep going on and on, and I really did not understand why John Figueroa was there, but I indicated that I resented that, because he was not my superior. And as I realized that they were going to go on, I looked at my watch. It turned five o'clock and I said, "My day is over. If you want to talk between the two of you, fine, but goodbye," and I left them.

Obviously at that time I had not looked for a job. So I went home, told my wife what had happened. She was shocked, because she didn't think Bob was that kind of a person, or John for that matter. And the question was, what do I do now? And I said, "Well, I can look for a job and see what comes up." So I found out that the county had openings in the Department of Public Social Services, so I went to the personnel office and put in my application. I came back, and I had been involved as a volunteer with the Urban League. Found out that they needed staff, and I went and talked to the director, and he referred me to Abraham Live, who was the director of the community organizing. Talked to him. He liked, I guess, what he heard, and they gave me a job right on the spot. So the following day I went to work.

The job with the Urban League was interesting in the sense that I was working mostly in the northwest area of Pasadena, which is predominantly black, and, of course, the Urban League serves that area of the community more than others. My job was to organize the people into neighborhood groups, mostly to develop programs of what they thought they needed, and also to somehow apply political pressure to the city council so that we could get what we needed. And in that process, I found that I was very welcome in the homes. People were receptive of what the Urban League had to offer, so it was not difficult getting them to form community groups, neighborhood groups to meet and things.

The program was so successful, because apart from the visits to individual homes, we put out a newsletter, and Abraham liked what I was doing. And finding that a lot of Spanish-speaking people were coming to the Urban League office seeking help, because they provided employment service, they provide counseling, they provide all kinds of different services--they found out that they didn't have any Spanish speakers except me. So along with everything else I was doing, they asked me to develop some kind of a bilingual program for them. I was willing to oblige, so we set aside a couple of hours every day to meet, and I would teach them basic Spanish and basic spelling and writing so that they would know how we were talking, and that way we could put a little Spanish information in the newsletter as well.

That job lasted from about June thirtieth to September. By September I had already gone for an interview, and I had already been offered a job with the Department of Public Social Services. So as much as I hated to part, because it was fun and it was interesting, but I wanted a more permanent job with better benefits and all that, I had to give them notice and part company with them.

Along that time that we were with the Urban League, we also found someone that came from San Francisco, and we did some murals. One, as far as I know, still remains, or half of it anyway, but we did four murals.

ESPINO:

In the Pasadena area?

00:18:43

HOLGUÍN:

They're in the area where I live. One was right in the building of the Urban League, on the sidewalk, on Garfield. Problem is that over the years, graffiti started taking over the bottom part of the mural, and finally the people that are using it now, which is a restaurant, they painted it one solid color. The Urban League moved elsewhere and is doing services somewhere else.

So I went to work for the County of Los Angeles. I started as an eligibility worker. I was interviewed by the director of the Metro East office on Olympic and very soon I found that the shop stewards from the union [Service Employee International Union] were shop stewards really just in name. One day finally one of them approached me and asked me if I would be willing to join the union. I asked for information. I liked what I heard. I signed up, and the head shop steward got very upset because I should have gone to her, but she never even said hello to me.

Needless to say, very soon I found out that things weren't going the way they were, so I got involved in my workplace, and people liked what they heard. The union staff liked what they heard, and pretty soon they offered

to have elections, because there were a lot of complaints about the head steward. When we had elections, I got elected shop steward, and very shortly afterwards I was going to union meetings. I was learning a lot of what were the rights of workers. I was learning their by-laws, and I was asking questions. One of the main questions that I was asking, for example, was why does the staff do the negotiating of our contract, when we are the ones who know what the work entails?

So the other question that I was raising was, why do we have a stewards' council of only stewards from the department, when there are so many departments in the county, and all stewards should know what other stewards are facing. Those two questions were integrated into the ongoing question by others, until it became a reality that we had a steward council where I became the chairperson later on, where we had stewards from all the different departments, which is the way it should have been from the beginning.

Also, over the years the question of why does the staff have to do our negotiating for them got stronger and stronger until we pushed for training, because I went to training on my own and learned that there are a lot of legal questions that can be dealt with and asked in negotiating that most of the time were not being used. And so I suggested that our negotiating team be trained by professionals, because the county had its own professional people in the bargaining unit. And so we did that and inevitably over the years we also became a union where the negotiating team is made up of people that work with the county or in a different department, and they negotiate their own contracts now.

What we have now is a bargaining policy committee which is made up of people from the different bargaining units and having one representative in the bargain policy committee from each department, and they are the ones that decide that. Because the other thing that I also said, why do we have to work along the same way the county works? See, the county would negotiate by departments, and so we were broken down by departments, and our contracts were by departments, and I asked the question, why don't we have a master contract? "Well, what do you mean? That can't be done." I said, "Yes, it can. We all have common issues, and all those common issues could be dealt with in a master contract. The only thing is there may be some exceptions, and the question of salaries, because there are different backgrounds and different types of training and education in different departments. For example, nurses would require some special articles in their contract, but for the most part, the bargaining policy committee should serve as the one to start doing common language, so that we can develop a master contract." We now have a master contract.

ESPINO:

Were you part of that original struggle?

00:21:05

HOLGUÍN:

So I was the one that contributed to bringing about the changes. As a shop steward, I guess I began to stand up and stand out among shop stewards because of the things that I said at meetings and the things that I did. And so came the time when three years after I was working for the county, the union called me and offered me a position as a staff person, as an organizer. They were not called organizers at that time, though. That's another one of my doings. They were called business agents. And so I was told what I would do, and since we had in our contract a clause that said that the county could release us for one year to go and work for the county, and we could come back without loss of fringe benefits or accrued sick time and everything else, I thought it would be a good experience.

And so I went to work for the union, and that one year was exciting, because it was a negotiating year, so it was one in which we had to go and organize. The union staff was also set up the same way as the county is. We had so many business agents for the health services, so many business agents for public services, so many business agents like so on, and for the Department of Public Social Services we had five, okay. Two had been there for some time, and three of us were hired under the contract clause. It was Emmett Brown, and there was Soledad Bermudez, a fine lady, great organizer, and myself.

ESPINO:

And these were people who were county workers, county employees working in public service, social service, and they took one year off to focus on being a staff member of the union. That's so interesting.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. It's still being done now, but it's done now on a large scale. Now they call them lost-timers.

ESPINO:

They call them what?

HOLGUÍN:

Lost-timers. They lose time in the county for one year, but they go and they get paid salary and fringe benefits from the union.

ESPINO:

Well, tell me about the benefit. I mean, it seems like you would get something out of that experience.

00:23:15

HOLGUÍN:

Well, what we would get really is that we would get a salary a little bit higher than what county pays. The fringe benefits were much better. Holidays were the same as county. Retirement was very good. And, of course, we had pretty much a system, which has changed, hopefully, but at that time we had what they call a director of each department. That was broken down according to county departments. And the director really did nothing but stay in the office and tell us what we needed to do, very reluctant to go [unclear].

Let me tell you what happened. One of the things that happened was that I was assigned north county, which included Pasadena, Glendale, Lincoln Heights, Santa Clarita, Lancaster, what else?

ESPINO:

Palmdale?

00:25:46

HOLGUÍN:

No. There was another one up in north county that I had too. Palmdale had a children's services department--and San Fernando, oh, and West Valley out in Canoga Park. Interestingly enough, the director of the Canoga Park and West Valley was also the director of the San Fernando and one in Santa Clarita, which were like self-offices. Very interesting arrangement, because the directors in the self-offices were actually supervisors. But the director kept pretty tight control. She visited regularly, and the supervisors were very accountable to her. She ran her department with a very strong hand, but she was also very respectful of the union and of the workers, so I had good relations with her. We arranged, as soon as I was able to find out what the arrangement was, to agree that they will bring all their shop stewards to one of the offices, and we will have a meeting once a week, and she would be there, so that way we would deal with three offices.

And by the way, that was the only office that I was able to arrange to meet the director and all the shop stewards. Later on I was able to arrange in Lancaster as well, because they had a big issue with smoking over there, big issue. I had to work with that, and we needed to negotiate, because the people that wanted non-smoking were very steadfast in their position, and the ones that wanted to smoke wanted the right to smoke, and we had to figure how to favor both sides.

ESPINO:

Well, what were the objectives of the union having you work for them? Did they give you a training? What did they tell you? What did they want you to achieve?

00:30:25

HOLGUÍN:

No, no training. I demanded training, because I said, "The union must have some guidelines. The employees of the county must have some rights, that I need to know. There must be some legal issues that are outstanding that we have to go by, and there are certain things that we have to look for as we visit the workplace." And so the response from the director, who I'm not afraid to say this, although some people may not like it--he had been a very bad eligibility worker, and he was a very bad director. But his response to my demand was, "Here's the stuff. Read it." So he gave me legal documents, he gave me manuals, he gave me all kinds of stuff to read, and I had to learn on my own, which was fine. That helped me become a good man. I learned how to do grievances, how to do representation at civil service hearings, and, of course, learn to start training people at bargaining, because I didn't like what they were doing to me when I was in the bargaining unit.

The first year was really organizing, getting people to understand the contract. And, of course, in organizing for the union, at that time organizing meant get an application from county employees so they pay their dues. That was what they called organizing. To me, organizing was, get the people to sign up and then learn what their rights are, and learn to demand that the rights be respected. And, of course, along with that, on my own standard, learn to be a good employee, because if you are a good worker, you'll never be in trouble. And there was that question. Many times I was asked to spend time representing people that were always getting in trouble, or people that weren't doing their work, or people that had problems with attendance, or people that, to me, had no legitimate gripe as far as anything to do with their employer.

There was one shop steward who wanted to file a grievance every time the director didn't respond to her, "Good morning," for violating her civil rights. That was her particular grievance. And that shop steward had twenty-seven grievances in one year. Can you imagine that? And I told the staff at the local when we had meetings, which was every Friday morning, "There has to be something that does not force us to represent someone who is not representable, because there are grievances that are not legitimate grievances, that are really something that just wants to give an employee a chance to give management a hard time, and keep us busy." So I began to learn to weed out people that had grievances that I considered were not that great. I said, "I would represent you, but be forewarned that that grievance is not going to go very far. Because in the first place, we're going to need to talk to management and try to resolve that before it becomes a grievance." And that became my style.

ESPINO:

Was that union protocol, or was that your personal way of doing it? Because I'm assuming that there's a protocol that you follow once someone submits a grievance and then with a procedure.

00:34:29

HOLGUÍN:

Well, no. There is supposed to be a protocol, but since shop stewards don't get trained, many times it's, okay, you're a shop steward. They're not told what to do, okay. So many of them will file a grievance and then we find out later. See, so protocol became one in which I said, "If you perceive that something is wrong, you talk to me. I'll take notes. I'll make arrangements so that we can meet with management and see if it can be resolved before it becomes a grievance." And most of the time it could be resolved, because many times management didn't know that a particular employee didn't like what was going on, or didn't realize that was in trouble.

And so I got to have very good relations with almost all the directors in the area of the county where I was assigned. My organizing skills, I guess, got polished up more, because I already had trouble, and I had experience organizing to the point where when we had to have a hearing at USC, and we were going to be

talking about whether we'd call for a strike or not, I brought three buses from Lancaster full of employees. And, of course, Phil Giarizzo, who was the general manager at the time, was very pleased, because I brought a lot of people from the other areas as well, and he said that had never happened.

But one of the things that I had to do was that as I went to the sites in the beginning, I was getting the cold shoulder. Shop stewards were avoiding me. They were showing very openly that they didn't trust me, and I had to confront them with that. I said, "What is the problem, that I'm being treated like that?" I said, "You don't even know me, and you are treating me with some hostility." So I found out that my predecessor in north county had been a lady who for over a year had been selling real estate on union time, and so she was not taking care of business, and people were angry with her. She had good communications with some of the contact people in each worksite, and that's how she found out what was going on, but she wasn't doing much work with anybody.

And so I had to tell my director. I told my director, "Look. This is what I found, and this is what we need." I said, "Particularly at East Valley," which is in Panorama City. I said, "They want to talk to someone in the union." So very reluctantly he went, and to make sure that he went, I took him in my car. I heard some interesting things about him from his personal life that gave me a better insight about him, but when we got to East Valley, he heard what people had to say, and he had to offer apologies for what had happened, because I had nothing to do with it, okay.

ESPINO:

How many people did you find? I mean, this is, what, two years into your work with the county?

HOLGUÍN:

No. That was the first year.

ESPINO:

The very first year.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. My area covered about eighteen hundred employees.

ESPINO:

But I mean, you started working with the union in 1980. Is that correct?

HOLGUÍN:

No, with the county.

ESPINO:

With the county I mean. With the county in 1980, and then you become a shop steward, and then you take a year off--

HOLGUÍN:

In December of '83, I went to work for the union.

ESPINO:

So in that short period of time, what percentage, would you say, of people--I don't know if you can even put a percentage on it--were union members, union officials, shop stewards who weren't really putting their 100 percent into--

00:36:25

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. Like I said, part of the job of the business agent, as they were called then, was to recruit people to join the union. They weren't doing a very good job of that. So that in the contract, they had a clause that stated that when they reached twenty-three thousand members, they would get a big bonus. Well, during that time they never reached twenty-three thousand members, which is to say there were some workplaces where membership was less than 50 percent. But the interesting part of that was that when we came to negotiate a contract, we kept hearing a lot of negative stuff from those that were not members.

ESPINO:

Do you have any examples of the negative comments?

00:39:49

HOLGUÍN:

Well, "We didn't get much of a raise." We always heard the same thing. "The county always starts with takeaways," meaning takeaways from the contract, and we had to spend half of our negotiating period fighting the takeaways and all that, meaning that the union was not taking an aggressive stance as far as what the union membership wanted. And so by the time the first year came around, we had gotten a contract, and I was getting ready to go back to work for the county when Phil Giarizzo called me and asked me to please stay another year, because they needed to organize more, because they needed to get a better contract next time. In those years, they used to negotiate every three years, which wasted time.

Agreeing to that meant that I would have to give up my job with the county. I would have to resign, because county would not allow me a second year. So thinking that I might do some good at the union, I agreed, and I stayed a second year. Interestingly enough, Soledad Bermudez agreed to it also, and so did the other fellow. I keep forgetting his name. So we started our second year, and in the second year we came out with a plan. Our plan was that instead of each one of us having a section of the county to take care of, two days a week we would get together, all five of us at one site, and talk to everyone at their desk and start getting people to sign up.

We began to find out who were the organizers. We know that Soledad was a great organizer. Patsy Howard was the other one. Patsy Howard was a good organizer. I was a good organizer. But we had two people that were not. Charmaine Jacki was a white--they used to call her the white-hair lady. She had San Gabriel Valley. She was a poor organizer, and Emmett Brown was the other one. Emmett Brown was really not a good organizer. He couldn't even get the people out to the sidewalk to march for ten minutes.

ESPINO:

Can you tell me about a typical organizing day? What would you do, like from the morning till the end of the day? Like blow by blow.

00:41:58

HOLGUÍN:

Well, part of the requirement of the staff was, we had to visit every worksite every week. So for me, it meant driving seventy-five miles to Lancaster once a week, and usually I would hit Lancaster first in the morning. Then I would come to Santa Clarita or canyon country, and then San Fernando, and that would be it. Another time I would visit Canoga Park, Glendale, and Pasadena. We also had to set time aside to write grievances, to prepare for hearings and all of that. But typically we spent a good portion of our time driving, because county is pretty big, and for me, covering that whole territory was very time consuming and very hard on my car. But, yes,

we had to talk to people, tell them what was going on, try to arrange to have a meeting with them and get the shop steward to get them, "Okay, we're going to meet at the lunchroom," or wherever, "and we're going to talk about what's going on." And the more you talk to people about what's going on, the better you could get people to think, "Okay, I want to be part of what's going on."

But when we went the second year, we started doing, like I said, visiting a workplace, all of us, and that way we'd come out of there and we said, okay. We counted before we parted company, said, how many pink cards did we get? Pink cards being the applications. So we began to average about one hundred a week.

ESPINO:

Wow.

00:44:31

HOLGUÍN:

I can tell you that there was no organizing prior to this. And the more we came up, we realized, this is getting to be fun, and it's getting to be productive. When our director found out about it, he got upset, but when the general manager found out about it, he was elated. So he called for a staff meeting, and he said, "Everybody's going to be doing what DPSS people are doing. You're going to be bringing me pink cards. You're going to organize." Of course, they didn't know how we were doing it, but he said, "You're going to organize, and you start bringing in--." So the staff of all the other departments resented us, because we had one business agent who used to go to General Hospital, and she used to brag about how she did it. She'd go to General Hospital, set up a table in one of the hallways, let the shop steward know that I'm here so that people who want to see me about anything, they can come and see me.

And I suppose that similar styles were prevalent elsewhere, because Charmaine Jacki was well known, was well known in the sense that she was sociable, she was very talkative, and she was always making deals with the directors, deals that were not always welcomed by other people. I'll give you an example. A particular employee was giving a director a hard time, and the director didn't know what to do with it, because grievances were coming in and they were always having problems with it, and Charmaine would offer them, "Well, you know, why don't we transfer this to such-and-such other place, and I'll bring you somebody else in exchange?" Making deals like that, so giving bad people somewhere else and bringing them another bad [unclear]. But she was very likable. I loved Charmaine, but she was not a good organizer, and she was not a good grievance solver either.

ESPINO:

Well, can you talk to me about the characteristics of a good organizer? What would you consider a good organizer?

00:48:11

HOLGUÍN:

Well, a good organizer--I was getting to that. But let me tell you, for example, what is not a good organizer, and I suspect that to this date it still might be going on, although many of those people are gone. But the advice that I was given by the staff that was there when I went to work for the union was, "You know, this is a good job. You don't have to work too hard. You don't even have to come to work on time. You can leave and go home early. You can take long lunch hours." And I took this under my wing, but I said, "That is not for me. I'm hired here to do a job, so I'm going to do it." As I understood, my job was to visit each worksite every week, to touch base with every shop steward every week, to give them information that was new, to take whatever leaflets I had and get the shop steward to help me pass them around to everybody, and the union is always producing leaflets, to talk to people about joining the union, because joining the union means that you'll get this and that.

Except that part of the problem with that is that even those who were not paying union dues, once we got a contract, they would benefit from whatever we were able to get on the contract, and for those that didn't pay their union dues, oftentimes whatever we got was not enough, could have gotten more. And so when we started organizing, we said, "You know, people should have the right to gripe about what they didn't get, but they should also contribute to help us get what we want." And I had to sell people the notion that the union was not a place in downtown Los Angeles, that the union was not their business agent, that the union was them, and that the more we had as union members, the more strength we had and the more pressure we could put on the county to get what we wanted. See, to me that was organizing, and to me, in order to do that, you had to put on a full day.

Oftentimes I had to go to the union office to get my grievances and arrange my hearings to a second, third level, after work hours. I didn't go home every day at five o'clock. Oftentimes I ended up at the union office and worked two or three hours extra, which was fine, but that's what the job entailed. Eight hours is not enough if you're going to be a good organizer, because you get pretty good money, and you should put out good work in return. Of course, I have a work ethic that not everybody has. To me, I've always been a responsible employee no matter what job I took.

ESPINO:

Well, let me just say, then, that brings up an issue for me, and that is, what about a single mom who's an organizer and who has children at home? I mean, do you think that she still should fit those same expectations of working ten-hour days, to be a good organizer?

00:55:23

HOLGUÍN:

Well, Sol Bermudez had two kids, and she was a good organizer, and she put in her time. It's just how much of a commitment you have to the job. But, yes, she used to talk a lot about her kids. She used to talk about sometimes neglecting the kids. But she was such an exceptional lady that after working and taking care of her kids, she would do things like laying tiles on her kitchen, fix up the cabinets, pour cement on her walk. She was that kind of a lady. And inevitably, when I resigned from the union, she resigned too, because she says, "I have no match or anyone to share things and experiences with." So she went to work for a bus company, and as far as I know, she's still working for the bus company out in the Long Beach area.

But, yes, the work is hard. You don't work your finger to the bone, but your time is very valuable, especially when you spend so much time driving. But once you train shop stewards, and this is the key, training your shop

stewards relieves you of a lot of work that you were doing. For example, once you get the shop stewards to understand, "Look. I'm going to be there at a certain time. I want to meet with all of you." And you go and you say, "I've got these stacks of leaflets here. You distribute this in here." Then you count on them doing that, and that frees you to do other things, like talking to people that are reluctant to join the union, that are questioning things in their contract, that want to know about their rights because their supervisor in on their back or harassing them or whatever.

And as a business agent, you deal with a lot of stuff, and sometimes stuff that is unreal. For example, county has a requirement that each employee has to get an annual evaluation. Oftentimes, employees don't know how they're doing for two or three years, and when they get an evaluation, it's late and it's negative. And the contract says that if you have not received an evaluation on a yearly basis and it's late, they have to give you at least competent, at least. So I told people, "Demand that you get your evaluation on time. Demand that you meet with your supervisor at least once a month," because the county has forms in which you meet with your subordinates and you say, "Okay, how are you doing in this area here? Do you need any help?" Or, "I feel you need help." You annotate and you have like about seven questions in which you're really rating the work of each subordinate. And in that context, when you finish the interview, your subordinate signs and you sign, and in that signature there is an agreement that, I need help in this area, and I agree to help in that area. And then we have to have a plan how you're going to help. So supervisors within the county, they also have responsibilities that they're not fulfilling. And I'll tell you how that happened later on.

I learned a lot during the period that I was a business agent. The second year, like I say, we were very successful in organizing, and that gave rise to another concern that we had, which was, how do we reach that twenty-three thousand? And I said, "It's easy. All you have to do--look at what we are doing." So later on I went to work for the county, but before that, like I said, I established a good rapport with the general manager. I even got involved with the board of directors. That's how I knew Luis Duran, who is now the chair of the seniors committee. I got to know a lot of the people, because when we negotiated, since I was on the negotiating team, during the two years that I was working with the union, they got me to represent them in negotiating with the board of directors of the union. So I knew how they functioned, and all of that was, I mean, a tremendous learning experience for me.

And I found that the reason they wanted was [unclear] confront the board, didn't want to confront the general manager, because he was the lead negotiator and he was rough. But also, they wanted too much. I mean, the contract, if you look at their contract, well, if you look at their contract of those years, they almost expected a 10 percent raise on a yearly basis, which is not realistic. They wanted more money, they wanted more benefit, more time off, more everything. And so we had to negotiate and then come back to them and say, "This is what they offer." "Well, that's not--go back and fight some more." And it got to the point where finally the board said, "Look. This is your last, best, and final offer." And then we had to take a vote on it or go on strike.

What is unusual about working for our union was that we had a staff where they had a union within the union. The clerical staff has a union, and the field staff has a union.

ESPINO:

Different numbers? It's all SEIU [Service Employees International Union].

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. Well, they're not SEIU. They're URLA [United Representatives of Los Angeles]. It used to be United Representatives of Los Angeles.

ESPINO:

That's the clerical staff.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. But they were not affiliated with any international union, interestingly enough. Somewhere along the line, someone was weak. They said, "We want a union." They said, "Okay, go ahead." And since then they've had to recognize the union. Other unions don't have a union within the union.

ESPINO:

So they're both? They're both SEIU and URLA?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, they are now. In those years I remember Gilbert Cedillo saying that they were SEIU union too, but they're not, because they never paid union dues. They pay union dues to URLA, not to SEIU, and this was a thing that later on I told Gilbert and I told some of the business agents later on, like Carlos Montes. Carlos Montes wanted to be involved with the union and going to the conventions and all that, and wanted to vote, and I told Carlos this in Puerto Rico when we did the Latino caucus. He wanted to vote and I said, "Carlos, you can't vote." "But I'm union." I said, "You're URLA union, you're not SEIU." He said, "But I am." I said, "Well, show me you are a union member." Later on he asked me, and I said, "If you want to be an SEIU member, you have to arrange to join SEIU and arrange for the local to take out union dues to pay to the international."

ESPINO:

Did he do it?

00:57:20

HOLGUÍN:

Well, it's 1 percent of your salary.

ESPINO:

Did he do it??

00:59:54

HOLGUÍN:

No. He got fired very shortly thereafter, but that's another story. So our involvement with the union was very good in that sense. What came out of that, okay, was that after the second year, I told Phil Giarizzo, "I don't think I want to stay. I don't want to go through another period of organizing and getting ready for contract negotiations and all that." And he said, "What's wrong with contract negotiations?" And I told him. I said, "You know, we have our director being the head table in our negotiations. We're not allowed to say anything. We're not even allowed to frown. If we want to say anything, we have to pass him a little note, 'Let's caucus.'" You'll call for a caucus and we'll go and meet somewhere else, if he feels like it. And to me, the county has to hear from us, because the employees are the ones that can say, "Look. This is how I'm getting screwed." I said, "He doesn't have the same, because he was [unclear] and he left for whatever reason." I said, "So he doesn't know what the working conditions are. He doesn't know what we hear as shop stewards and as bargaining unit committee members from our people at the worksite." I said, "That's who we're representing." He said, "Well, but you know, it's pretty hard to train everybody." I go, "No, it's not. All you have to do is to want to train them."

So earlier in that last year, another one of the things that we did was provide training for the shop stewards. We used to have them come in. We'd meet at Patriotic Hall on Figueroa and we would set up a curriculum.

ESPINO:

Who developed the curriculum?

HOLGUÍN:

[unclear].

ESPINO:

You developed it.

01:03:40

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. The rest of the staff said, "I never thought of that." I said, "Well," I said, "you know, we're in a new era. We're in the twentieth century. Audiovisuals are the thing to do." They're still working with butcher paper on an easel and then throwing the paper away and forgetting it. I said, "You know, people get excited when they do something else." So one day I said, well--when they heard what we were doing in DPSS, there was a lady that had used to work for the farmworkers that was working under Phil Giarizzo, who told him, Phil, she said, "Well, can you give us an example one day to the staff?" I said, "Well, how much time do you want to give me?" So I said, "Okay." So I went home, started putting things together and all that, and I came and they went crazy. It never had occurred to them--I said, "Look. See this clock here? You can use it as a visual. See this? You can use it. There's a lot of stuff you can use audiovisual. People are already accustomed to that just by watching TV." I said, "You know, most of us are intelligent enough that we don't have to sit there and listen to someone talk at us." I said, "That's old." And so that was my contribution to the union.

In the sense of other things, I returned to work with the union after the second year, with all the knowledge that I had acquired, all the experience, and then I decided, well, I'm going to just do shop steward now. Then my wife [Rosario Holguín] comes one day and says to me, "You know, being a shop steward is not enough. We've got problems in the union." I said, "What problem?" "Well, do you know that this is going on? Do you know that this is going on?" I said, "Well, to some extent," I said, "but that's [unclear]." I said, "You know, Latinos didn't start working for the county until recently, so naturally you have a lot of blacks and a lot of whites, and they dominate almost every department." She said, "Well, that's going to have to change, because we're not even given a voice on the board. The board doesn't let us address them on issues." I said, "Okay."

So it got to where at one time one board member told Rosario--I mean, they'd been going at it now for a while, after every meeting, after every meeting, and then Alejandro [Stephens] had been appointed, because in those years, the board appointed or elected the president of the board. He was not elected by the people. The board had elected Alejandro, but only because they had something else in mind. They didn't have Alejandro in mind to be the permanent president. They wanted him to be there for a purpose, and then they wanted to kick him out and put somebody else.

ESPINO:

What purpose was that?

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I don't know if you [unclear], but Alejandro's been in the news. All those are allegations from the people that were there at the time on the board.

ESPINO:

That was what year?

01:08:08

HOLGUÍN:

That was the year 1992, but it had been going on for some time. I knew some of those board members. In fact, one of them, after I got involved, threatened to kill me, because they messed up with the wrong people. Alejandro, as an interim president, wanted to appoint a Chicana from the worksite where Rosario was working, and I was working there too. And each time it came to dealing with the appointment, they had already been going at it for two, three hours, and it was time to go home, and so they would postpone it for the next meeting. And finally it got to a point where Rosario started trying to get more people to go and see what was going on.

And so one day one of the black ladies her, says, "I don't know why you keep coming over here. You Mexicans don't even have a right to be here." Wrong message. Rosario came and said, "We need your help." I said, "Okay. Let me go and see what's going on." I went to the next meeting. I saw what was going on. I didn't like it. I tried to voice my opinion. They didn't let me. I tried to get a little piece of celery to munch on, because they used to have these big platters with nice vegetables and fruits on the board of directors table, and somebody said, "This is for the board." I said, "Isn't this paid for by union members' dues?" "Well, yes." I said, "Then it's mine too," and I grabbed another one. And then everybody started going, and we started, in their view, harassing them, because we started asking to be allowed to speak, and why wouldn't Chris Salcido be appointed? Why wouldn't they confirm the appointment of Chris Salcido? Because I think by that time, she was the only Latina that was going to be on the board, and they didn't want a Latina there.

And then so I started bringing people from my worksite. I started calling people from El Monte and from Glendale, and we started filling the board room with people, because they were all supposed to be open meetings. And the board room was large, but once you put about thirty or forty more people in there, it's crowded. And it got to the point where one day they called the police on us, and the police came. We went and talked to them. "Oh," he says, "this is a union disagreement," and they left.

But out of that came what we then called a CDU, was a Committee for a Democratic Union. It was not an official committee of the union, but it was a committee made out of union members who were displeased with what was going on. And guess who organized that? Rosario. Of course I was behind that, because I've always supported her. But they had Rosario Holguín, they had Bobbie Helms, who was a nurse, a black lady, and we had Donna Meredith, a white lady from Hall of Records. So we had three ladies represent heading the CDU. Now, these other people had been already sending out leaflets, anonymous.

ESPINO:

What people?

01:24:45

HOLGUÍN:

Well, these people that didn't want us around, who were disturbing--the three ladies that I just mentioned, they put their name on every pamphlet that went out, and we started having fundraisers to run more leaflets, and we had people distributing all over the county. I mean, when we organized, we organized every department, without the blessings of the union. We became the CDU. The name was later adapted by San Francisco, some union over there. But anyhow, the organizing took us about four months, but each time it got stronger and it got worse for the board. The board, they were trying to now start calling emergency meetings away from there so we wouldn't know where they were, but we always had a couple of people that would let us know what was going on.

And finally we got into a campaign calling national headquarters, sending letters to the president of the international, and before long the international president appointed someone to be a hearing officer and come to Los Angeles and start setting places to hear the grievance, which was us, and the board, who was them. And it was like Congress. It was on the other side of the aisle at these hearing sessions was the board and a few of their allies, and on the other side, the majority of the people were the members that had something to say against the board. They were spending money without wanting to be accountable.

And after a series of hearings, I was almost disappointed what was going on, because it seemed to me that the board members and their allies had a stronger voice in the eyes of the hearing officer than we did. And so on the last session I left, and I told the hearing officer, "I don't have much faith in what went on." He said, "Well, don't lose your faith." He said, "Wait till you hear from the president." The task of the hearing officer was to give a report to the president with his recommendations.

Shortly thereafter, we heard that the international president had appointed a trustee, who came down with the authority to fire all the staff, to disband the board, to change all the locks in the thing, and really, he became the figurehead of the union, and his task was to start talking to the people on the board, to the people in the CDU, and to the membership at large, and get at the truth of what was going on. What came out of all that was the change that we wanted. The recommendation was that we needed change in our union, and we began by displacing the board, displacing the staff. Then little by little the trustee--I have a picture of the trustee too--began to hire staff one by one, after an interview. In other words, if you're okay, you can come back to work.

And then we rewrote the by-laws. I mean, we rewrote the by-laws to a point where they began to look like a union by-laws and a constitution, and in those by-laws, we wrote a process by which people could get elected to office, including the requirements to be eligible to run for office, and the procedures and the dates and everything else. And we had then an election in which we were going to vote on the by-laws, and the officers were going to be nominated, and then once they got nominated, a newspaper of the union would have our picture and our platform and everything else, and then people would vote. And they did vote by hiring an independent company that comes in, that we don't touch the ballots at all.

This company would mail out the ballots. The ballot would come to them. The day that we count the ballots, it would be in the presence of any member that wanted to be present. They'd break the seal on the envelope there. They put the ballots in a certain order so they could run them through a computer, and then you watch the computer do its job. And at the end of the whole thing, they announce the results. Some of these malcontents keep saying that Alejandro [Stephens]--because Alejandro for fifteen years was the president. He got elected, reelected, reelected, reelected, and they kept saying that he manipulated the elections. There's no way. How can you manipulate eighty-five thousand county employees that get a ballot in the mail and then they mail it somebody else? It was not--but all the people that ran for him year after year after year lost, except maybe a

couple that would win one or two positions. But for president, no one could beat him, because Alejandro had a good idea of what a campaign is.

But anyhow, I recall that before we had that election, we had another election which was one that a board member moved to have the membership decide if we wanted the board to hire Gilbert Cedillo for general manager, or somebody else, okay. And I remember Jim Green made that motion, and the rest of the board had an option to name somebody else to run against Gilbert, okay. And maybe they did, I don't recall. But anyhow, what I remember, and I had this on video, what I remember was that we had county officials present at Patriotic Hall; and international union president was present; we had from the state council people present; and, of course, we had the membership was present there too. And the idea was that at this time we were turning in the ballots, and people that had collected ballots, sealed ballots, had to bring them in.

What they didn't know was that there was a clause that people could vote by proxy, and people were bringing--oh, so-and-so brought in ten ballots, so-and-so brought in twenty-three ballots, I brought in about fifteen, and then Rosario comes in with eight hundred and some ballots. And needless to say, the vote was favorable to Gilbert at that time, and this is significant because by that, later on we had the conflict with Gilbert, because Gilbert later on, after we had the regular elections according to the new by-laws--Alejandro got elected president. I got elected board member and later on appointed to the executive committee of the board. But there was a conflict constantly between Gilbert Cedillo and Alejandro Stephens. Gilbert Cedillo kept arguing that he didn't need a contract because he was elected by the people. And I kept saying to him, "Gilbert, the people voted to have the board hire you to be the general manager. You are an employee." He had difficulty understanding that. He constantly kept challenging Alejandro, and, inevitably, that was his downfall, because later on other things happened, but I'm not there yet.

Under the new structure, of course, since we argued for a democratic union, we tried to keep our promise that it was going to be a democratic union, and people were invited to come to meetings. We started having meetings away from the local at the Carpenters Hall in El Monte, up in the valley and all that, to allow people from those areas to come to the general-membership meetings. Rather than having one general-membership meeting once a year, we wanted to have general memberships every month.

One thing that I got only once, and that was the one where I was disappointed with Alejandro, was that I wanted our general-membership meeting to have an open forum for the membership. I said, "We don't want to be accused of doing the same thing that the other board did." I said, "People should have the right to say what they have to say." But we had one--the board couldn't deal with it, because there were so many things coming at him from everywhere, so they decided to go the traditional way, have general-membership meetings where they become information. "This is what we're doing for this, this is what we're doing with that, this is what we're going to do for that, this is what we want from you," and as such, people didn't have much of a say, and attendance, I guess, began to drop.

But I remember that one at the Carpenters Hall in El Monte. It was jammed, and people voiced their opinions, and that's what I wanted to see, because I figure if it is our union, let it be our union. But, yes, we implemented many things. We allowed many committees to be created. Among them we created the ethnic committee, and we created the African American committee, the Latino committee, the handicap committee, we called it ADA. We have about twenty-three altogether, standing committees. Well, the standing committees and other committees. And Alejandro's concern on that is that each committee be chaired by a member of the board, not somebody else. You could elect [unclear] and treasurers and whatever else.

And each one of those committees would be allocated a certain amount of money from the board to function and [unclear] and have something that we started out, because I said, "If this board allow themselves the luxury of having that, we need to keep in mind that most of our members that come to the board meeting come straight from work." And being what it is, that in the beginning our meetings used to last four or five hours, we had to have something to eat. And so we started the practice of catering food at our board meeting and then later on at our committee meetings as well, because the same thing applied to people in the committee. They come from work and we stay two or three hours at the meeting, and we needed to have some nutrition.

So that was one of the things we started, and each committee was allocated--I think most committees were allocated five thousand dollars a year, and one committee, Human Rights Committee, gets allocated twenty-five thousand, because that was the committee that was kind of the head of all the other committees. But we functioned very well, except for the board, because some of the people that had been ousted were allowed to run again. They're still members, and some of them, about three got elected. I, well-intentioned, recommended to Alejandro that he appoint a couple of the people that we had ousted, just to show good faith and hoping that they learned their lesson and we could be more accountable. And then there were others that sided with one side or the other, so that the board from the beginning, even though we had two days of training on legal matters and all that, and we had a retreat at my recommendation, so that we could get to know each other, the board never functioned as a unity. From the very beginning, the board was kind of divided.

ESPINO:

Well, can I just stop you for a second, and I want to know a little bit more about Alejandro and what was his reputation before he was--

HOLGUÍN:

I'm getting to there.

ESPINO:

Okay. I mean, even before he became a leader, what did he do and how did you meet him?

01:31:04

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. Alejandro obviously was involved, because he was already on the board when he got selected president by the board. When I first met Alejandro was when I was working for the union. He was in the stewards' council, and I was impressed with his demeanor, with his expressed thoughts, his ideas, with recommendations for improving what they were doing. He always dressed in a businesslike manner, and so I respected Alejandro even before he was president, because, like I said, he behaved well, he represented well, he speaks well. And so when this discord began that caused the CDU to be created, Alejandro sided with us. He was not with the board.

And so later on when the elections came on and all that--and let me tell you, by the way, because obviously since we were not sanctioned by the union, the first thing we had to do was, where do we meet? And as we grew, we had to find bigger places to meet. We used to meet at Phillips, in the back room. We used to meet there, and by then we already twenty, thirty people. We used to meet at Patriotic Hall, but we couldn't pay the

rent all the time, and so at that time Maria Elena Durazo had become president of Local 11, which used to be on 3rd where the [unclear] school is now. That's where the union used to be. Very appropriate, eh? So we told her about it, and she agreed to let us meet. She said, "No matter when you want to meet, we'll find a place for you. If we're not having a meeting, you can use the auditorium."

So the interesting thing that happened was that as we did the CDU and we were having our meeting, from the beginning Gilbert Cedillo wanted to take over, and I had to put Gilbert in check by telling him, "You cannot run this meeting, because this is a members' meeting, and you are not a member." "Oh, but I am." I said, "Show me where you pay union dues to SEIU or Local 660." "Well--." "When you bring it in, we'll tell you, but right now we run the meeting." And so Alejandro was welcome, Gilbert was welcome to be there but not to be the leader of [unclear].

We had Khalif Saddam, who was at that time a DPSS [Department of Social Services] staff, a business agent, and apparently he had been promised by these malcontents to be the next general manager. And since we had our meetings open, anybody can come. We had some of the opposition used to come to our meetings, and I guess they wanted to know what we're doing, all that, but seeing that they could not influence what we were doing and that they were really not in accord with everything, most of them stopped going. But I remember Khalif Saddam came to one of our meetings and really crying made a confession to us that he felt that he was going to be the next general manager, because he had been promised by, among others, Ron Turner, and Tanner and some others on the old board. And they had no business promising him that, but he felt that, and after a while, he stopped coming to the meetings too.

So as our meetings progressed, we started meeting at Local 11, like I said, and that became our place of preference, because they had parking and they had plenty of space and all of that. And since Maria Elena had her office up on the second floor, we didn't bother her and she didn't bother us. And she happens to be a good friend of Gilbert's. I think they went to law school together.

So when we came out of all that and we had those elections where I told you Rosario came on with 864 proxy votes, [unclear] oh, my god, and the other people who were trying to keep the members from coming into the meeting said, "Well, we didn't know you could vote by proxy." I said, "Well, if you knew your by-laws, you would have known that."

ESPINO:

Was that her idea, the proxy? Whose idea was that?

HOLGUÍN:

No, it was on the by-laws of the local before.

ESPINO:

Right, but who was--someone had to suggest people vote by proxy, I'm assuming. Was that Rosario?

01:32:08

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I think it must have been a long time ago, because there was a time when people couldn't come to the meetings, but they could send their votes by somebody else. So, yes, it was there. I don't know how it--just like I don't know how they got to have a union. That happened at some point when they put pressure on some general manager who said, "Well, I don't want it, to hell with you." [unclear] Okay. Never was he to know that he was creating a monster.

But anyhow, after the elections, then we began to act as a union, but we had our problems. I remember our first meeting lasted past midnight, but mainly because we couldn't agree.

ESPINO:

And this is the new board you're talking about.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. All twenty-three members of the board.

ESPINO:

So even within the new members, you had conflict.

01:40:23

HOLGUÍN:

Well, remember, many of the people that were on the board before got elected again, and then, like I said, I recommended a couple of people who were in the opposition, which Alejandro on my advice appointed to vacant positions. And so from the onset, there was a percentage of the board members who were anti-Alejandro, and many of the members of the board who did not want agree with the other. And let me interject here, because this is still going on, and it goes along the color line, okay, black will vote on issues that blacks think are good for them. They will vote against issues that they don't think are good for them, never mind who they're good for. Sometimes there's one in common where we can all favor, but I remember that much of what went on was

argument.

Ron Tanner in particular, calling himself a parliamentarian, would continuously argue with Alejandro about parliamentary procedures, about questions of rule of order. Mr. Turner was another one of the blacks that was constantly, but behaved a little bit better, and we had others. Most of them are retired now, thank goodness. But most of these people that were anti-Alejandro then retired and are still anti-Alejandro. Ron Turner lives in Arizona, and whenever there's something that has to do with [unclear], he'll travel here just to have input and organize all the other people. So it was always a question, whenever someone got appointed, the blacks would [unclear] and want him to be on their side. They caucused very good on that. They lobbied very well on their issues, and I told Rosario, "We are the losing side, because we don't have enough Chicanos. We don't even have enough Latinos on the board that have backbone." They're there. Some of them are there because you get a stipend when they go to the meeting. Some of them go there because they got elected and they're popular, but they're not fighters. They don't argue.

Even to this date, our chairperson in the retirees, in the seniors group, he was a board president once for two terms. When it comes to blacks, he doesn't want any problems. Whatever they want, they'll get, and he won't take a position on that. And I told him, "But you are the chair. You have the right to either call a motion out of order." I mean when we have in our by-laws something that says only two people will go to the convention, and we vote on the two people and then seven other people say, 'Well, I want to go too.' And then they call their caucus and they vote on that and they all go. Two years ago we went in the red on our travel budget, the seniors, because everybody wants to go to the PRI, to the CBTU and all the black organizations that meet usually in the East Coast.

So on the board it's the same thing. Blacks--pretty much a good portion of the time, it's blacks against Latinos. And through appointments and all that, Alejandro managed to have the board fairly well balanced, so there would be blacks, whites, and Latinos. But like I say, unfortunately, most of the Latinos he appointed never really came out and fought, so the blacks have their way. I'll give you an example. When we had the hurricane in New Orleans, one of the black members wanted, instead of a ten thousand donation wanted a hundred thousand, because it's a black community, and she cursed everybody on the board that didn't vote for it. And, of course, we didn't have a hundred thousand dollars to give. We could contribute to organizations five thousand here, ten thousand there, because we need to keep supporting community groups and all of that, but we don't have the kind of money that you can buy anybody out there.

In that sense, the board functioned poorly. Alejandro functioned in spite of the board. He got all the things he wanted to do in spite of the opposition and in spite of all the obstacles that they presented before him. When we had, for example, the earthquake in Northridge, five of us on the board went to see the damage, to see what we could do. We went by the university, and I said, "Look." I said, "The last earthquake damaged the library very badly. Let's see what it did." Well, we weren't allowed in the university, because it was so damaged. So we went up Nordhoff about two blocks from the university, and the road that I remember being flat like that was like this [demonstrates]. So we went over that and there was a little restaurant there. We sat and by then we had been to Olive View and DPSS and to court and all that, and found that county employees somehow in their contract are required to provide assistance in case of a national emergency. And we asked, "What does the county have for you? Nothing."

So at that meeting there was Alejandro Stephens, there was Donna Meredith, there was myself, there was Gary Kemper from the courts, and there was a gentleman, I forget his name, who subsequently left county to go to work at the University of California in the Bay Area. What's that big university that's there?

ESPINO:

It's UC, UC of California?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes.

ESPINO:

Modesto? Davis?

01:43:39

HOLGUÍN:

It's another one; I forget. Anyhow, he went to work there. But we came up with the idea, well, we could have fundraisers, and out of that grew the notion that we could have a fundraiser and organize the county employees more. So we thought of the 5K run. So we kind of drew big plans and presented them to the board. The board was not--well, they were favorable but not very united, because we suggested to have it in July. They wanted to have it by Martin Luther King Day. And we said, "It's too soon. We don't have time to organize for that, and besides, Martin Luther King Day is in the winter. It's cold out there. We wanted to have it in the summer." And we wanted to have it like by the beach or someplace like that. So because we didn't want it on Martin Luther King Day and all of that, some of the blacks opposed it. To this day, they'll oppose it.

And so we said, "Okay. If you don't think it's a very good idea, we don't have the money to start. Can we borrow some money from the board?" So they agreed to let us borrow five thousand dollars, because you had to pay for leaflets, you had to pay for permits, you had to pay for a lot of other things. You had to pay central staff to help us with the particulars of the race, and so we started getting busy for that. We had our first race. I think the first year we only had about three hundred people. Unfortunately what we found in subsequent years is that not many county employees were involved, not many county employees were running or walking, but the regular runners and people that walk in other races loved it, because it was early in the morning, it was by the beach and all that. So our participation in the race grew year by year. We were able to repay the board their five thousand dollars, and by the third year we started making money. Unfortunately, in order to be successful, you need a lot of volunteer work, and we weren't getting the volunteers. We still needed to get people at the water stations, we still needed people at the blockage of the streets, putting up posters, distributing leaflets and all of that, and so many times we had to pay for those services. But nevertheless, this year is going to be the sixteenth year that we have the 5K/10K run.

ESPINO:

So despite the fact that it's not SEIU members, you wanted to continue it? Why is that?

HOLGUÍN:

No, it was not SEIU members. They didn't want to help. But eventually, when they found out that it was successful, they started wanting to put their hands in the money.

ESPINO:

So it became an objective of fundraising, not of organizing anymore?

01:49:03

HOLGUÍN:

Well, we found that the organizing wasn't taking place anyway, because as much as we went to the worksite and talked to the director, got the board of supervisors to even write a letter to the director and tell him, "Help him out, cooperate with them," and all that, there were still directors that had their own money. "Oh, no, I don't want to do that." And so it became a fundraiser, but it was helping only county employees, and they had to be members of the union in order to be helped. They had to be members in good standing. So in that sense, it still works, except that when the board wanted us to account for the money we said, "Well, the bookkeeper of the union, being the controller, does our bookkeeping, and the books are open. You can arrange to come and see the books anytime."

I suppose that some of the people went, because they made instances about what we had been doing with the money, innuendos here and there, but their main complaint is that after we found out that they were trying to put their hands on the money, we formed our own corporation with our own trustees, with Alejandro being the president. And so the money is still there. Whatever millions there are there, they are there, but belong to the corporation, not to the local. The local, except for Annelle [Grajeda], she used to get involved, because being the general manager, she wanted the members to see her over there, and hopefully that would get members to participate, but we found most regular [unclear] who were involved, and when we formed the corporation, it made it even worse.

So like I say, there's malcontents in there that have never been happy with the results of the election, who have been anti-Alejandro, who continue to harass Alejandro even after he retired. He's been in court. Everything that they said about him with Local 660 with the county has been found out to be true. He's been released of all the charges. But the membership doesn't know that. The paper and the guy that wrote in the paper did a good job of discrediting him, which is what this guy wanted. They wanted to discredit Alejandro and over the years managed to at least partially do a job.

But that was one of the things that we've done since I was involved with the union. In sixteen years of the 5K run, which our foundation became the emergency relief fund. That's what we call it, and members can apply if they have a hardship, especially as a result of a natural event. They can apply, give us their story. They've got to

prove evidence, like if they're behind on the rent or their car is going to be repossessed or whatever. We need evidence. We meet as a committee and then we vote on whether we grant them what they're requesting or some, or we refer them someplace else where they can get help, but we've helped out a lot of people. We donate money to the three county hospitals and the Red Cross. So my part, except for the organizing the county employees and union members, it's been successful.

Another thing that was successful from the things that we did was that we were able to organize further and create the agency-shop concept, because closed shop is illegal. But agency shop simply says, "You don't want to be a union member? That's okay, but you've got to pay for the service." And so people--we [unclear] with the county. We put it to a vote for the members, and every department became an agency shop. Those that don't want to pay union membership pay 80 percent of the union membership, but they don't have the right to the benefits, so we still can sell them on the idea of becoming members. So that was one of the successful things, and we had to do that department by department.

ESPINO:

Can you explain how does it work?

02:02:05

HOLGUÍN:

Well, we started out with the Santa Monica School District. [unclear] We got them to join agency shop. Then we got L.A. County Schools, which is also very small; we got it. Then we got DPSS. We got the eligibility workers to join and the supervisors; we got that. Then we started getting other departments, so department by department we started organizing, and that was part of the organizing. We saw our membership grow to about eighty-three thousand. Of course, the close human contact is not there anymore, because as members of the board, we now negotiated the contract with the union, and we got to the point where they struck on us once, but I'll tell you that later.

After we organized agency shop, we also got the board to approve the concept of evaluation of the staff, the union staff. That wasn't very welcome. But since I am one who believes in the work ethic, I used to tell the business agents, "Whenever you say you're very good, how do you know?" "Well--." I said, "Well, if you're that good, wouldn't you like to have it on the record?" And that was my argument with them all the time. I said, "I demand to be evaluated every year, and I want my evaluation to be on time, and it better be a good evaluation, because I can prove that I do a good job. Almost everybody that worked under me is in a high position with the county now, because I trained them to be good workers." I said, "It's to my advantage. Instead of harassing them and fighting, I'll train them to do the job right."

When I became a supervisor after I returned with the county, that was one of the problems I encountered. I became a supervisor right away, because now I knew the ropes. Hey, I know where the dues apply. I qualify. I know what I need to be doing. I applied and I got it, and people said, "Well, but you know, I've worked with the county twenty-two years." I said, "So what?" He said, "Well, you're not going to tell me what to do. You just came in." I said, "Well, you may have worked with the county twenty-two years, but you may be doing things wrong for [unclear] years." I says, "You're going to see what you do, and all that." If they send me someone supposedly that was doing a poor job, and they dumped a couple of people like that on me, they dumped on me to give them a bad evaluation. I said, "I'm going to evaluate them from what I see, and if any negative stuff has to be done, let the previous supervisor do it and then give it to me and I'll incorporate it into mine and say, 'Her

former supervisor says this and this and this.'"

I said, "But you know, we have a form, and the form is so simple. In five minutes like you can interview." And each supervisor has about eight workers. I had about fifteen at one time, with a protest, of course, but I was to get them out of a bind, because they didn't have enough supervisors. But you know, it doesn't take long. In one day you can interview all your subordinates, and all you have to do is, "Is your caseload up to date? Are your reaffirmations up to date? Are your reports up to date?" things like that. "Are your interviews going along all right? Is there any area where you need help?" And if the subordinate says yes, I said, "Okay, how do you need help?" And then I have to promise to help and make arrangements to follow up on it. And then after we do it, it's, "Okay, I think you need help in this area. Do you agree?" Once we fill out the form, we both sign, and we know what the supervisor has to do and what the subordinate has to do, and if we both do our job, that subordinate is going to learn something more, and the supervisor is going to learn something more, and the subordinate is going to become a better worker, and he's going to feel better. And at the time of evaluation, I don't have to be thinking, well, what did she do, what does she do? All I have to do is look at the reports, yes.

And even the deputies, at the first excellent evaluation I gave, they challenged it. I said, "What is it that you don't agree with?" "Well, this." I said, "I have evidence. You want to see her folder?" And so they learned, because most supervisors used to start, "Well, let's see. Well, she's always coming in late. Her attendance hasn't been good." Always starting with a negative, and that is only a very minute part of evaluation. Their performance includes a lot more than that. On my evaluations, I used to do narratives that incorporated the questions or the answers to the questions. I'd say, this does this way well in this area, give examples and all that, because it was in my records already. And so my supervisors in my area were jealous, says, "How come you get away with that?" I said, "Well--." And I remember the director says when I retired, said something to the effect, "This department will never have another Ramón Holguín." And I felt so flattered by that, because the deputies from two other districts came to my retirement, but that's also another story.

So the changes that we brought into the union when I was a union member were good. The ones that we brought as I was a board member were good, because one of the things that we did since we had to negotiate with URLA was that, in a sense, my secret task was to show the general manager and the rest of the board that were on the bargaining committee, how poor representatives the staff were in negotiating a good contract, to the extent that over the years, we deleted stuff in their contract that they fought to keep. But it was no longer relevant, because many of the articles in their contract referred to specific persons that were no longer there, or benefits that included like someone who had been there twenty-five years, and at one point we didn't have anybody else that was there over twenty-five years anymore.

The last time that I served on the board that we negotiated a contract was in 1998; no, in 1997. We kept going back and forth. The general manager, being the good person that she was, but wanted to be in good standing with their staff, was trying to accommodate staff on everything they wanted. And it got to the point that we would give them the last best and final, and they would come back with something else. And I said, "Okay, why do they want something else?" And we'd look at what they were saying, and then [unclear]. "Oh, I think this is what they want." I said, "So let's figure a way to make it better." We would rewrite it to make it better and present it back to them, and they would reject it. And to make a long story short, we had given them the fifth last, best, and final on a weekend, and we had met at Patriotic Hall that time. We had given them the last, best, and final, and then we went to the office. And the head of their bargaining committee said to us, "Okay, well, we'll look at it and we'll let you know." I said, "What's there to let us know? That is the last, best, and final." "Well, anyway."

So we went to the office. Well, it wasn't very long before they come, not the whole bargaining committee but the head and a couple of other people, and he started saying something to the general manager that really burned me up, because I said, "What is it they don't understand? We polished up the contract so that it looks better, more professional. It's given them everything they want and more. What's their problem?" And he kind of says, "Well, if we don't get what we want, we're going to go on strike." And I said, "Wait a minute." I says, "What is it about our last, best, and final you don't understand?" He said, "Well, we don't like it." I said, "Well, that is the last, best, and final. You do what you need to do. You don't like it, go on strike." They went on strike the following

day, but that strike lasted one day. By the second day, they wanted to come back to work. [laughs]

See, every time they were promoting strike in the field, I kept saying, "Don't do that." I said, "You know, a strike is the last thing you want to do." I said, "A lot of people suffer, and they never get back what they lose, especially if the strike lasts a long time." I said, "A lot of these people are single parents that cannot afford to lose a single day pay." "But you know, strike is fun." I said, "A strike is not fun. It's fun for you, because you will be getting paid anyway, but they won't." And so when they went on strike, okay, that was the field staff. They convinced the clerical staff to go out with them in solidarity, and you can imagine what Rosario was going through. I was on the board, and she was on the other side. I told her, "Do what you have to do." I said, "Think it through. You guys want to do that, do it."

Well, she realized also that they were in the wrong, and the whole clerical staff--because, see, there was one field staff that had three relatives on the clerical-staff side, so they convinced them to convince the rest. And we were all being ostracized by all the unions when we went to the federation meetings. Said, "Shame." I said, "Well, don't call it a shame, because you don't know what's happened."

ESPINO:

So in the end, did they use the last, best, and final? Was that the final contract that was signed?

HOLGUÍN:

Yes. But we had eliminated a lot of the frivolous stuff. We had eliminated a lot of stuff that was there for the benefit of people that were not there anymore, because that was the idea of negotiating. Somebody wanted this? Well, they'd push the rest of them to push for it, and then people that did the bargaining had to do their talking for them. So we cleaned it up to where it looked like a real good professional contract, and they still didn't understand that.

02:02:46

ESPINO:

They wanted something different.

HOLGUÍN:

Afterwards. We told them, we said, "Why did you fight us? Didn't you realize what was going on?"

ESPINO:

Well, next time I want to talk a little bit about the details of a contract and what makes a good contract, in your opinion and your experience, and also a little bit more just to sum up the changes that you experienced and that you were a part of. But we'll talk about that next time, because it's been two hours and they're going to ask us to leave. Okay, I'm going to stop it now. Thank you. [End of interview]

SESSION NINEMay 19, 2010

00:00:37

ESPINO:

This is Virginia Espino and today is May 19, 2010. I'm interviewing Mr. Ramón Holguín at the East Los Angeles Library.

Last time, Mr. Holguín, we got really into your work with the union, SEIU [Service Employees Industrial Union], but I wanted to ask you if you could give me just some background information on how you met Alejandro Stephens and what your responsibility or what your role was in helping him to become president of Local 660.

00:03:59

HOLGUÍN:

I met Alejandro Stephens at one of the shop stewards' council meetings, and I was impressed by his ability to express himself very eloquently and by his ideas about what a stewards' council should be, because they coincided with my ideas. Subsequent to that meeting, I met him at other committee meetings, and I liked his demeanor, I liked the way that he was not afraid to speak his mind, and so over the years I exchanged ideas with him in certain matters of union organizing. We pretty much coincided in what we believed organizing should be, and so when we came to the point that I found he was elected by the board to be the president--because in those years the president and the executive board was not elected by the membership. They were elected by the elected members of the board.

I saw that they were already having some problems. There seemed to be a division among board members, mostly, I would say, not in ideology but along color line. That exists to this date, as far as I know and as far as I have seen. But nevertheless, they had elected him president, and they had also appointed Gilbert Cedillo acting general manager. I didn't know at the time, but I found out later on that those who elected both Gilbert to be general manager and appointed Alejandro to be the president, had other plans, that that agreement was not a permanent arrangement.

When my wife [Rosario Holguín] got me involved in organizing the CDU [Committee for a Democratic Union], about which we already talked, Alejandro became one of the members of the CDU, along with other members of the board that didn't like what was going on. I found an issue of the local newspaper that is kind of interesting in the sense that this gentleman here, who was running for the board then and became a member of the CDU, pretty much in his platform tells you what was going on. If you like, I can read you that so that it's not just in my words.

ESPINO:

His name is Austin Pruitt.

00:20:06

HOLGUÍN:

Mr. Austin Pruitt. His platform went like this. "It's time to reform the board of Local 660. Most current board members spend their time fighting each other and firing general managers. This board crippled 660 staff during contract negotiations. This board doesn't represent my interests or yours. Look at the candidates closely. Check with union activists in your workplace. It's time to awaken and vote thoughtfully. We are responsible for Local 660. Our leaders must lead where we, the rank and file, want to go. Leadership is service. It is not a power trip. If you agree, I want your vote." And interestingly enough, of all the characters that were running for the board at that time, he was the only one that called it like it was. All the others promised things that they didn't deliver. And by the way, I respected Mr. Pruitt very much, because he was an intelligent person, he had a master's degree, and he was able to speak his mind.

And so in that context, Alejandro Stephens saw what was going on. When we split, he joined the CDU and shortly thereafter became one of the leaders of the CDU. So by the time the battle was over and we had done all the things that we needed to do, it was logical that he would be running for president.

Some of the things that I want to mention so as to be clear on what was happening--we had several situations in which we disagreed on things. For example, when we created the CDU, they had appointed Gilbert Cedillo, but didn't really want him to stay there permanently. And as a result, Mr. Cedillo also wanted to get involved with the CDU, except that as I pointed out to him when he tried to take over the CDU, I pointed out to him that he was not a union member, that he was staff and as a result we could not have him lead the group. So we took the leadership from him and got Alejandro to run the meetings, with the three ladies heading the information that was going out to the membership at the different worksites throughout the county. That was, as I had mentioned before, Miss Donna Meredith, who worked for the county recorder, Bobbie Holmes, who was a nurse, and Rosario Holguín, who was with the Department of Public Social Services. All three ladies are now retired and are members of the seniors association.

When we organized that, we brought about what's been called an election, in which Mr. Jim Green, who was on the board, had made a motion that we should hire Gilbert Cedillo as a regular general manager, permanently. The motion was seconded by Mr. Pruitt, and it was voted on that we would be voting on that issue at a general-membership meeting. As Jim Green pointed out, the opposition had an option to also name someone they had in mind to hire as a general manager. That way we would really have a contest and have the general membership let us know what it would be.

As it turned out, when we had that election, the opposition was very eager to keep that meeting from happening. They were outside the Patriotic Hall on Figueroa Street in Los Angeles, telling people that the meeting was cancelled, encouraging people to go home and not attend, but eventually we caught them at it and they had to give up the fight, and the meeting took place. At that meeting, as I recall, there were a lot of people voting, much more so than anything else. Dr. Rudy Acuña in his book gives us some of the figures of the results of that election. It was here. Okay, and this, I want it to be clear, was not an election, per se, to elect Gilbert Cedillo general manager. It was an election to instruct the board to hire him as a general manager.

The vote was 3,643 in favor to 952 against. And even though the vote was favorable to his hiring, the board went ahead and hired somebody else anyway, and that's when they hired Mr. Ron Asland, who had come from a much smaller union, I understand, somewhere in Whittier. And this man actually took the job seriously. When we organized the CDU to continue the fight because of the board's action, we had a campaign where the membership would be calling the international headquarters and would be sending letters to them, to national headquarters, letting them know that the matter was still not resolved, that we were still having problems.

And that is when a little bit later on, I think around July, the international appointed Mr. David Baker to become the trustee, and he came with full authority to close up shop, fire all the staff, disconnect the board from the members and leave the local under the direction of the trustee. He went about the business of talking to people. He talked to the people representing the CDU. He talked to the people representing the board and its allies, and he also went around and talked to anyone who would want to come and give him information, because he wanted to get a clear picture of what was going on and how people perceived the functions of their local.

As a result of that came the rewriting of the by-laws and a vote on those by-laws, which among other things describe how a member would qualify to be nominated for office. In the new by-laws, unlike the old by-laws, the membership would vote for a president, they would vote for a vice president, would vote for a secretary, and would vote for a treasurer and for members-at-large representing the bargaining units.

As a result of our involvement, those of us who were in the CDU, or some of us anyway, were asked by the members to run for office, since we had done a good job of organizing and letting people know what was really going on. So along with Alejandro and other people, I ran for office, representing my bargaining unit, which was supervisors, and we ran a successful campaign. But the outgoing board members, or the ousted board members, were not prevented from being nominated or running for office too. So some of them also ran for office and were successful in getting elected, which really caused the board to be somewhat divided again, and for many years the board did not function as a unity group, because it seemed like since Alejandro had been the winner, some of the other people were malcontents that were opposed to anything that Alejandro proposed, were opposed to him even holding the meetings.

We had a particular gentleman who presumed to be a parliamentarian and was constantly calling the president on parliamentary procedure and therefore preventing the board from taking care of business. But many other things were happening along that they wouldn't do it. I suggested to Mr. Stephens that we should have a retreat, in which we would, among other things, socialize a bit and get to know each other, get to know what our concerns and plans for the union were, what we felt was our priorities, and we would vote on what were our priorities and select at least three of them that we would pursue.

We decided at that time, with some guidance from a moderator, that the board, which was elected by the members and was responsible for setting the policy for the union, and that the staff, under the leadership of the general manager, would make plans to carry out that policy. Among the things that we decided at that first retreat was that we needed our own building, that we needed to set policy, and that we needed to organize, and we set about the business of doing those three things, first and foremost, with other things, of course, following, such as organize the members for bargaining, effective bargaining units. Because up to that point and for some years after this new board was elected, most of the bargaining was done by the staff. And more and more, those of us in the bargaining committees felt that the staff was not representative of our interests, that they behaved pretty much along the lines of what the general manager or someone else told them to do, instead of following the concerns that we had as members. And we kept saying that as members and employees of the county, we knew what the working conditions were. We knew whether the salaries we had were adequate, and we knew what was the benefits that we were going to be fighting for.

In the beginning, we were not even allowed to speak during bargaining sessions. The rule of thumb was that if we wanted to say something, we would write a little note to the staff that was doing the lead bargaining, telling him that we wanted to caucus. And then he would mention to the opposite side representing the county that we needed to caucus, and then we'd go and meet and express what we needed him to talk about. Oftentimes he would reject what we said. Oftentimes he didn't feel that it was the time, and so we had to go back to the

bargaining and keep quiet.

More and more, as some of us began to go to training sessions provided by the Los Angeles Trade Tech, where they do training, labor studies, we learned more about true bargaining, and the more we learned, the more we realized that our staff didn't really know what they were doing. And over the years, we pushed and pushed to let us in the bargaining committee be the ones to do the bargaining, and allowing all of us to speak, of course one at a time, but to express what we felt was the concerns and voice our opinion, because we sometimes, as members of the elected bargaining committee, didn't always agree on everything, but we were allowed to speak our mind. More and more, county representation began to feel pressure and began to sense that more and more, we [unclear] know what we were talking about, including the salary scales and everything else.

I remember that the last time I was in bargaining unit, the director in my particular site and division chief were both on the side of the county's bargaining committee, and I think they learned to respect me, because the division chief asked me specifically, "Where did you learn so much about bargaining?"

ESPINO:

Can you just give me a little bit of a description or a definition of what you mean by true bargaining? Because you said you learned what true bargaining--but can you elaborate on that?

00:22:17

HOLGUÍN:

Well, let me say that traditionally, and I think you'll read a lot of that in here, is that county had the union many times in the beginning, fighting takeaways. That was very time- and energy-consuming. They would start, "Well, we're going to take away vacation or a particular day of vacation. We're going to take out 6-1/2 percent of your salary," those kinds of takeaways. And so many times we spent half of the bargaining period just fighting to keep what we already had. And as a result, we were not being effective. As we learned more in bargaining, we found that there are things that we want that we want to take an active part in pushing from the beginning. We need to let the county know what we expect as we start bargaining, so that they are ready for us, because we know what we want. We don't want to be fighting for stuff that we already have.

And in that sense, we became more specific about what we wanted in terms of working conditions, in terms of salaries. Because in the old days, we'd bargain for everything under the sun except salaries. That came at the end. And we said, no, that needs to be upfront, because that's one of the major concerns. We want the salary that's comparable to the salary of other professions, the salary of comparable positions in other counties and other states, and that's the kind of stuff that I'm talking about.

ESPINO:

So you would do research and find out--

00:25:19

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, we would do research, and we had the county code that we would really understand in terms of how they promoted people, in terms of the points that you had to count to get promoted, in terms of the points that you had to count in the salary scale, so you could know where you go next, not 1 percent here, not 2 percent there. But there are specific amounts in the salary scale that tell you, you can go there. Because they do that with management; why don't they do that with the rank and file? And so in that sense, just like in organizing, you need to know what you're doing. You don't play it by ear. You need to train yourself to do those things, so that when presented you'd sound professional and they understand that you know what you're talking about.

For example, at the L.A. Trade Tech they used to teach us what things you can do legally, because as you negotiate, you put things on the record so the county knows, next time you have to do these things here, and you need to respond accordingly, not just let them fall by the wayside. In that sense, you can move ahead or you can hold things up legally, without really county opposing it very much. They can be concerned, but then they also have to behave more professionally, because we found that the people they put at the bargaining table as the lead are trained people. They're professionals at what they do. And how could we compete with that if we did not have comparable training?

And so we had that thing in the sense that we became more and more effective. As the policy committee got more effective, they began to do one of the things that I questioned when they thought I was crazy, and that's what I said, "Why do we have twenty-one contracts?" because the county had different departments. I said, "We're all employees of the county. We should have pretty much similar working conditions, similar salaries and all that, and similar concerns." So as we got better, we began to see what they call common language in our contract, which meant that we tried to align a particular article in one contract with all the other contracts, and that way we would get closer to one contract with several sections addressing a particular bargaining unit, but not the entire contract being reproduced.

ESPINO:

Did you ever find, under that type of contract, that that would create more conflict within your own bargaining unit, because you had different interests, and now you have this one contract that you needed to--

00:33:20

HOLGUÍN:

We had--I mean, until the last time I was in bargaining, we had problems, yes, because many times another bargaining unit would come up with language, and then our representative at the bargaining policy committee would come in and he said, "Well, you don't have to diddle with that, because that's common language." I said, "Well, we didn't agree to it. You never brought it before us, and we are opposed to it because of this and of that." So she would have to bring that back to the bargaining-policy committee and say, "Well, our group is not in agreement with that." And they have to discuss it again and negotiate it until they come up with the language that was really appropriate and acceptable to all the bargaining units, because we didn't want any one particular bargaining unit to lead the rest into wherever we were going. We wanted to all be part of and parcel of what we

were doing.

So in that sense we got, for example, at the last bargaining unit that I was, which was in 1997, which was one of the years when we got the biggest raise, Marietta Welch had been elected to the bargaining-policy committee, and I don't know why, because I would not have voted for her. But anyhow, she was the representative, and every time she came in, she came with the notion that, well, this is common language, and I said it can't be. So we fought with her a lot during that last bargaining unit, and in that bargaining unit it was also the time when on the other side of the table we had my boss, my direct boss, Mr. Gaston Serrato , and the division chief, who was Mr. Michael Collins. And I think they learned to respect our group, because we let them know that the cat was out of the bag and we knew how they determined promotions and how they determined salary increases, and we were asking for specific amounts rather than a little percentage here and a little percentage there. And they were surprised that we knew how. We had learned to count eleven points that needed to be to get to the next salary scale. So that was very effective for us.

But let me backtrack now, because we were talking about getting Mr. Cedillo elected or whatever he felt we were doing. After we had the trusteeship period and we approved the by-laws, the new board, we had our retreat, and one of our main tasks, of course, was to hire a general manager. And wanting to respect the wishes of the majority of the members who voted, we decided to hire Mr. Cedillo as the general manager. We drew up a contract which he willingly signed after consulting with legal counsel, and then we had our president sign it. Unfortunately, our president failed to have us proofread the contract that was signed, and unfortunately, when we confirmed the contents of that contract, we voted favorably and Mr. Cedillo was hired to do a job.

During our retreat, we came up with the goals of the union and with the policy that we wanted, and let Mr. Cedillo know what he needed to do, which was make plans to implement those goals and that policy, and bring the plans back to the board for review and approval, which he did. But interestingly enough, by the second year, Mr. Cedillo arranged for our retreat, and like I said, our first retreat had been at the local, which did not involve any expense other than lunch. The second meeting we had out in the bay area of L.A., and we had a gentleman, Mario Machado, who was better known for being a broadcaster with Channel 4 or Channel--one of the major TV stations, and he was now retired. He did an excellent job, and we tried to iron out some of the differences that had surfaced during our first year of operations, and we promised to work closer together and respect each other more, and came up with other ideas, as long as also we could begin to record policy decisions. And so we developed what has been known as the policy file, which was frequently overlooked. But at least we had it on record that there were certain things we decided that were going to be done from there on. Sometimes they were done, sometimes they were not.

The third year, Mr. Cedillo organized the retreat, and they organized it at Balboa Island. I understand--and that's what I understand because I boycotted it, and I let him know in no uncertain terms that I was not in agreement with having a retreat in such a luscious environment. The hard-to-reject invitation was that we could go and spend some time in the sauna. They had recreation rooms. We could bring our families, and all would be at the expense of the union. A considerable amount of money was spent in there, and I let them know in no uncertain terms that I was opposed to those kind of expenses. But nevertheless, the retreats continued to happen in big environments, and I did not attend another one until about four or five years later.

ESPINO:

How many other board members were opposed to that kind of spending?

HOLGUÍN:

I was the only one, as far as I know. Yes, we went, for example, to Arrowhead and UCLA Center, which is a very plush environment with cottages. We had a two-story cottage just for me and my family, which included only my wife, and she was a member as well. A good environment. A lot of people had never been in the snow, in the mountains, but it was enjoyable, but it was expensive as well.

ESPINO:

How about productive?

00:36:33

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, productive it was, because sometimes what you can say about those environments is that you're pretty well secluded from anything else. Like there are no general attractions to go, except if you want to go skiing, and the hotels are really far from shopping centers or whatever. So in that sense they can be productive, but people can still disappear and go and do other things.

But we went along fine, except that as a result of the manner in which Mr. Cedillo was hired as the general manager, there was a misunderstanding about what authority he had. He still felt that he had been elected by the members, and therefore he should have full authority to run the local the way he wanted, and we had to keep reminding him that the president, with the permission of the board, by instructions of the board, was his immediate boss. And Alejandro then had to let us know, or we had to let him know, what road the general manager had to take, and then he had to instruct him and the general manager had to do that, because he was, as we frequently reminded him, an employee of the union.

But nevertheless, over the three years that he was general manager, we kept having that conflict, and much of the conflict revolved around Mr. Cedillo's manner of doing business. I'll give you a few examples. Mr. Cedillo would go somewhere, usually with someone, some political figure, and promise them something, or would go to a candidate for office and promise them something, and then he would come to the board and ask us to approve what he had promised.

ESPINO:

Do you have an example, something specific?

00:46:53

HOLGUÍN:

Well, he would promise, for example, we would endorse him, or we would give them money for their campaign, that kind of stuff. And we kept reminding Mr. Cedillo, "You've got it backwards. If we want to endorse someone, or we want to provide someone, we have COPE, which is the Committee on Political Education, which every union has, and we bring that issue to them and then decide whether we're going to endorse someone, and whether we'll give them money for their campaign. Then you can tell them we've done it." And frequently the process for that is, we let the candidates know that they can come and speak to the group, and if we like what they promise to do, we can endorse them and then give them money for their campaign. And so over the years that happened, and I'm sure many politicians owed favors to Mr. Cedillo, so that when he ran for office after we let him go, he had friends in Sacramento that would help him with his campaign.

Mr. Cedillo had a manner also of doing other things before--I'll give you an example. We had a campaign once where we were trying to prevent the Board of Supervisors of L.A. County from closing General Hospital. That would have been devastating to the community as well as to our members. And so somewhere along the line, Mr. Cedillo engaged a group of people that were in the business of doing commercials, and he convinced us to engage these people in doing some commercials that we were going to air on television, showing pretty much why it was not a good idea to close General Hospital. And we had a thing where some of our members became actors, and one was being buried in the ground, who had a nameplate, and others were shoveling dirt on the coffin and all that, showing that it was the death of health services for many people in L.A. County.

What we found out later on once we had made a commitment is that we had to pay these people upfront, half a million dollars, which we had to borrow from the international in order to pay, because we didn't have that kind of money in reserve. We get our membership money on a monthly basis so that at no time do we have large amounts of money. It comes and goes, just like people who work. We work and we get a salary and we spend it. We continue working to get the next paycheck, and the same thing goes with the union. It gets a certain amount from the county for whatever the employees have authorized the county to pay in the form of membership dues.

And I recall when we went to--where was it then? I think it was in Chicago. We went and then we brought John Sweeney to our table, and Gilbert pretty much embarrassed John Sweeney into signing an agreement right there and then. And I recall John Sweeney saying to Gilbert, "Don't you ever do this to me again." Because that was Gilbert's manner of doing business. He put people on the spot in such a way that people will make him look bad and make the union look bad if you don't.

Another particular activity that he had when he wanted something done, he would bring all his administrative staff to the board meetings and have each one of them speak on behalf of what he wanted, so that by the time we got through with them, it was time to go home and we couldn't conduct regular union business. And so all those little things accumulated over the years, so by the time we had to renew the contract, we had to put some teeth to the contract. The main thing that we wanted in the contract was the right of the board to employ Mr. Cedillo at the will of the board, because we didn't want to fight in the courts Mr. Cedillo, in the event that we had to let him go, which was the practice with past general managers. Almost every general manager that I know would sue or be compensated in some way as he was ousted.

And we did the same thing with regular employees, as a matter of fact. Any employee that got fired ended up getting good money, because they claimed some wrongdoing in the process. When Mr. Cedillo--and I'm saying this because I was in the executive committee of the board, and so we did a lot of things that we discussed in closed session and then brought the recommendations of the executive committee to the board for approval, without having to go into the particulars of the discussion. And I remember that Mr. Cedillo had his assistant, Mr. Don Savage, at every one of those meetings, even though we requested that Mr. Savage had no business being there, because we were not discussing his personnel matters. But Cedillo instructed him to stay, and he decided to be faithful to Mr. Cedillo and stayed all the way through at every meeting we had.

And I think Mr. Cedillo's biggest objection was that he knew that he now would not be able to do whatever he wanted, that the board could fire him without cause anytime that we felt that he wasn't doing what he was doing. As a matter of fact, we gave him the contract to sign, and he refused to sign it on several occasions. And then one day his wife Ruby came to my home in Pasadena and brought me the contract, allegedly signed by Mr.

Cedillo, and said to me that as long as Gilbert was concerned, we had a contract. I took the contract to the local and informed them how it had been delivered to me, and then the board read the contract. We passed it around, either passed it around or passed copies of it, with the understanding that we would return the copies again, because we didn't want those to be at the disposal of anyone. There were too many people that wanted to know the insides of the union's operation for their own reasons, and we felt that that was nobody's business except the business of those that were involved.

Once we discussed it and confirmed it, we called Mr. Cedillo, and whether he did or not, we instructed him to understand that the president of the union was his boss with the permission of the board, and that any instructions coming to him would be from the board through the president, and we let him know that any disobedience of that would be considered insubordination. Well, we gave him a task to do and he left. We were under the impression he understood. Whether he did or not we don't know. But what happened next was that he called in and said he was going to take a short leave of absence, and what he did during that leave of absence, he started going to worksites where he was welcome and started talking to people about the wrongdoing that the board had done to him. He began to tell people that we had treated him badly, that we had discriminated against him and I don't know what else. But at any rate, he convinced enough people out there in the county to think that we had done him wrong. And all he was talking about at that time was the contract.

ESPINO:

Well, can you explain to me just some specifics of what the president and what the membership--I'm not sure if it was the membership, but what the board wanted him to do that he didn't comply with? Or what were the biggest conflicts between the board and--

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the biggest conflict was that he went out and did things he wasn't supposed to, things that he was not instructed by the board to do, or authorized by the president, for that matter, that would put us in a bind, pretty much forcing us to approve monies for a particular thing he promised, after the fact.

ESPINO:

Because he is quoted in the paper as saying that he wanted to make the union responsible to the community. Do you feel like some of the things that he did weren't responsible for the union being more responsible to the community?

0:56:18

HOLGUÍN:

Well, the one thing that I can say that he did, and that was because I made a motion that the board should instruct Mr. Cedillo to oppose Proposition 187, and as such, he went out, because I went with him many times, to organize the community, not just the immediate community but the community at large. We went all over California talking against Proposition 187. We met at several of the schools. In particular, we met at that Catholic School, Salesian School. We met there with the community and explained to them why we should be opposed to Proposition 187 and why we felt it was wrong. And in a sense, because if it passed, it would involve many of our county employees, not here but in many other counties, because they were informing people that the county, through DPSS [Department of Social Service], was aiding illegal aliens, which was not true. It never has been true, and they were giving them the wrong information. So we went on a campaign to try to tell people the truth.

And in that sense, he did a good job. I'll take my hat off to him, because he did a good job. We went to San Diego, we went to Sacramento, we went to many different places, and every time we were able to gather a lot of people from other unions and from the community at large and inform the people, okay. That, of course, ended up in the big march we had here in Los Angeles. I don't know if you remember there was an argument that we had something like a hundred thousand people, and other people claimed that it was less. But we had a big march against Proposition 187 that was instigated mostly by the unions. But then other people followed the bandwagon, and so we had a lot of people marching from East L.A. into downtown Los Angeles, and that brought attention to people that did not understand what 187 was about. And though it passed, there were enough people that said, "Well, we have to look at that with scrutiny and decide what it is," and it was found that most of what was passed was unconstitutional and illegal, and as a result, Prop. 187 was never implemented.

But that was about the only thing that I remember in particular where Mr. Cedillo was very involved. The other one was, well, we had several marches through the city. We had boycotts. We had picket lines at the locals. Every time we had contract negotiations, we would have what we called rolling thunder, where county officials didn't know when employees were going to walk out of a particular workplace, but it was always for a short period of time. We would come back again. It was mostly to show that we had the strength and the numbers to bring about a strike. Strikes are not something that we welcome, because everybody gets hurt, the people we serve, the employees that we represent, because they never make up what they lose. But the threat of a strike makes management take notice, and in that sense if we are effective, they will take the notice and they will want to avoid that.

So in that sense, yes, he was involved in the community along those lines. Other than that, Mr. Cedillo was very shy. He was not the kind of a person that would go out and talk to anyone. It's like when he went to a workplace or we went to--he was talking to a captive audience, and for that he was good. He knew the speeches, because I went many places and the speech was always the same, dignity and respect for the employees and the particular issue that we were fighting at the time. So he was good at speaking, like you say, many times singing to the choir. But inevitably, when that contract was renewed with the board's option to let him go without cause, and then he did this and went organizing, and we found that he was not on a leave of absence, but he was using his influence and his ability to communicate with the county employees for his own purposes.

And let me tell you what happened, and I may want to look up the issue of "The Voice," where that is what I'm saying to you now he supported. Mr. Cedillo then began to organize along the lines of he wanted to change the union, okay, and in the issue, he was passing around a petition. The petition was essentially to change the by-laws of the local, and in the by-laws I don't remember the exact wording, but like I say, I'll look it up if I get to the local and do research and find that issue of "The Voice," because we were forced to do that. He used to pass around in one page, with one side the lines for people to sign the petition, and on the other side, if you can imagine, the entire by-laws of the local. You couldn't even read it with a magnifying glass, okay. But people were signing for what he was telling them they were signing.

And we were forced to at one point as a board decide, we need to invest money fighting this campaign. And so we put out a special issue of "The Voice" in which we printed everything that was in that petition in large print, so that it took up several pages of "The Voice." In it essentially it was saying he wanted to be the king of Local 660. He wanted to be not only the general manager but the president as well, with the option to appoint the

board and to make other appointments and make other decisions, without being accountable to anybody. And this is why when we printed it out, then people began to read it and realized, well, we've been signing the wrong things. And eventually, when we had another election, he lost and he stayed fired.

ESPINO:

That's incredible. So are you telling me that these by-laws that he wanted to change are the same by-laws that you were able to establish with the CDU?

HOLGUÍN:

No, no, don't get me wrong. The CDU was only part and parcel of contributing to the by-laws that Mr. Dave Baker wrote. No, he's the one that wrote them, because he's a union person. He was responsible, and probably they used the international by-laws as a model.

ESPINO:

But you were part of that change.

HOLGUÍN:

Well, a lot of people, yes.

ESPINO:

I mean you and your group, and there was a movement.

HOLGUÍN:

We were part of the group that brought about change to our union.

00:57:03

ESPINO:

And then Gil Cedillo comes and wants--

HOLGUÍN:

Well, he benefited from that.

ESPINO:

Yes. But then he wanted to rewrite them.

01:03:11

HOLGUÍN:

Well, he wanted to rewrite them after he signed the second contract. That's when he went to do what he wasn't supposed to do. That's when he went to talk to people about signing a petition because we had done him wrong, and the by-laws were wrong and all of that, so that was another set of by-laws. The by-laws that Mr. Baker wrote pretty much were from input from people, because he heard what people had to say, and I'm sure, like I say, the international has its by-laws which are supposed to be as a model, because no local under SEIU can write by-laws that are in conflict with the international by-laws, so it had to follow that. What Mr. Cedillo wrote was in conflict, not only with our by-laws that we had approved, but with the by-laws of the international, because no one is supposed to be unaccountable while they do their things, okay.

So once Mr. Cedillo went, we had the task of hiring a general manager. Very logical. We couldn't be without someone to lead the staff. And so Miss Marietta Welch and maybe a couple of other people had lobbied among themselves to, instead of hiring the logical person, who was the assistant general manager that had been there for years, they decided to do a national search, which was expensive and time consuming. But the majority of the board agreed on that, and so we wanted to show good faith, and we went about the business of setting up the information in different newspapers that were recommended to us as being the most read throughout the country. I don't recall which papers they were.

And I guess locals throughout the nation probably got information, because we had many applications. We had like twenty-three applications, something like that. And, of course, as we reviewed them, we weeded out some that were obviously not qualified for the job, and we cut them down to maybe about--I don't remember the exact figure, but I would say about six or seven people that we selected for interview. We were limited in that, because bringing them from wherever they come was an expense for us. We had to pay for their airfare, and we had to pay for their lodging while they were here, and pay them per diem and everything else, and that turned out to be a very expensive effort. But the effort we engaged in nevertheless, and we began to interview people.

By this time the person that the board had hired after the membership voted to hire Gilbert Cedillo was ousted by the trustee. I understand that he was paid twenty thousand dollars to get out of the picture, which he was very happy to do, because that was twenty thousand dollars he didn't have. But he had been very instrumental in working with the board that had brought him in, and, of course, it was to his advantage to stay general manager. But we felt that if he was going to be challenging the majority of the membership, he was not a person we wanted to have as general manager anyway.

And as we interviewed people, we eliminated a few because of one reason or another. Sometimes his personality, sometimes his attitude, sometimes his experience, sometimes it's they don't have the proper education to run a business such as a union, and so we ended up with one person whom we later learned had been coached by Marietta Welch on what to say and who was almost assured that he was going to be the one to be hired, which is something you don't do. As a board we're obligated to maintain a certain integrity, to be representative of the people that put us there, and to be also responsible for how we spend the money. Malfeasance is prohibited by law, and we cannot be spending our money foolishly or doing the wrong things.

This gentleman then came. I recall during the interview he was very arrogant. He even made a statement that I will never forget, because he said among the first things that he would do as general manager, he would fire Annelle Grajeda, who was really the only person that had been in administration long enough to give the local some continuity, because outside of Annelle, no one really knew very much what was going on at the administrative level.

ESPINO:

What was her position?

01:07:58

HOLGUÍN:

Annelle Grajeda had been assistant general manager for years. She had survived several general managers, not just one, and she was a good administrator. So after the interviews we voted, and this person was the one selected, and it's understandably why. He knew what we were going to be asking, and he knew the answers of what was going to be asked beforehand, so he came out smelling like a rose. I had some suspicion that his resume was not really representative of what he said he had done, and I can say even today that I had been in a position to review many resumes before then as an administrator for years. I knew when someone was gilding the lily. It's very easy. A lot of people do it. They put things on their resume that are not necessarily true or that are embellished more than the actual facts are. So we sent him the letter of intent to hire him, of our intent to give him employment and asking him to start preparing himself to come here. We would have to pay for his relocation, because he lived in Texas and had a family.

But one of our board members, Mr. Jim McCarthy, I guess listened to me or he had similar suspicions. He began to investigate and called the places that this man had said he had been, and we found that he had not been truthful, that in some of these places he had been unable to perform at the level he had been expected to, that he had been dishonest in at least one of those places, and when Jim McCarthy called for a board meeting and brought us the information again, we had to reconsider, and we decided to withdraw our offer of employment to that man. And we went back to the grindstone or grind wheel and attempted to decide whom we were going to elect.

By this time our energies and our patience had been pretty much worn out, and so we, those of us who favored Annelle, proposed that Annelle Grajeda be hired, but the opposition was against it, and so we had to argue several times at several meetings as to why or why not. And finally we called Annelle Grajeda for another interview, and she said what was so obvious to all of us, what should have been. She was the one person most qualified for the position. And so we hired her, and in that context I guess the rest is history. She was general manager from then until we realigned the unions and called for the 721 Local. At that point, the international appointed her president and general manager, which, interestingly enough, in that sense was what Gilbert wanted. She became both, with full authority to hire and fire and authority to approve the budget or whatever, which Gilbert never had.

ESPINO:

All by herself--

HOLGUÍN:

All by herself.

ESPINO:

--without having to answer to--

01:16:09

HOLGUÍN:

And that created a problem for us, because to put it in perspective, in the year 2000 we had a convention in Pittsburgh, at which time we had a new president of the international, Andy Stern, and Andy Stern had come forth with an idea about the globalization of industry and business, to the extent that we had to change our way, consider changing our way of doing business. He said, "We need to move in a direction of globalizing our unions so that we can be more effective, because the employers are running away. We need to be more involved in that, and we need to be more involved also in politics. But more than that, we need to be involved in organizing."

One of the ideas that he had in organizing was that every local, especially the large locals, would allocate so much of their revenue to an organizing fund that would be available to the smaller locals in SEIU so they could organize, because in order to organize, you need money.

To backtrack a little bit, let me show you where the old board that got ousted was irresponsible. One of the

things that I noticed, and I made motions to change that, was that they had in their budget of the local, they had a building fund, they had an organizing fund. There were others, but those are the most important ones. And I noticed as we reviewed the budget at our first retreat that we did not have money allocated to either one of those items. And I said, "What is the purpose of having those items if we put no money in it? If you believe in something, you put your money there." And so I made the motion that we will put money in a building fund and we will put money in organizing. The money in the building fund would be the money that was left over of our revenue for the year, would be put in the building fund, because we wanted at some point in the future to be able to buy our own building, which eventually we did.

And the organizing, that was the idea presented by Andy Stern at that 2000 convention, where he said we needed to support the smaller unions that have no money to organize. They had no money to organize organizers or to hire even sometimes a general manager, they're so small. And so we had agreed that we would allow a certain percentage of our budget to go into that fund, and that money began to be used pretty much from the beginning.

In 2004 at San Francisco, Andy Stern again presented the next step of his vision, and that was, "We talked about what we wanted to do. Now we need to do it." And so the idea of realigning in the sense that, for example, we need to get nurses all together, not belong some to this union, some to that union, and so on. And whatever bargaining unit--they had to be realigned along the particular jobs that they did. We had some dissension from that, but that came later. So we at the 2004 convention voted to go ahead with that task. And I remember that was the last time I was delegate for our union at the international convention. But I remember we voted on it.

Interestingly enough, and it just goes to show you how disconnected sometimes our membership is, almost as soon as they started passing the word that we were going to go ahead with that, our own local and another local as well, we began to hear people talking about Andy Stern doing his own thing, running things like a dictator. And I was appalled to hear members who were delegates at that convention, who had voted on it, and I told them, "How can you be telling people that and you saying that, when you were a delegate at that convention and you voted on it? Because I didn't see anyone voting against it. And now you're saying that they're doing the wrong thing?" I said, "You need to be more careful about what you vote on," because many times we vote on things without understanding what we're doing. I think that's a fault that we all have. Sometimes we're very eager to make a motion, second it, and vote it.

So anyhow, they began to organize along those lines, and we began to hear again allegations of wrongdoing, allegations of imperialism, allegations of dictatorship, allegations of unaccountability, and I told them, I said, "You were a delegate and you're a member of the board. You should not be saying those things, especially when you voted on them." But when I say there is dissension, I'll take the health services, for example. Okay. SEIU has health services. We used to represent some of the nurses in L.A. County. But there was another local, I think it was Local 210 in the Bay Area, Oakland.

ESPINO:

SEIU?

HOLGUÍN:

SEIU. They're also representing nurses in that area, and they were pretty much organizing while Annelle

Grajeda was still general manager of 721, or president, to get nurses to join them. Okay, that local is now called--

ESPINO:

Is it the United Health Workers?

HOLGUÍN:

No, I just saw a couple of them at the meeting of the federation on Monday. HEW, Health Services Employees Association. That's the group that is over there. They don't have a local number. But I don't know if it was the president or the general manager was opposed to disbanding the nurses and putting them under their realignment.

ESPINO:

The different local? The same union--

01:21:48

HOLGUÍN:

Well, there's a realignment of local around there similar to here, but he didn't want to be part of that. He wanted only nurses, only health-services people. And so he began to notice people, I guess everywhere, of what he was opposed to in terms of what Andy Stern was doing, again allegations that he wanted to take over and wanted puppets instead of leaders, and so he was asking for support. And in that context, eventually I guess they did put a vote, because I remember that Annelle Grajeda, I guess as general manager still, got a campaign going to let health services people in our area know that this effort was being made and asking them to vote to stay with us.

As I found out, the people with Kaiser [Permanente] decided to join the local in Oakland, and now they have one, what they call it SEW West *[FULL NAME?]. I don't know what that means, but I know they have a big union hall here in L.A. out there by Ferguson by the freeway, a huge place with a parking lot. We used it several times for general memberships. And then, of course, in a sense he [Andy Stern] won the fight. He won what he wanted. He got more members and still aligned with SEIU, but they have their own local, and I guess in part it was a self-serving thing, because if they had gone the other way, I guess he would have lost his position, and now he's the boss.

But that does happen. Not always everybody agrees with what's going on, sometimes through misunderstanding, sometimes simply because they don't agree. There is--I don't know if I brought it. No, I didn't bring it. I was going to bring--we had someone that passed away on May Day, who we all respected, because he was a true

union man, Pete Goodman, may he rest in peace. He passed away, true to nature, on May Day. But he was not only a union organizer, a shop steward, but he made no bones about being a socialist, and he spoke his mind. He felt that unions should be going in a direction where they would hold their employers more accountable, they should go in the direction of being more active, more representative. I mean, he wanted most of the things that we all want that we cannot have.

Oftentimes we talk about representative government, and it's questionable whether the politicians are really representing us. In that sense, this gentleman passed away at age--he was born in 1921. He would have been, what, ninety-seven, ninety-eight?

ESPINO:

Wow.

HOLGUÍN:

But, you know, he used to go to the federation meetings, true to form, until he couldn't anymore, due to physical illness. And you could always tell he was there, because he sat at a particular place. I hadn't been at a federation meeting for a while. I went and was glad to see a lot of people I hadn't seen, but I missed him right away, and then I see them passing around a leaflet where it says that he had died. So they had a little video in his honor to show what he did and a little bit of what he said, which is really what true unionists want to hear.

ESPINO:

Well, you brought up one issue that I think is something people within the union and people who study the union debate, and that is, where are you going to put your priorities? Are you going to put your priorities in organizing or in services that you provide to the members?

01:36:09

HOLGUÍN:

Okay. You know, when Andy Stern got elected to be president of SEIU in 1996, he ran against Mr. [David] Herzog, who had been the secretary-treasurer forever, and he was John Sweeney's appointee, I guess, to run for president of SEIU when Sweeney went to work for AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations]. As soon as Andy Stern announced his candidacy, Mr. Herzog withdrew, because he knew he was no match for Andy Stern. Andy Stern was much younger, more aggressive. Andy Stern had been an organizer in the western United States, and he was well known as an organizer, and he had a good platform.

So we in our Latino caucus, which is in the western region and includes Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, Idaho,

Nevada, Arizona, California, we started fundraisers and got some money to support Andy Stern's campaign, and at one union event, we went and gave the check of what we raised for his campaign. So, needless to say, we were supportive. I believed what I understood Andy Stern's focus and mission to be, and I believe that when he went--this is my understanding; someone may say that my understanding is erroneous--but as I understand, Andy went to John Sweeney and asked him as head of the AFL-CIO to put more money in organizing, because he said, "Union membership is going down. We need to start organizing." And Andy had already got SEIU locals to commit to that already, because we were doing that. And my understanding is that Andy Stern was also too concerned with the fact that AFL-CIO caters too much to the politicians and wants to do all of their negotiating in Washington. He says, "Our negotiating and our efforts have to be in the field."

And as I understand, John Sweeney did not want to commit money for organizing, and so Andy Stern then proposed to divest itself from AFL-CIO and got a few other major locals or major international to also withdraw from membership to AFL-CIO, forming the Change to Win group. There were, I don't recall exactly how many, but I think there were five or six of the major internationals that joined us, and being the major international, that hurt AFL-CIO very badly, because that's revenue lost.

And I recall as we had gone into that direction that at many conventions and many meetings, at the federation meeting, a lot of other internationals were bad-mouthing SEIU, because allegedly we had not been loyal to AFL-CIO. Well, to each his own. We believed in something that AFL-CIO under John Sweeney didn't want to do, and we went ahead and started doing it, and as we did it, more of those internationals joined us. And John Sweeney himself made no bones about the fact that he was angry. He was angry at Andy Stern, he was angry at SEIU, and he wanted us to reconsider. But we were already on a roll, and we were not about to change the course of our mission.

So it follows that among unions sometimes we don't agree on what needs to be done. But I believe that organizing is very essential, because I've seen the failure to do that causing organizations to go by the wayside. I was very proud of the fact that I was a m_____ at one time and that we were organizing, and when I say we were organizing, I personally used to go--I think I went to every UC campus in the state of California. I went to Chico State, I went to Humboldt State, and that is a long drive. We used to talk to people, and we talked about why we needed that change. I said, "We need the education system to change," because that was our major concern. We needed to make sure that our people, our Chicanos and Latinos got educated so they could get into any endeavor in society where they could do the best for their own people and for themselves.

And I saw that when we left, MECHA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan] became, in many places, a social club. It's not until recently that you begin to see MECHAs springing here and there in high schools and community colleges, and they, hopefully, are doing something, because one of the things that we did was support the foundation of Chicano Studies, hopefully in every campus. We also wanted that in the community colleges, and we helped in some community colleges to do that. But I feel that the people who get educated may sometimes forget where they came from, may see their own personal needs as the first priority, their families as the first priority, and that's fine, because as those families progress, so do we.

In his book, Rudy Acuña talks about--"Anything But Mexican"--he talks about Latinos being underrepresented in almost every field of professional endeavors or in the trades. We've always been the people, unskilled people, and I think to some people, Chicanos getting educated was a threat, because we understood why we were here, we understood what we needed to do, and we were outspoken enough to at least make other people stand up and take notice. I'm not saying that every Chicano that went to college was successful, because some of them have not been. I also did not subscribe, and I was criticized for that, that every Chicano needs to be college educated, because I believe there's a lot of dignity in the trades, and people in the trades can make a decent salary, a decent income to raise a family and to buy a home and aspire to all the things that we all want. So I encouraged those that didn't want to go to college, "Get yourself into a trade. There are many of the trades that put training programs, so you can become a trade unionist and earn good money."

My son was telling me that plumbers now make a lot of money, and I said, "Well, that's fine. I don't have a problem with that." Unions have begun to start promoting the idea of setting up training programs in the

different trades, whether it be masonry, whether it be a machinist, whether it be electricians, whether it be plumbers, whether it be whatever. Because with unskilled jobs nowadays, the competition being what it is, you cannot make a living. And this is one of the things that Andy Stern saw back in 2000 when he proposed the change. He said, "Industry is going away. It's not that unionism is going down. It's that the industry where union people used to work is not here anymore. It keeps going and it keeps leaving us, and we need to understand that the system has hurt working people."

I, along with a lot of people, was opposed to NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. I was very disenchanted when we went to Washington and after we heard President [William J. "Bill"] Clinton promise that he was going to lobby against NAFTA, and then we came home and we heard that he was pushing for it. And we knew that it was going to hurt, because immediately it began to hurt us here in this country, and it began to hurt people south of the border, and a lot of people have not put that into perspective.

When industry began to leave the U.S., it went overseas or it went south of the border, where the maquiladoras spread out all over along the border of U.S.-Mexico, and that hurt the people in Mexico as well, because it set up a system of slavery over there, where the people that work in maquiladoras sometimes were virtually imprisoned. Many of the maquiladoras were fenced in with armed guards. They would let people come in, a certain amount of people or certain number of people. Then they would close the gate, and the people that were in were there for the duration, and the people that were on the outside were outside for the duration. So that created a system where people would work, allegedly for better wages, but not really. They were making similar wages to what they would be making somewhere else, but also the working conditions had changed. Until this date, that happens.

The concept of the maquiladora then spread out to other countries in Latin America, so where Latin American working people now are hurting. And over here in this country, we complain that people are coming in illegally. Well, if there are no jobs in their country, or the jobs that are available are not providing enough earnings for them to support a family, what other choice do they have?

ESPINO:

That brings up an interesting point, because in past history, people like Ernesto Galarza were against undocumented, like having a bracero program, or I think even César Chávez, I'm not sure if I'm correct, but against that whole--did your union, the SEIU, take a position on the immigration issue, on immigration reform, the call for immigration reform?

01:42:56

HOLGUÍN:

For a long time I was disappointed with unions, because for the most part they did not want undocumented aliens. There was a time when the union discriminated even against other minority groups. It was over the years that out of necessity and because of the Civil Rights Movement and all that, they began to let ethnic groups join other unions, and to this day there's still a lot of need to organize them, because people that come from other countries have had experience with unions in their own countries, and so it's not that they don't understand unions, that they don't understand the power of being able to bargain for their working conditions and earnings. It's just that they were not allowed to.

And, yes, I think Dr. Galarza was an advocate of not having a bracero program, not because he was against the

concept itself, because we felt that under the bracero program, the workers could not organize into a union, could not have good working conditions, because they didn't have good working conditions and did not earn enough money. And even before that, I remember when the labor-camps people and the Department of Agriculture would argue that there were no undocumented people working in the fields of California, and Dr. Galarza would say, "Why is it that you can find the little fruit fly in the fields, and you can't find a hundred thousand undocumented workers in the field. If you walk along the freeway, you can see them all over the place.

César was against it only from the standpoint that the braceros were threatened to be sent home if they joined a union, so for the most part, even though they may have wanted to, they wouldn't, for fear of losing their jobs. So in that sense, I recall that César would say when he was organizing, he found out that the labor camps where the growers went for workers would give them the people that charged the least money. And César found out about it and went and talked to them and said, "Look. We have workers that have the right to be in the field, because they are U.S. born, because they are legally here." He said, "If you need an x number of workers, I don't mind if you hire the others after you hire all the workers we can give you. Then if you need other workers, out of necessity you can bring them in, but our workers should have priority." That was his position, and that's why he was opposed to the bracero program, and that's why he pushed to get rid of it, because the growers were using it to their advantage.

A lot of people don't know that the bracero program was agreed upon by Mexico and the U.S. for the duration of the war [World War II]. That was it. The war ended up in 1945, and the growers continued to argue, "Well, we still need them, because if we bring them in--if we let them go and we start hiring people here, the price of produce is going to go sky high." And under that threat, they continued to push to keep the bracero program going.

And, of course, we also didn't want to have to pay more for a head of lettuce or to pay more for whatever crops were available, so we ourselves are guilty of keeping the bracero program so long. But when it finally was over, that's when organizing the farmworkers became more a reality, okay, and it was our brothers, the Filipino farmworkers, that really decided they'd had it. Then we said okay, now that we have someone who has the same concern we have, we're going to join them, and that's when the farmworkers' movement began.

But, yes, the question of immigration with the union was something that in the past I can say, shame on you, because many of them would not, okay. Presently, I can tell you that on Monday, was it May seventeenth, yes, on Monday, May seventeenth of 2010, I again began to attend the federation meetings, which take place once a month.

ESPINO:

Maybe it was the sixteenth.

HOLGUÍN:

And I am a delegate from my local [721] to the federation. That's where we decide to endorse candidates, we decide on the issues to support, and everything else. And Maria Elena Durazo, true to form, challenged us to join her and anyone who wants to go, because they're going to have buses available, on July twenty-ninth is it going to be?

ESPINO:

May twenty-ninth. Are you talking to Arizona?

HOLGUÍN:

When the law comes into effect. It's ninety after the governor [Arizona Governor Jan Brewer] signed it.

ESPINO:

Yes. Well, I know there's a big demonstration May twenty-ninth--

HOLGUÍN:

Okay, that's it.

ESPINO:

--but I don't know if that's when the law is in effect.

01:49:04

HOLGUÍN:

Well, I think she said May twenty-ninth. I think Rosario [Holguín] went to see her today, and she was going to get information from her, because we're very close to Elena. But she's challenged us because they're going to have buses available on that day to go to Arizona, without any papers. She says, "If you have the guts and you believe what it feels like, you go without papers. Be prepared to be arrested. Be prepared to spend at least one night in jail." She said, "But we need to go en masse and let them know that we oppose the law that she signed." And so we are on notice to go, and I'm very tempted to go if it wasn't for my health. But Rosario might go. She's capable. So the position they're taking on immigration is that.

I think more and more, we're beginning to see that this has become not an immigration issue but racial profiling,

because no one can tell me that you can see someone and affirm that that person is undocumented. So how are they going to identify? Of course, we know that in Arizona, they're going after Mexicans. And it's interesting, because I was reading "Sonoran Strongman," and they've had this issue with Mexicans since before Arizona became a state, when it was still a territory. They didn't want Mexicanas around.

In Texas, Rudy [Acuña] affirms that they created the Texas Rangers to get rid of Mexicans in Texas. Of course they were not successful, because this Mexican is very resilient and has learned to survive almost any type of misfortune. And so they fought back and stayed there, and some of them came afterwards. So in terms of immigration, I think personally that it is not a new issue. It has been around for a long time.

I recall once some years ago that we went to have a convention of GLACLA *[FULL NAME?] I believe it was, in San Antonio, and I took my brothers and sisters from my union to the Alamo. I said, "You need to see the Alamo and learn why gringos pay so much homage to the Alamo." So that you know, if you don't, the Alamo has a little museum around the yard, where they have the history of the Alamo, and you can say immediately, if you know the conditions under which Mexico came out of the war of independence, that there's no way they could have thousands of well-uniformed, well-trained troops to come and invade the U.S.

They don't tell you that the Anglos that were in Texas during that time were settlers that had been allowed by permission of the Mexican government to settle there with some conditions. One condition is that they would practice the Catholic religion. Another condition is that they would pay their taxes to Mexico. And the Anglos that were there refused to do both. They continued to have their secret religious meetings, and they refused to pay taxes. So when Santana, who was president of Mexico, came, he was coming to claim the right of Mexico to demand what they expected the Anglos to do. The Anglos decided they were going to resist, and so the rest of it became history, because they were being told, "Get out of here," and they said, "No, we're going to stay here." And very true to form, they thought that they were going to get support from up north right away, which didn't come, and that's why they got wiped out. And they deserved it, because Texas was not their country.

ESPINO:

Well, that explains part of the history that we live here in Los Angeles, and that is white domination of the political-economic system after that, after the Mexican-American War, after the territories were lost. So how important is it to have a Latino or a Latina in positions of power in the union? How does it affect the union's position on immigration? I mean, Maria Elena Durazo is Latina. What if that position was filled by a non-Latino? Do you think that would make a difference?

01:57:00

HOLGUÍN:

Probably it would make a difference. It would be interesting to see how many people take up the challenge that Maria Elena put before us, because she asked everybody that was there. "You pass the word around in your locals, pass the word around in your communities. You are opposed to what that law is, you will join the caravan and go, and you go without papers, so you know what people without papers feel like, because you took a risk of being arrested."

My son, of course, is a U.S.-born citizen, but my oldest son [David] was at the last demonstration in Riverside again, and they confront physically the Minute Men, which are very prevalent in that area, San Diego, Riverside. They came to a fist fight about a month ago, and my younger son was seeing it on TV. He said, "You should

have seen David having it out with some gringo." [laughs]

I think Chicano Studies is good for that reason. It gave a lot of young people throughout the years an identity they didn't have. It gave them a sense of history, of why things are happening. And so when they get into positions of importance and power, they would at least have a voice, hopefully a strong voice, against injustice towards working people, because that's what it is. It's always been injustice about working people, the working class, the lower-working class, who have no voice. Because many politicians have gotten away with that, because they know that the twelve million or so undocumented people that we have here do not have a legal voice.

You know, I watch a lot of foreign movies, and what you begin to see more and more, which is not something you used to see, you see the illegal immigration from Asians that come in boxcars and ships and all that, in large numbers, and they get lost in the shuffle very quickly, sometimes because they're being exploited from their own people, and sometimes because they're being protected by their own people. And since we don't know the language, and we don't know the names, they get lost in the shuffle very easily, and many of them come with money. Of course, some of them are working class, but most of them pay good money to come here with a promise of being able to do something under a different system, not realizing always that they're getting something just as bad as it is in their own country, and that's the oppression and the exploitation.

But I think immigration is something that we're going to have to live with as we deal with it, for many years. I may not see a change in my lifetime, but I hope my kids will see it in their lifetimes, because we need a working class that will do the jobs nobody wants to do, but they need to get paid decent wages.

I recall hearing once that in Texas they had sent recruiters to the cities, trying to get people to go work in the farm, the cotton field and all that. And they were offering better wages than they pay braceros, but there were no takers. Blacks didn't want to go and work in the fields. Whites didn't want to go and work in the fields. That was passe. That was all right many years ago, and no more.

I remember my own father, when he jumped ship in New York, because he came here--originally, he came here illegally. He was in the merchant marines of Mexico and when he was in New York, he decided to jump ship, and then realizing how hard it was to get a job there, began to work his way down the cotton fields until he ended up in Texas. And then he decided to make his stay there and registered and became legal, became a citizen, and then got married and everything else. He did that all when he was younger. But he was telling me--in fact, when our university started an oral history project, my son went and he didn't know whom to interview, because he was told it has to be someone that's been around that can tell you history.

So he was telling me, well, who do I see? I said, "Well, you have your maternal grandfather, you have your maternal and your paternal grandfathers." I said, "Your maternal grandfather is in Texas. Your paternal grandfather is right here, your grandpa." And he says, "That's right." So he went and when he interviewed my father, he was surprised to hear about the things that my father witnessed in his migration to Texas. And, of course, you know my father was unskilled, but fortunately when the war began, they were training anybody that was available, and he trained to be a welder, and he got into a good trade, and he spent the rest of his life working for the same company, doing what he learned to do during the war.

ESPINO:

Was he unionized? Was he in the union?

HOLGUÍN:

Oh, yes. I didn't tell you about that yet. I went to work for them one summer, I don't recall what year, but I can tell you the name of the company. It was the Guarding House Brothers. They used to build construction materials, cement buckets, wheelbarrows, that kind of stuff, and they did it for when they were building dams all over the world, so they got big orders. They used to use these big hydraulic-operated cement buckets. You fill them out--you get a, what do you call it [unclear]? They haul them up and then they go and they open up--

ESPINO:

A crane?

02:04:47

HOLGUÍN:

The crane, yes. Then they open down the cement. Imagine how many cement buckets it takes to build a dam. So that's what he did for thirty-eight, thirty-nine years. But, yes, he was trained, and he was unionized. When I went to work for them, it was one summer where I don't know what I was doing. I don't know why I was--but for some reason, I wasn't working that summer, and I went to work under the notion that I was going to be a control engineer, so-called. So as such, I would have to learn everything that everybody was doing, and the promise that I was going to be promoted once I learned everything.

So I went and I learned machinist work, I learned welding, I learned steel breaking, I learned all of the stuff that everybody else was doing. But at the same time, the same day that I started working, the shop steward came to me and said, "You know, this is a closed shop and you have to join the union." I said, "Okay." So I said, "What do I get in return for joining?" So he told me all the beautiful things that the union has to offer, and so I signed up. About a month--it was in that month, they were having a union meeting down on Wilshire Boulevard in L.A., which is where all the unions were, and I was interested. So I asked the people who was going. [unclear] I said, "Well, I'm interested in what's going on, so I'm going to go." They said, "Oh, if you're going, we're going." So about three of them from the shop went with me.

And the first thing we have is the business agent tells us that contract renewal is coming up, and we need to be aware, because we're going to have to vote on it and all that. So the first thing I said, "Well, where's the last contract?" He said, "Well, people should have it." And all three people said, "We never got one." And I said, "I don't have one." So then he reached into the [unclear]. He said, "Well, here." It was for a contract. I said, "Okay. Next time we have a meeting, I'll be more informed." So I went and read the contract in one night. Then I started asking questions. "Who has the previous contract?" He says, "Well, somebody--." Jose Morales, I'll never forget him. He says, "Well, I think I have a contract stashed away somewhere." I said, "Well, bring them over." So he brought me two previous contracts, and I started reading and comparing, and I said, "Not much has changed since you got this contract eight years ago." "What do you mean? They told us this and they told us that." I go, "Well, [unclear]."

So then we started getting organized. That was my first attempt at--no, I had organized one before. [unclear] started organizing. One day my father called me to his department, says, "Come and have lunch with me." I said, "Okay." So I went and went up. He said, "Mira. The boss says that you'd better lay low," he said, "because you're

causing a lot of problems here." I said, "What do you mean? We're just into contract negotiation." He said, "Well, they don't want to, do they? They usually have the union come to them and they agree on what they're going to give the employees." I said, "Well, that's a sweetheart contract." He said, "Well, they already threatened me with my job." I said, "What did you have to do with it?" He said, "Well, you're my son." I said, "Well, I'm sorry."

So I told him, I said, "Look. I'm really not believing that they're going to give me a promotion." I said, "I know I am here just for the summer, so I'll be leaving very soon and you won't have to worry about it." So I left, and one day my father said, "You know, you planted a seed." He said, "We're going on strike." [laughs] And they did. And so they got pretty much what they wanted, but the bosses closed up shop and opened one factory in Buenos Aires, and one factory in Buffalo, New York, I think. And by that time--I had to be clear--most of the people that worked there, I think the one that had the least time with that company was about eighteen years. So they had all been there a long time, and it was a good place to work. They didn't hassle you too much, except the shop steward, no, the foreman. He was the one that thought he owned the world. And he knew that I was trouble. I think he was the one that passed the word to the boss.

But, yes, there is an interesting thing about that. My other idea about organizing--when I was working with training the Head Start people, AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, approached me and asked me to organize the Head Start people. So I went and organized people at CMEA *[FULL NAME?], ABC *[FULL NAME?], and Azteca, three Head Start programs. I organized them to join AFSCME.

ESPINO:

And how did they respond?

HOLGUÍN:

Good. Yes, they were good.

ESPINO:

Well, I think we're going to wrap up now, and I was wondering if you had any final comments or any final impressions you want to give. We've talked about so many different things in the twentieth century--

02:14:08

HOLGUÍN:

Well, like everything else, unless I took a book and start annotating in chronological order everything that

happened, it always happens that when I go home, I start thinking, oh, we didn't talk about this and we didn't talk about that. And so in my interview, I think you'll find a lot of going back to certain things that we didn't cover, which I feel need to be stated for the record somewhere.

Much has happened since I left county employment, and so many of the things that you have in there I am really not aware of it, because as a retiree, a retiree association is very far removed from everything else, and I find, as I did when I was an active employee, that active members don't want the old folks to intrude on what they're doing. And I'm very cognizant of that, because there was a time when Gilbert had hired a well-known union organizer, may he rest in peace. This man was retired. He had an illness which was very expensive to take care of, and so Gilbert had hired him under the table and told him to just be around as a volunteer and help out wherever you can, when, in fact, he was a salaried employee to get the health benefits. But I remember Henry * [LAST NAME?] came to our bargaining committee meeting once, trying to help, and obviously, like a good old timer, he wanted to give us a perspective of why negotiating and all that--and I remember one of our old-timer active members pretty much told him to, "Fuck off. We don't need you here."

And I figured I guess that's the same treatment I'm going to get, and I did. More and more, I kept feeling that they didn't want me. I was head of the Latino committee and secretary of the Latino caucus statewide for eight years, and when I retired, I had to give up that post, because only active members could be the chair of that committee, and I was the chair. And so when they appointed the next person, she told me the same thing, like, "You've done your part. We don't need you anymore." And so it's sad that we sometimes negate our own history. This is why sometimes little mementos like this are so handy, because you need reminders.

And you know, that's the same thing of our history anywhere, in the movement, in MECHA, anywhere you go. Newcomers think that they're going to start everything new, and they'll forget about what's been accomplished and where we need to pick up and continue to improve.

But, yes, I'm sure I'll think of something else. There's a lot of things that we've done beyond what I've narrated to you and what we're doing as a result of unionism with other groups, like ARA and CARA and CCS and many other groups, because the struggle continues. What we accomplish as active members, we need to protect as retirees, and that's another thing we forget. When I kept talking about Social Security protection, I said, "You know, these people in Washington want to lead us to believe that Social Security should be privatized." I don't know if you've heard about that. And I said, "The people like service employees, thank you to Donald Regan, don't pay Social Security, so they don't care."

And that's very sad, when we're saying, "Look. Look what they're trying. [George W.] Bush made it very clear, openly, we need to privatize." Even on his last term, he still said, "That's going to be my push." And that was his priority. But we made sure that he didn't succeed. Right now there's still some in there that want to do that, so we need to protect Medicare. What passed as Medi-Cal reform is not adequate, and again, like I say, even when you accomplish what you think you wanted to do, it's not really what you wanted to have."

There's a lot of people, you'll read in this--"¿Dónde está?" Yes, mira. I'll try to get you a copy of this. Por ejemplo, this is what we do. We lobby. We go to Sacramento and we lobby on propositions or measures. Here's on the healthcare reform and some of the things that they're not doing that we thought they were going to do. We have someone in there. We had a couple of people that--Donna Meredith is on the legislative committee. They go to Sacramento to look at what's going on in the legislature and bring us back information. We lobby our representatives. We write petitions to these guys over there and the struggle goes on. And people who think, well, I retired, I don't have anything to do, that isn't so. There's still a lot of things to do.

Because like I tell my son, "You put yourself in a position, through your own doing, where you don't have a union, where you don't have funds in your Social Security retirement fund, where you don't have health benefits." It took a long time for him to realize that he had to do something to take care of his health, because I told him, "We cannot afford to pay--." I mean, some of these medications cost over two hundred dollars. I said, "You know, we cannot--." I said, "We could provide shelter for you, we can provide food for you. We cannot provide you pocket money, and we cannot pay for your health needs." And so he sat there and he sat there, and,

oh, my granddaughter, since she started nursing, she said, "Well, you know, there are a lot of programs where you can get help," she said, "but you have to go and look for it." And now the kid's got two doctors now that take care of him. He gets his prescriptions paid for. I don't know who pays for them, but they have to be prescribed by a doctor. We give him money to take the bus to go to General Hospital, and he has to wait. Sometimes he'll have to take off real early in the morning to be seen after five or six hours waiting. I said, "Well, but that's what people do that don't have coverage." He says, "I know that. There's a lot of people there in line when I get there."

But it's interesting. Like I tell you, he--we don't have this anymore, right?

ESPINO:

Yes, it's still on.

HOLGUÍN:

I don't want this--

ESPINO:

Shall we wrap it up then? And we can continue talking off--

HOLGUÍN:

Are we going to meet again? Or is this it?

02:14:23

ESPINO:

Well, this might be it, but I'm going to talk to my supervisor and see what she thinks, because this is our ninth session.

HOLGUÍN:

Yes, because I think people need to hear what happens after.

ESPINO:

Right. Okay. Well, I'm going to stop it right now. [End of interview]