

A TEI Project

Interview of Lilia Aceves

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (December 11, 2008)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino and today is December 11, 2008. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, thank you Lilia, for agreeing to be interviewed. I'm really excited about this new interview series. I'd like to start with your family background, if you could tell me a little bit about your parents, where they were born, and then move on to your birth and where you were born.

Aceves

Okay. I don't know too much about my father. I know that he was born in Arizona, and I know that my grandmother, his mother, his mother's name was Carmen Guayacán, and my father's name was Miguel [G.] Acuña, and he always signed his name Miguel G. Acuña. So they were from Arizona and I'm not too sure--I know that my nephew Michael Macias tried to get some background, and what he got was that they had come from Mexico. But as I told him, I said, "You know, in those days there were no borders and this was

all Mexico, and I'm not too sure." I know my father was born, I think, in 1906, so say that my grandmother was born twenty years before that, that would have made it--what, are you better at math than me in your head?

Espino

Late 1800s?

Aceves

Yes. Well, and this was all Mexico until 1848, and then it still remained very Mexico, so that's about what I know about him. Then he did tell me that he started working in the mines when he was thirteen years old, so I know that he was married. He had three children, and his wife died at childbirth, I believe, with a fourth child. Now my mother Francisca Medrano on the other hand, I know a lot about her. They're from--now it's Calera Victor Rosales, Zacatecas, Mexico, and her grandfather Bonifacio Pichardo became a very successful land owner. The story goes that he got married with a widow that had a little piece of land and a couple of cows and whatever, and evidently--at this point I can't remember his first name, but his last name was Pichardo. So he became a very successful farmer. He had only two children, a male and a female, which is my grandmother, and her name was Valentina Pichardo and then de Medrano, because she got married with my grandfather, who was a very poor peasant farmer that came from a very poor family.

Aceves

So they say that Grandfather Pichardo was very, very upset, because Valentina got married with Crescencio Medrano, this poor peasant. So in order to appease them, she gave them her firstborn. But I mean, they were all there in the same farm. It's still there, and maybe I can dig up some pictures next time, because it still looks the same. So she in turn--they lived on one side of the farm, and she lived in another side of the farm, but the grandparents brought up my Tía Lupe. But it seems that my grandfather, Crescencio Medrano, became active in the [Mexican] Revolution, and, of course, his sentiment was with the peasants, right? So they say that Pichardo came one day and said, "You'd better leave, because they're coming to hang you, and you'd better take the two girls, the two oldest girls and your wife," and I understand there

was a baby there, and he left all the rest of the family. There were three boys and two little girls.

Espino

Your aunts and uncles.

Aceves

Yes, my uncles and my mother's brothers and sisters. My mother was the second one that was born. First is my Tía Lupe and then my mother, and then it was Leon [Medrano] and Refugio [Medrano], we call him Cuco, Alfredo [Medrano] and Regina [Medrano] and Amelia [Medrano], and then I don't remember the baby's name or anybody. So they came and they settled in New Mexico, in the mines there. They say that my Tía Lupe was pretty pampered, so being brought up with the grandparents, her personality was very different than my mother's. My mother rolled up her sleeves and went to work in the rich people's homes, and she would bring all the leftover food they would eat, and she adapted right away.

Espino

Was that your grandparents also left, also fled?

Aceves

Just the grandmother, Valentina. Valentina came, Crescencio came, my Tía Lupe, my mother, and that baby. Well, it seems that my grandmother Valentina wasn't able to tolerate this--I mean, she was used to everybody doing--I mean, they had a lot of help. Even though farmers have a very different attitude, she still was--I understand that her father's--because the grandfather didn't read or write or do arithmetic and she did all of that, so she was his right hand, and she was very independent. You can imagine in the--it would be 1916, I think that's what my mother told me. She was sixteen years old when they came over here, and she was very independent. I mean, she would be very, as they say, igualada. Well, she was, like I say, her father's right hand, and she felt very independent and she didn't go by all the standards that the women went there. And they were land owners, so there's always different manners for the classes, and in Mexico it was more class than race over there, and I think it still is, maybe not as much.

Aceves

Anyway, so they came, and my aunt got married with my uncle, Joe Villagrana, and my mother got married with--I don't remember the first name, but her last name was Porras. So I'm not too sure what happened to my mother's marriage, but she ended up coming to Long Beach to live. There was my great-uncle, my Tío Telésforo Medrano, who was Crescencio, my grandfather's brother, so he told them to come to Long Beach, that he had a place for them to stay, and obviously there were jobs, otherwise they wouldn't have come. So they came and they settled in Long Beach, and my uncle Telésforo was involved with the Salinas, which was my father's wife's family. So like it's going to happen now--people started to move in together, and they would get a house and share the rent. So my father, his mother, his wife and at the time his three children, were going to help with the rent, and my Tío Telésforo made arrangements, and that would be my mother, my grandfather, and my Tío Telésforo. So that's how my mother met my father.

Espino

Living in the same house?

Aceves

Yes. So at some point they moved to Los Angeles. Oh, no, then my grandmother passed away, my grandmother Valentina passed away.

Espino

Your mother's mother.

Aceves

Yes. So my grandfather, by that time he was back in Mexico, he sent the two girls, Regina and Amelia for my mother to bring them up. He just did, and my mother didn't question it. So my aunts were little, because I know they went to Lafayette Junior High School, so they came here and they moved into the downtown area. So we always lived--I think the first house we lived was Stanford, that's where I was born. Then we moved to Ceres, which was a block over, and then we moved to Gladys, which was a block--it would be a block east and a block west, so we were in that neighborhood. I was there for my first ten years. My Tío Telésforo--well, it was during the depression, everybody

bootlegged, and he made beer, and everybody would go out and work and go look for work, more or less. My mother always had a job. She always managed to have a job. She was never without a job. My aunt [Regina] says that they used to all go out in the morning and go look for jobs. I don't know how serious they were, because I remember she took me one time to go look for a job, and she said, "Sienta te aqui." I can remember that.

Aceves

When I used to tell her the things I remembered, she said, "You can't possibly remember that. You were only two years old." I says, "I remember you sitting me over there." And I could see they would go into the laundries, well, that was the work that they knew. There were laundries in the area, and they would be roped off where all this group of people would be standing, and this man would come out and say, "You, you, and you, come," and then everybody else would leave. And I guess my aunt, since she was short, she knew she would never be picked out, or maybe she hid. And she says that my mother would come from work and she would stand up and open the door, and everybody in the neighborhood would be there drinking beer and playing cards and smoking, and they had all gone to look for a job. And my aunt Regina says my mother said, "¡Si salen a buscar trabajo, rogandole a dios que no encuentren!" But everybody managed. There was always somebody coming from Texas or something, and they would go to the house and they would stay there till they found a job and a place they could afford to rent, and that's the way it was in the thirties.

Aceves

Well, little by little they all got married. My Aunt Regina got married and moved to Oceanside. My Aunt Amelia got married and went to live in a flat. In those days they had a lot of flats that were four/two, two flats downstairs and two upstairs, or two-story buildings, and in between there were homes, but they were always more expensive. So my Aunt Regina got married, my Aunt Amelia got married, my Tío Cuco got in trouble and my mother shipped him to Mexico.

Espino

Do you remember what he did?

Aceves

He probably got somebody pregnant. Yes, because that's another story, because they were in the neighborhood and the sister were little, and the sisters of the girl he got pregnant would always pick on me in school, so I knew who they were. Anyway, so he went. It was a very beautiful family, extraordinarily beautiful, all the sisters. So then my uncle kept on bootlegging, so I remember one time my mother coming home, I don't know whether because she worked across the street on Ceres. Yes, there was a laundry across the street, so she worked across the street, and she came home and I know she got real upset with my uncle, because he was there playing cards with the guys, and so we moved away.

Aceves

Now that I'm older, I don't know whether my father was in the picture now or what, because I remember where we moved. It was across the street from this little parish, Nuestra Señora de la Imaculada and it's still there. I passed by there not too long ago, and it's a sewing factory. So we lived across the street, and I would, you know how in May ofreces flores a la virgin de Guadalupe, and I would see my father there, and I would come home and I'd tell my mother, "Vi al señor." "¿Cuál señor?" "Usted sabe, ese señor." "¿Cuál señor?" "El que usted dice que es mi papá." So eventually--I must have been very little, because I was always going by the name of Lilia Medrano, because the customs in Mexico, si es una hija natural, you go by the mother's name. So he registered me in school, and he registered me as Lilia Acuña. I never said anything, but from that day on I started to use Acuña.

Espino

So you were born at the same time that he was living in the house with his other family?

Aceves

No, no, no, no. That was way after, way after. I don't know, I could ask my sisters when their mother died, and I could figure it out exactly, but no, they left for Arizona. According to my sisters, they left because he couldn't find a job here. According to my mother and my aunt, they left because she was pregnant, so maybe it was a little bit of both. So although they say that when

they came back [father's mother's daughters] that my Grandmother Carmen [Guayacán] had come over to say, "Me dicen que tengo una nieta," and, of course, the family was real upset. But anyway, I don't know that my mother and my grandmother got along together. I think that there was a little friction there.

Aceves

So anyway, then he was in the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. I remember that he was in the WPA--

Espino

Your father.

Aceves

--and they worked--the check was sent to the house, but they worked two days, three days. Everybody worked, but sometimes they worked--everybody had a job, but I guess that's probably in the records. We could probably find out how the money, if they were paid according to their needs, like he had three children and a mother and himself, and they just worked whatever hours that they developed, because I know that he worked doing the Pasadena Freeway, and he worked--at the time it was Central High School. Then it became the Board of Education, and now I think they tore down the building there, so there were a lot of things that he worked on in the city in construction. It was always in construction. And there were times when my father--if he wasn't working, he would take care of me.

Espino

Your father?

Aceves

Yes. As a matter of fact, when we moved to Gladys there was a Chávez family downstairs. It was María Chávez and Raúl Chávez and his two sons, Raúl Chavez and Salvador Chavez. And María asked one time that my mother was going out, she asked her, "¿A dónde va tan temprano?" "La voy a llevar que la cuiden, verdad?" So, dice pues, "Yo la puedo cuidar." So then that made it real nice, because my mother would leave me in bed. Of course, she would make me drink a ponche. I'm sure she'd put three eggs in it and stand over me till I

drank it all, because she figured if she doesn't eat all day long till I come home, it'll be okay. [laughs] So María would come from downstairs and pick me up and take me to school, so I remember that. I was still in kindergarten.

Aceves

At one point she had a nervous breakdown, María had a nervous breakdown, and they disappeared from day--I mean, I really, really missed them. Then is when my mother had to ask people in the neighborhood if they would take care of me, and that's where I witnessed a lot of domestic violence. I can understand it now, because the men would go out to look for a job, and the corners just the way they are right now, and then after if they didn't get picked up they would all get their pennies together and buy a bottle of something, and then in the afternoon they would go home. It didn't matter what happened, it would turn them off. I mean, the only little thing. I remember this particular family that was across the street. She had a sister that was very gay and looked very different than Concha. Concha always was pregnant and having a baby. But I forget what her sister's name was. She would come over and fix food and bring goodies for the kids, and she'd make everybody laugh, and she was a very attractive woman. What I remember, that she had real dark hair, black, black hair, and she was very white, and she wore a low-cut dress--[Interruption]

Espino

Okay. You were talking about Concha.

Aceves

This lady, Concha's sister across the street. So she would come over, and nobody wore low-cut dresses in those days. So she would have a low-cut dress and then her cleavage would show, so--

Espino

We're talking, what, forties?

Aceves

No, no, this was the thirties. This was before--

Espino

Before World War II?

Aceves

Oh, yes, yes, yes, because I got sent to boarding school in either January of '41 or '40, so this was all before I'm ten or eleven years old. So I remember this particular time, which is the time that really scared me. So when the lady left, then Concha tells all the kids, "Don't you dare say anything that she was here to your father." Well, you know how kids are, one of them said Concha's sister had been there, so the father started to hit Concha and the kids started to cry, and as each one cried, he hit them. He hit each and every one of them. So I hid behind the couch, a big couch like that. I said, I know I'm next. So that night or I don't remember exactly, but I know I told my mother, "You know, you don't have to take care of me. You don't have to pay anybody to take care of me." I know she used to pay them three-fifty a week, and she only earned something like seventeen dollars, fifteen to seventeen dollars a week. A penny a shirt she got paid for ironing a shirt. So I said, "I can take care of myself. Anyway, I go to school till two o'clock, and then from there I go to All Nations, and by the time I get through with All Nations," that was a community center in the area, "you're home." So I kind of--.

Aceves

In between there, though, she did put me in a nursery school that was across the street from Ninth Street School, and I remember telling her, too, that I didn't like going there, because they would put us to take a nap, so I would lay down and I wasn't sleepy, so I'd get up and go play on the swings. They'd come and pick me up and take me back and put me--they did that several times, but I don't know if I didn't understand or I just did what I wanted to do. So I remember them one time telling my mother that if I didn't mind, I wasn't going to be able to go there, so I told her the same thing. I says, "Well, you don't have to put me there." I don't remember which one came, whether it was the Concha or the nursery school, but I was able to talk her into letting me be on my own. So then I would go to the city library downtown and stop by at the Biltmore Hotel and play, and stop by at Pershing Square and listen to all those men preaching and talking. [laughs]

Espino

At nine years old?

Aceves

Yes. It was before I was ten, ten or eleven, yes.

Espino

Wow. And you weren't afraid to be on the street?

Aceves

No, no.

Espino

All the men hanging around?

Aceves

No, no, no, I wasn't afraid. I just wasn't. And in those days you didn't hear as much. I'm sure, being human, that there was all kinds of things going on, but you didn't hear about it. And Skid Row was a jumping place. It wasn't like it is. I mean, there was a lot of music, a lot of people, and yes, there was a lot of drinking, too, but it was lively. It was lively. Then they built the Dorkal Theater, the theater right there on 7th Street, but we would go downtown to the movies on Sundays, it was a dime. My mother would give me fifty cents, and I'd take four other kids with me. But, yes, there was a certain amount of freedom that my mother allowed. She was very trusting, too, now that I think back, but that was the first ten years, maybe even up to January '41.

Aceves

I was in the sixth grade when she put me in boarding school, and boarding school was supported by the Methodist Episcopalian Home Missionaries. So I asked, was it Miss Hodge, to give me the name and the address of the school, because my mother wanted that information. It turns out that where my mother worked, and she was working in this laundry, and at the corner of 9th Street and I forget that other corner, there was a little store. Everybody had little stores, and it turns out that this couple had brought up a niece or a granddaughter or something, and they told my mother they had put her in this school, and my mother thought it was a good idea. According to my cousins

she said, "Well, she's growing up, and it would be better if she would be in a safe place." So I went to Frances de Pauw after that.

Aceves

Now, during the summers I would always go to Oceanside where my aunt lived. My mother would send me there. I know a couple of times they sent me in the train. My father would put me right here at the Union Station once it was built, because I remember going to the Union Station when it was built. They had a big parade, and my piano teacher was Miss Pimone and she lived right there on Olympic with her--two sisters and two brothers, and Miss Pimone earned a little money by giving piano lessons. Her brother, his name was Villa and he was an artist, and I don't know what the other brother and the other sister did, because I know that the other sister took care of the house. She was crippled from one leg. She dragged a leg, and she was very petite, where Miss Pimone was a heavysset woman. So I know they were in the parade, and they were in an old-fashioned carriage, so I remember when that opened. I don't remember what year, but that's easily checked out.

Aceves

I was in the sixth grade when I went, the fifth or sixth grade, whatever year you are, because I did start school when I was--

Espino

Probably eleven, twelve.

Aceves

No, I was ten or eleven. So I went to boarding school Frances de Pauw. I was there for five years, and that school was--when Frances de Pauw came into the area, she felt that the most deprived group of people were the Mexican women, and she felt if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family. So she went to the Methodist Episcopal Home Missionaries and she said she would donate her home if they would support this boarding school for girls. Now, when I went, there was a maximum of ninety-five girls, and it started from the third grade through the twelfth grade. But when it started, they started with kindergarten or first grade, but I guess they kept cutting back.

Aceves

And that was--I often wonder what kind of life I would have ended up if I hadn't gone to boarding school, because I was exposed to a middle-class Caucasian culture, and whether we didn't like it--we didn't always like the food, but we were growing and hungry, so we ate. And most of the teachers were very devoted. They were home missionaries. I mean, I had problems with maybe one, but it was mostly because the kids, we got into little squabbles, and they would take the side of the other kid and not mine. But I did very well. I still have friends from there. We've maintained friendships. Matter of fact, we've kind of lost being as close as we used to, but my "comadre", she's still in the area, doesn't live too far. I baptized her firstborn, and she named her--at the time I was going by the name of Lillian, so she named her Lillian, and I still keep--for a long time we kept in touch. Now I think about them once in a while and, "I have to call Vicki Bernal Foster," or, "I have to call Alice Hernandez Precado," and some of them have passed away. My other very close friend, Helen Hernandez passed away not too long ago, but we were in the same class, and when we came home we went to Belmont High School.

Aceves

So boarding school was very interesting. Like I say, if a class was nine in a class, that was a big class, so we got a lot of attention. We learned a lot. As a matter of fact, I remember going from history to Bible or Bible to history, either one of them, and it was contradictory, the history and Bible. And the same teacher taught the class, so there was question on top of question. Oh, that reminds me. When I was little and I was going to make my First Holy Communion, or I'd already made it, anyway, I went to catechism. I went to catechism, I don't know if it was every day or every other day, I don't remember exactly, because the church was across the street. I don't remember how old I was, but I was little. No, I must have been nine years old, because my aunt Regina moved to Tijuana. Her and her husband bought land in Tijuana and they moved. They had about six acres, and he took care of pigs and my aunt took care of the chickens. And those pigs, there's good mother pigs and not very good mother pigs. There were some pigs that they were in so much pain that they wouldn't care, and they would step on the piglets and they killed them, so when those kind of pigs were going to have a litter, my aunt and her husband would be all night long, with the mother pig so when the babies were born they would

protect them, and the pig wouldn't squash them. Then there were other pigs that you could leave them alone and all the piglets would be safe.

Aceves

So then there was always a runt, and my aunt would take it and feed him with a bottle, and that little pig would follow my aunt all over the place. So I was kind of attached to the pigs. They were very clean. They kept them very clean, and when you went to feed them they kind of got to know you, and some of them would snort like they were mad at you or something, and others didn't. So I knew a lot about pigs, I had had a lot of experience. So I remember we were in catechism, and they had young girls teaching catechism. What were they, probably young teenagers, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old, with the little kids, the little ones. So I remember that I kept asking questions and they would lose control, because the other kids would get bored and start playing and fighting and whatever. So I remember that particular time the girl lost control. Then the nun came over. Now, they were the social service nuns that wore the gray dress and a veil up to here, and she lost control. Then the priest came over, and I remember so distinctly, I was so traumatized, he says, "Now, what do you want to be? Do you want to be like a little bird that eats or takes a drink of water and then looks up to the heaven and gives thanks to God? Or do you want to be like a pig that just eats and never thanks God?" Well, I got a little offended, because I felt a certain--I mean, I liked pigs. So I remember raising my hand and I said, "Father, didn't you say God made everything?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, then, if he made everything, then he made the pigs and he loved the pigs also." And he just said, "Out!" just, "Out!" so I was thrown out of catechism.

Espino

You were probably nine or ten at that time. Was this before boarding school?

Aceves

I think it was before I made my First Holy Communion. I made my Holy Communion when I was eight, so--

Espino

Seven, eight years old.

Aceves

So I was, yes, about eight years old. I remember that.

Espino

You were questioning.

Aceves

Because I identified. So when I've told that story he says, "Oh, yes, you couldn't question a priest. You still can't, for that matter." But anyway, I remember then the kids told me they were all going to some big outing, and I remember going and saying, "Well, I'm going to go on the outing, too." And I remember the Sister saying, "You can't go. You haven't been coming to catechism." I must have looked very sad. She says, "Oh, go ahead."

Espino

So just getting back a little bit to your life at home before you went to boarding school. I was just wondering if you--[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, I'm sorry. My phone rang. But I wanted to ask you about the first house that you lived in, when you lived with the other families during the depression time, when you would also receive visitors and people, family members coming from different places, what the living arrangements were like, where did people sleep? How did that work out?

Aceves

I don't exactly remember the first house that we lived in on Stanford. That was a little flat. There were four of them, two upstairs and two downstairs, and I don't know if it was two bedrooms or one bedroom, but we were crowded. I know I always had my own bed. I always slept alone. I don't remember exactly the sleeping arrangements. I know that there was always a couch, people slept on the couch. There were always beds, there were cots. I remember that I also got lost when I lived in that house, and I opened up the screen--this is what my aunt tells me. That part I don't remember. But my aunt told me that I opened up the screen with a broom--it was a latch--and I took off, and they couldn't find me. So they looked all over and it turns out that there was a

Baptist church on Olympic and Ceres, a big, big church, and somebody found me and took me there. So I think they heard it on the radio or something, but I was lost pretty much all day long.

Aceves

There was always somebody that was home with me, somebody was out of work, or somebody was living with us, or somebody didn't have a home and they brought them over and they could stay with me, and so that was how it-- I'm assuming it was crowded, but I remember them talking, but I do kind of remember them also sitting at a big table and everybody sitting together. The kitchens were always big in those, or at least they seemed big to me.

Espino

Right, as a little girl.

Aceves

But, yes, they were always big. The rooms always seemed to be big, and there was everything. Every house had a Murphy bed, there were beds that came out from the wall, so there were places for people to sleep, and I know that we had one bathroom, because I remember my aunt saying this story a lot. So then after I got lost, then everybody would just have me there because they couldn't trust me because I learned how to open the doors and how to do everything. So she says that she was taking a bath, so she had me sitting there on the toilet, and she says that after she had taken a bath and she was all dressed up that I told her, "¿Gina, tu tienes dos abezas? ¿Tú tienes dos cabezas?"

Espino

Abezas without the C, yes.

Aceves

I couldn't talk, and everybody would laugh, because evidently I saw her pubic hair, so I--

Espino

[laughs] I didn't get it. Oh, because she had to have you close by. Funny.

Aceves

Yes. So they always used to tell that story, and they used to say it in mixed company, so it must have been really, really funny for people, because usually you didn't hear that kind of talk in mixed company. So that was the first house. Then when they all moved out, and I remember the neighbors--you always had a real community in the neighborhood. I mean, everybody knew everybody. And I know the lady next door, Chole I guess her name was, Soledad, then she had two sons, and she was the only one that spoke English in the neighborhood, so you always went to her for her to write letters or something like that. So then when we moved to Ceres--I think it's Ceres--that was across the street from the laundry where my mother worked, there was another family there. He had a daughter and his sister. I know their last name was Martinez, and by that time my Tía Regina had gotten married, but my Tía Amelia was there, but Tío Telésforo and then my mother and I. But the front room was used as a bedroom, and then the dining area had beds in it, too. The kitchen was real big. So it was crowded, but I didn't think anything of it.

Aceves

So then when we went by ourselves, my mother and I went to live--my Tía Amelia got married and she moved upstairs, and then we moved to Gladys. Then it was only my mother and I. My father never really lived with us. He came over every night, but he always went home after work and had dinner with my grandmother and his kids. I know that there was a period when my mother couldn't find a babysitter, and my father used to call my grandmother La Jefa, and he says, "Se la tengo que llevar a la jefa," and my mother was kind of stuck. I mean, I don't know if that was after María Chávez, that family had disappeared--

Espino

From downstairs?

Aceves

Yes. Because I was still in kindergarten. I went over there, and I know I went to Fremont Elementary School and I was in kindergarten, and I must have stayed there about six months, living with them. They lived down in downtown in the temple area. They had a three-room with--downstairs. I know that after my

grandmother passed away, my sisters moved up to an apartment upstairs, but I thought the one downstairs was a lot better, because it was three rooms, the kitchen, the front room, and the bedroom, and then there was a sharing of the bathroom. I remember my sister Rosie Acuña-Rodríguez], the oldest one, I remember her giving me baths all the time, and I used to play with my sister Jenny Acuña-Macias all the time. She had a lot of dolls, and we'd play day in and day out. I know they tell me that Mike Acuña, who had a fatal accident, and he was only twenty-four, I know that they said he always felt very protective of me, because he was the big brother, when we would go to school. So that was the way--the living was very--thinking back, they were very humble, but they were adequate and comfortable. We never lacked. I don't ever remember being cold. I don't remember being hungry, or any of the kids in the neighborhood being hungry. So it seemed that we had enough, that we had enough.

Aceves

A few people had cars, because I know that once my Tía Amelia, she got TB, and I know my mother went begging for people--she wanted to go see her every weekend. I know my father had a car, and my uncle had the truck, and he would put us all in the truck and we'd go see her. She was there two years before she passed away.

Espino

Where was she sent?

Aceves

To Olive View [Sanatorium]. Yes, tuberculosis was very prevalent, and everybody had at least one member of the family with tuberculosis, and nobody thought anything. I mean, they were sent away, and I know that for up to I guess the time I went to boarding school I had to go every six months and they gave you an injection. But I always would get all red, so then I had to go get an x-ray, but the x-ray would come clear. Both my mother and I did that all the time. I don't remember if--she never missed work. She worked from dawn to dusk. I mean, I got a job working for the May Company when I was in high school. I went on the 4-4 Plan [4 hours of school, 4 hours of work], and I was making forty cents an hour, and that year I made more money than she did,

and I was working part-time and she was working fulltime. I mean, I really felt that--anyway, that was the way the living quarters were, the neighborhood. There was always a lot of food. The women always were cooking from scratch and they would make the menudo, the mole, tortillas. Most of the women didn't work. My mother was the only one in the neighborhood that I remember that worked during that time.

Espino

Do you think they did other work from home, iron from home?

Aceves

I remember after or during the war that the comadre next door, she worked at home from the garment--but the kids were already big. I mean, the oldest girls were already working, and I remember her saying that, "The girls don't have to get educated. They're going to get married. Just the boys get educated." So I remember the two older girls working in homes in Beverly Hills or in some affluent neighborhood, because there was only one telephone and that was at the Ford Hotel. I think it's still there. And I know I used to go with--because the other gals were my age, and we would go over there and they would call her up, call up the sister. I don't know what the mother wanted them to do or say or whatever.

Aceves

Then this family that lived downstairs, after the Chavez moved out this family moved in, and she put in a telephone, and we used to use her telephone. I don't know who else had a phone, I don't remember, but I remember that they would come and call us if there was a phone call for us, and we'd go and use it. I don't remember who, because nobody had phones. Nobody had phones.

Espino

What about a radio?

Aceves

Oh, yes. No, the radio, yes, you always had a radio, and some people had victrolas. But yes, everybody had a radio. As a matter of fact, we had a big radio. I know the last radio we had was a Zenith. I mean, I even had it when I

moved to the first house we bought, and that was in '48, I think. But the radio was always in the front room, and our house across the street from the church was, you walked up the stairs and on the right side was a front room, and then there's a little room which was my bedroom, and then there was a hallway and another bedroom, and then the dining room and then the kitchen, and there was a porch. But my mother converted the porch into the kitchen and the kitchen into a dining room, and the dining room that had a fireplace into a bedroom, and people would stay there when people came. That time we were just by ourselves.

Aceves

And when my uncle had his accident, my Tío Telésforo had his accident, my mother put him in my bedroom, and she put me in that other room, so it was kind of like an extra bedroom for if anybody came over. So we didn't seem--at least I didn't know I was poor. I remember when I realized we were poor, though. My father had brought the newspaper, because he did read English, and he brought the newspaper and the newspaper had a magazine in it, and in the front--I'm sitting on the floor looking at this magazine, and it had the average American family in the United States, and I could see the background of the home and all of that, and that's when I realized that we were poor and that we weren't average.

Espino

Because that picture showed--do you remember what it showed?

Aceves

It showed a real nice home and nice furniture, like you'd see a lot of them now. And then the kids used to make fun of me, because I had a fantastic--how do you say it--I was a big storyteller. I remember this gal that lived on the corner, Angela, and I remember saying some kind of a story and she said, "Well, if you were so rich you wouldn't live in that house." I said, "Well, what's wrong with the house? We have everything." [laughs] But I guess with her telling me that, some kids realize it, but I thought I had everything. Oh, there was a lady from Panama that used to sew, and I guess that my mother was the only one who could afford to buy her clothes, so I think every week she came with a dress and she would talk my mother into buying a dress for me. She

would make me a dress, and I think my mother would give her two dollars. I remember her one time giving her three-fifty, because she said she couldn't afford--and I can still see the little lady. She was real short and real small. She sewed beautifully, but people couldn't afford to buy her stuff, except my mother couldn't afford it, but she was so thrifty. I mean, she didn't throw--I mean, even my son, Billy Aceves, says that he used to go after we moved to City Terrace, he was her first grandson, and we were living with her. My husband Bill was in the service. And Bill says he would go over there and she would heat the tortillas and he would look at it, it had green spots. So he would tell her, "It has green spots." And she said, "Well, give it to me," and she would cut all the green spots and give it back to him. [laughs]

Aceves

But I mean, and she made stuff of things that I would consider were rotten. Or she would make tortilla soup. In those days tortilla soup--now you have it at restaurants, but she would make it with the told tortillas, and she would send me to the corner store to go ask them to give me a bone con tuétano. Do you know what tuétano--with marrow.

Espino

Okay, yes.

Aceves

So that would give the soup a flavor. In the carniceros they gave it to you free. Sometimes you had to pay twenty cents for something, but she made everything, and she sent money to her family all the time. In Mexico when they had the drought she supported them for eight or nine years. They had a drought in Mexico in the thirties, yes, because we went in '42 and the drought was still going on.

Espino

It was, what, Zacatecas?

Aceves

Yes, where probably all that northern part. That's probably in the history. We could look that up. Yes, she managed. I mean, she was so thrifty. Like I say, we

always had a home. I think the most rent we ever paid was eighteen dollars, but that's what she earned a week, fifteen to eighteen dollars a week.

Espino

Do you think you always had nice dresses, and she dressed nicely herself?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Do you think that people looked at you and your mom as people who had a little bit more than the rest?

Aceves

Yes, yes. Yes, because I wore shoes all the time, and the kids would wear the shoes to school and come home and take them off and go barefooted. I mean, my cousins tell the story, when she used to take me they lived right here in Belevedere, they used to call it Maravilla, and my mother would tell my aunt, "Don't let her go barefooted. She's not used to going barefooted." Well, I loved going barefooted, so my cousin Joe Villagrana, who passed away, because we took the bus and he would see her getting off the bus and he would run to the house, "There comes my aunt! There comes my aunt!" And I can remember my cousin Emily Villagrana-Castro, she would pick me up and take me to the bathroom and wash my feet, put my shoes on and then nobody would say anything. [laughs]

Espino

So it sounds like your mom had some very strict values about raising you. Do you think she got that from her mother?

Aceves

Well, she was thirty years old when she had me. She was already--I think that's why she was so in love with my father, because she never got pregnant. After her first husband I'm sure she must have had some affairs in between her first husband and my father, but she never, never got pregnant. It wasn't till she got pregnant with my father, and I guess in those days everybody wants to be, well, I guess she wanted to be a mother, so yes, she was very, very--I mean, it

seemed like her life centered around me. But not really, because she loved her brothers and her sisters. My cousins still remember. I mean, she was always getting clothes from everybody, and if anybody went to Zacateca she would send those, not suitcases, trunks with clothes for the kids, their kids and everything. She was always in that respect, my cousins just love her. They thought that she was so caring, and she was. Her family and--she was a very generous person, very generous.

Aceves

But she started to drink, and that's what eventually killed her. And then being by herself for those years, those five years, when I came home I was already fifteen, and she was still working real hard, but the alcoholism had gotten--she was already, from my point of view, drinking excessively.

Espino

Even before you became a teenager you think she was drinking?

Aceves

Well, I didn't know. I came home when I was fifteen.

Espino

You didn't come back home to visit during the summers, holidays?

Aceves

Yes, I would come visit, come for weekends, and then all the holidays, the vacations she sent me with my Aunt Regina, so I went every summer there until I got a job, which I was fifteen. I was in the tenth grade, in the B-10. The A-10 I went and when the counselor called me in I said I wanted to take an academic course, because I wanted to go to college, and she says, "Well, your parents can't put you through college. You either take home economics or commercial." And I said, "Well, I'll take commercial." I remember that she said, "You passed all your tests, so all you have to do is take history and English and then the rest can be electives for you to graduate." I was in the tenth grade and that's when I told her, "I want to go to college." And she says, "Oh, your parents can't afford--." So I was bored, I was bored in high school. I did like my English class, but history, I failed it, and then I went to summer school, and I love history. I failed it and then I went to summer school and he

said to turn in a book report. Well, I think the summer school was four, six weeks. I turned in a book report every week, and he says, "I don't want a book report every week. I want you to pass a test," and I couldn't pass those tests. He said he was going to fail me. They gave me a D.

Aceves

Then I remember with English, the English teacher took a real liking to me, and on the board she put down who she'd classify, one, two, three, four, like that, and I remember this kid telling me, "How did you get--?" I think I was the second or the third one, and he says, "How did you get up there?" I didn't say anything, but I know that she liked everything I wrote. But I know that Connie and I tried to get into Algebra and Mr. Phillips, I still remember him, threw us out of there. He says, "Girls don't come to this class. Go to your home economics," and all the boys laughed.

Espino

And this was at what school?

Aceves

Belmont High School. I went there in the ninth grade, because at that point the missionaries couldn't get enough teachers to come and teach, so they were going to send the high school girls to Hollywood High School, and so I talked my mother into letting me come home. Besides, by that time I was a little boy crazy and I wanted to start dating and stuff, and that was another incentive to go to work, because she wanted me to use the same dress for every date. But I could buy at least a blouse, a different blouse for every date. But I gave her--she wanted me to give her all my check, which is what was usually done, but I started to just give her half. Then I would work four and four. I would go to school four hours and go to work four hours. It was a shortage of people working, and since I caught on real fast, it was the accounts receivable, they had the NCR [National Cash Register] machines, I caught on and the boss took a liking to me till she heard me talking about her in the bathroom, so I learned how to do the machines. So we worked on Saturdays and Sundays and all the vacations, because there was a shortage of help. The gal that got me the job, Norma Coulter, she passed away real early,

real young, she remained a clerk, but then I got to be an NCR operator, and I worked there till I was pregnant.

Aceves

I didn't know I was pregnant. Everybody else knew I was pregnant, but I didn't, because of the morning sickness. But I thought I just had morning sickness because my husband Bill was going overseas.

Espino

And you were nervous.

Aceves

Yes. But that was the way it was. But that was also a good experience, Belmont High School. I got into a group that we still keep in contact with, about thirteen of us. We didn't fit in with the temple, with the pachucos, and we didn't fit in with the academics, because you had to from the beginning be admitted there, so we were kind of in the middle, so we kind of stuck around together. We hung around a lot at Echo Park and in some homes, my home was one of them that was open. Some other of the homes were not.

Espino

Maybe your mom wasn't around. Did you have the place to yourself after you came home from school?

Aceves

Well, see, my mother had moved. She moved from Gladys to Aliso Village. She was one of the first tenants there, and she had a little apartment, but it had a gas refrigerator and a stove. It was a one-bedroom, so when I came on vacations or the once a month that we--if we were good, we could leave on Saturday, so I used to work off a lot of merits, because I knew I was going to get a lot of demerits, so you could work them off. So I was always begging all the teachers, "Can I clean your room? Can I do this for you? Can I do that for you?"

Espino

Because I'm going to ditch tomorrow. [laughter]

Aceves

So then that's when I talked her into coming home. But like I say, by that time she was already drinking more than I liked, and she was used to being alone, so she had her friends over and I would go out and come home and kick them out, so that's when the conflict, that's when the love-hate relationship started to develop, and I felt, not understanding. Well, how can a fifteen-year-old understand? And the alcoholism had already gotten--she was more--although I don't think that she was--like I learned a lot about alcoholism when my son was drinking a lot, and so I went to a lot of AA and I learned a lot. I know that at one point I called up AA and they came over, and the lady called me back and she said, "Your mother's too far gone. There's nothing we can do for her. But you should go to Al-Anon and learn about alcohol." Well, I didn't, not until my son, and if I would have learned all I know about alcoholism, that it's a disease and how it's like diabetics, exactly.

Aceves

As a matter of fact, Paula, I was active in AA. We put an advertisement on television in terms of comparing alcoholism with diabetes, and the Diabetic Association made us take it off, because they didn't--but it's exactly the same thing. Like there's diabetics that can't control themselves, and little by little their limbs are taken, they lose their sight. There's others--I have a friend that she's diabetic and she looks wonderful, and she's been diabetic most of her life. She has a nice figure, and she's into her seventies, I don't know, maybe seventy-two or so. She looks great. And I know people like that that can control themselves, and then others that can't, and others that have to take insulin, others that can just control it with diet. So that's the way some alcoholics can't take a drink, because they'll keep on and on and on till they almost--and working tough love is the hardest thing you can do. As a mother, I think that tough love is the hardest thing one can do, especially when you see them in such a bad condition. I put those screen doors, those security doors on because of my son, not to keep burglars away. So when I used to come home and see him in the front yard laid up, or back here sitting there, I would just turn around and go to a meeting.

Espino

What about your mother, would you see her like that, too?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

You'd see her laid out?

Aceves

Well, I never saw her on the floor or anything like that, but passed out on the couch or the bed, yes, I saw that.

Espino

She wasn't working anymore?

Aceves

Yes, she would work. She would go to work. She worked till, let me see. We're already living on Ditman and we moved over there in '57, so what happened is that she worked in a unionized factory, in a garment shop.

Espino

So she moved from the laundry--

Aceves

Yes, into the garment shop during the war, because they paid better, and then they became unionized. There were three partners, and the three of them split. They closed. That way they could get rid of the union and then they each opened non-union shops. Well, my mother stayed with the union, so they would send them to all different places and she would have a hard time, so that's when she really started to drink, really until she soused her brain I think, because I don't know, I guess everything just built up on her, and it became very, very sad, very sad to see this proud, strong woman end up just killing herself, drinking herself to death.

Espino

Your father wasn't in the picture?

Aceves

No.

Espino

They never married?

Aceves

No. No, they never did. So, no, he--according to my cousin Nickie Villagrana Cardenas, who passed away last December, and she's about eight years older than me and she knew everything--when my grandmother [Carmen Guayacán] passed away, that's when my mother found out that my father had another woman, and Nickie says, "She just cried and cried." She says, "I felt so sorry for her." I says, "Yeah, I don't know why he was not such a good deal," but I still say she was madly in love with him because he got her pregnant. He was a lot of fun, and he was a great storyteller. Like I say, he took care of me when she couldn't find a babysitter and he wasn't working, but he was an alcoholic. He told me that he started drinking when he was thirteen years old, when he went to work in the mines, and they all drank there, so that's what he told me.

Aceves

But he used to drink, but he was a very--well, he was young. He was young, and I guess you can control it, and as you get older you kind of lose control if you keep on drinking like you do when you're young. But then we lost track. I remember the last time I saw him he went to boarding school one time to see me, and then one time--then we moved back in the neighborhood to 2nd and Bixel, that's where I went to Belmont. After I came home from boarding school, my mother squatted in this house that somebody told them somebody was leaving, because houses were scarce and you couldn't rent them. It was on 2nd and Bixel, a little duplex. It was a duplex, but there were only three rooms, and again she made the porch into the kitchen, and then the kitchen the sink was there and a cupboard, that's all that fit there, and the little dining area, there was a couch there, and we had the bedroom and the front room.

Aceves

So that was when--I guess it must have been in '41 or '42. I could find out when my grandmother passed away, because I know the other day I asked my sister, "What did my grandma die of?" She says, "I haven't told you that

before. She died of TB, and she was only fifty-nine years old." I said, "Well, she must have had that TB that is not contagious," because I know she died at home, and I know I have friends that said that their mother was at home. I remember this particular friend that I met while I was working, and she said that her aunt moved in with them, and she was little, the three kids were little, and the mother was in a bedroom and they wouldn't let the kids go in there. Then one time they left the door ajar and Carmen says she ran in there and hugged her mother and she said her mother pushed her away, and then the aunt came and scolded her, and I don't know if she got spanked or not or something, but I could understand the rejection, not understanding and them not explaining, so you didn't explain to kids all of these things.

Espino

I know. Some think that people didn't really understand the disease TB yet. I don't know if when your aunt, was she living with you when she contracted--

Aceves

Oh, yes. I remember the day they came to pick her up.

Espino

They picked her up?

Aceves

Yes. The day they picked her up we were living on--what's the name of the street? Right across the street from Gladys, right across the street from the church, and there was a window and she was sitting there smoking and drinking beer and I was jumping around, and she kept telling me to stop jumping. And in one of those jumps I knocked down her beer and she got very upset and she scolded me, and I don't know if she even [Spanish words], but she had never spoken to me mean. I remember I was so hurt she couldn't keep me quiet. But I don't remember--I know that an ambulance was going to come and pick her up. That's why she was sitting in front of the window, watching, and they were going to take her away, but I don't remember them coming in or her going. I just remember that incident.

Espino

And she died there? She never came back home?

Aceves

No. She died in Olive View, but I understand that she was already in what they called the porch, and I could go walk up there and she could come up and talk to me, and so you couldn't get too close to them, but it was a different section. Like when she was in the hospital part I don't remember ever going there. And then they would leave us out in Olive View, because they walked--the parking was kind of like a big park, but it wasn't a park with grass, it was just a park with trees, and they would park and all of us kids would be playing outside, and my mother and my aunt and my uncle would go visit my aunt up there. I remember one Easter Sunday, because she made me a little rabbit. She was on the porch and she was able to send it to me, but I could see her. The story goes that somebody came and told her that her husband had another woman, and she just lost the desire to live. I mean, that might have added to it, but she was pretty bad.

Aceves

What I think happened, that she had abortions, because her husband didn't want her to have kids.

Espino

She never had children?

Aceves

No, she didn't have any children. I know that she had at least two abortions from what--you know, you pick up. They talk, they think that you don't understand. That's what I tell my aunt, this happened and that happened. She says, "No, it didn't." But you pick up a lot of things when you're little, especially if you're taught not to say anything and just sit there. And you did. My aunt and my mother would be in company hours, and I'd just be sitting there. I would move around or say something, and if there were kids I could go play with them, but if there weren't kids, I had to sit there next to them and not fidget and not do anything. So I kind of think, because I know that he never--I don't think he hit her, but I know that her husband had a temper. I remember going one time and my mother going over there and cussing him out, and he had broken all the furniture, all the mirrors and broken the furniture, and my aunt was sitting there all curled up, crying and crying. I don't

know if that's when they took her, but I know the last days before they took her to the hospital she was there. But I think that what happened, that she got tuberculosis because she had those abortions and her immune system--I don't know if that's even possible. That's what I made up in my mind.

Espino

She was weak, because she was weak physically.

Aceves

Yes, because like I tell you, tuberculosis was very prevalent in the neighborhood, and I think that for a while there they had wiped it out, and I understand that it's on the rise again. But that was the way it was. Like I say, everybody had at least one relative, and you didn't ostracize them or you didn't think it was bad or anything like they do now with so many, like with AIDS. I mean, everybody was scandalized. Of course you didn't want to get sick, so I say that my mother took such good care of me physically, I mean, that I had cod liver oil every day. She's make you drink that one that carries the fish? Sometimes I go to health food stores and I see that blue bottle with a guy carrying the fish. That was the cod liver oil she gave me, and she would make me drink it for health, because my aunt had tuberculosis and she didn't want me to--she didn't want any of us to get sick for that matter.

Espino

But you don't remember feeling shame or embarrassment--

Aceves

No.

Espino

--or that the outside, the greater society, like the people at maybe County Hospital, the medical profession or the social workers made you feel like the Mexicans for some reason are having tuberculosis because too many people live in one place, or they're not clean or whatever?

Aceves

No. No, I didn't get exposed to that, you know what I mean? It was a tight neighborhood, and there weren't any stores that had Mexican food, so we'd

walk all the way to Olvera Street, right where La Casa Pico is. That was all market right there, and my mother would buy the chili and the stuff and the food there. Later on, where the downtown market, then we would walk down there. They began to carry Mexican food or chili or whatever my mother cooked, because there was always soup. I mean, there is always soup with all the vegetables and the bones. There was always beans and there was always rice and there was always a bowl of chili. I never ate chili till now, till I was a grown up, but my mother was a big chili eater, and I couldn't understand why she liked the chili so much when she was all red and perspiring, eating that chili, and she was huera, so it really showed up on her. So I never got a taste for chili till I was an adult.

Aceves

But no, everybody--I guess because of the narrowness of our life, because she walked--she got me this piano when, how old was I? I don't know, they didn't even make them, but I could find out. She got it, and we used to walk all the way down to Hill Street from Glady's St. to pay the bill. I don't remember paying utilities but we must have, because my father would, what did they call it--they had a name for it, where he would cut off the electricity so it wouldn't charge, and then when the man was going to come, the meter man, he would disconnect it so that our bill would be down. So there were all kinds of little things that you did and people did--

Espino

To survive.

Aceves

And the cars, everybody fixed their own car with a hammer and a screwdriver. Everybody was always running out of gas. I remember when we would go to someplace and my father would run out of gas, my mother would get so mad. I think it was ten cents a gallon, but she would just get mad because he didn't tell her.

Espino

She probably always had a little stash of some cash?

Aceves

Yes, she always had money. But, no, I never felt ashamed. Now, I remember a lot of times that there was a lot of color. Even though half of my family is dark, and the other half is, well, my mother was huera, what they called huera, not blonde, not rubia. You know what a huera is, you know, my coloring, which is--

Espino

Fair.

Aceves

Yes. And I remember everybody always talking about, "Ay, que bonita, lastima que esta tan prieta." So I picked up on that and I used to say, well, maybe I should be thankful. Then what was the other thing that people would talk about? Nothing illness. Mostly looks, the color thing, and, of course, when my mother left me, the fact that my mother and my father were not married, the women would always be gossiping about my mother, so I had a real big complex about that. And there are complexes that even intellectually if you understand, like now it's so open. I know like women in Comisión [Femenil], at least one particular woman that felt, "Well, here I'm getting up in age and I have no prospects of getting married. I'd like to have a child." So she planned her child. But she had a profession, she could support that child and herself very well. We weren't worried about jobs in the seventies. But the fact that I was, that my mother and my father were not married, was a big complex with me. Everything else, I didn't feel anything. I know the color thing and there was something else that also--

Espino

What about language, not speaking English?

Aceves

Well, like I say, I picked it up in kindergarten and maybe even sooner than that, because they did put me at All Nations. I think I was one year old when they took me to the preschool there, and I know that they used to call the teacher there, and they used to make me cry [Spanish words], because she used to wear a bun, and I thought the way they said it was, not what they said but the way they said it would make me cry, because I thought they were belittling her. Then I'd love hotdogs, so we'd go to Central [Market], because

at Central was where they had the hotdogs, and then they would be making fun of the black families. [Speaks Spanish] And they'd just love to tease me, my mother and my father and my aunt's husband. I mean, he used to call me la vocona, that I looked like Martha Raye. [laughter] And I guess I would start crying. They just enjoyed teasing this little girl. But no, the color thing I remember, and there was something else that I remember I was in school and I used to think, "God, maybe I should be glad since I'm not dark, and maybe I should be glad if I'm not this."

Aceves

But what I couldn't be, what I couldn't erase was the fact that my mother and my father were not married. That I couldn't, and I always felt something was wrong with me because my mother and my father weren't married. And then, oh, the way my mother was. She was so assertive, no se debaja de nadie. She would tell people off and that was embarrassing to me. As a matter of fact, I remember one time this kid in school hit me in the mouth and my lips got all swollen, so when my mother came home and saw me with my lips all swollen, she marched to school. The teacher was still there, and I had to translate to her, because she didn't speak any English. [laughs] But that I couldn't hide from her, because she could see it, and she dragged me down to the school. But other things I wouldn't tell her, because I knew that she would go, like the guys beating up on their wives? I remember that Angela's mother, her husband, her father beat his wife up. But when her brothers got to be a little older, what were they, maybe thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old? So they straightened out the father. "You hit my mother again and we'll beat you up, or throw you out," or whatever, so they stopped that.

Aceves

I never told my mother any of those things, I mean, nothing that went on with my aunts either. I didn't say anything, because I knew that she would take action and for me it was embarrassing. She used to embarrass me, because she was not like the other mothers, not like the other women. The last time that Nickie and I were talking here I was saying, "You know, once--," because I've always identified myself as a working-class person. I'll tell you why. I remember one time, my mother always used to brag about her family, and one time I was up to here hearing her, and I told her, "Bueno mama, usted

puede jactar de su familia porque son aristocraticos, pero yo, mi mama, yo no puedo porque mi papá minero y mi mamá lavandera." I had to run because she got so mad. But she had that--well, when she was sixteen she was brought up where--and she had that attitude.

Espino

Her mother was--they were land owners. Even though they might not have been from the upper-upper class of Mexico, they were still--

Aceves

Yes. They were--

Espino

Upper-middle-class would you say?

Aceves

Well, no, they were in that little town and in Zacatecas. They would have been considered--because they had a home, they had the farm, they had a home in Calera, they had a home in Zacatecas.

Espino

Okay, so that is upper-class.

Aceves

Yes, they were. As a matter of fact, when I went, my mother asked the family that lived there that she wanted to show me the house, like when I go down there I see it, and it's a building. It's real nice. So he did very well, the Pichardos did very well. I mean, the farm is still there and cousins are still there, and I sent my son there every summer, I think before he was twelve, because I paid half for his passage the first time, and he got very attached to the family there, to my uncle. And it's still there. As a matter of fact, he was saying, "What's going to happen?" They're having a hard time right now with NAFTA and all that. He says, "What's going to happen when Tomas Medrano and Rubén Medrano pass away? Because the others are all girls." I said, "I don't know. I don't know, because Octavio is becoming a priest. He's not getting married. The girls don't have kids. They're not married." Except two of them, but the other three or four are not married. One of them had Octavio,

but like I say, he entered the seminary. I'm hoping that he'll get married and have kids, at least. Anyway, so it's still there. It's still there.

Aceves

So she had that attitude, that class--

Espino

Of privilege.

Aceves

--exactly, of privilege, and I know a lot of people talked in back of her back, because she was assertive, and she was a tall woman for those days. She was five-feet-six and she was tall and she had a mouth, and if she drank, god, like I say, it was embarrassing, because she would tell everybody off. She was an entirely different person, because the chemistry. Now I understand. But basically her, she was a very generous person. I wouldn't say that she was thoughtful, but she was very generous, and she didn't want anybody to be without anything if she could afford it, food and clothes, a roof over their head. But everybody was like that in those days. I remember everybody shared whatever they had. There wasn't this materialism. You took care of your people first, that they had food, clothes, and a place to live. The rest was--there wasn't enough. There wasn't anything for the rest. There was no rest.

Espino

Wow. Well, this is going to be my last question. I just wanted to ask you about--for this session, and then we'll pick up next time. I wanted to ask you about--oh, gosh, I just lost my train of thought. It was something to do with your mother, but I can't remember what it was. Just give me a second. Well, maybe we should just stop there, because it just slipped right out. I had it right here; I didn't want to write it down. So I guess we're just going to stop here, and I'm sure I'll download [laughter] and jot it down and we'll pick up on that the next time. So that was great. Thank you.[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (December 19, 2008)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino and today is December 19, 2008. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, we're going to go back a little bit to what we talked about last time regarding your experience at boarding school [Frances de Pauw Industrial School for Girls], and I'd like you to tell me anything that you can remember about that experience, how old you were when you went there, what were your first impressions when you got there, were you happy, were you miserable, and then any details about the ethnic makeup of the teachers, of the students and just we'll go from there.

Aceves

Well, let me give you a little background on why the school was developed. I don't know if I did that before. I used to have the whole little story book on it that we made, but it appears that Mrs. Frances de Pauw, when she came to southern California she noticed that the most deprived group of people were the Mexican women, and she felt that if you educated the Mexican women that then you educated a whole family. So she went to the Methodist Episcopal Home Missionaries and told them that she would donate her home if they would open this school for these Mexican girls. So she did, and that was called Whitson Hall. I don't know why it wasn't called--well, the whole school was called Frances de Pauw School for Girls. So Whitson Hall was like a little mini-mansion. You walked in, you had the stairs and they converted all the upstairs to three dormitories, and then there were, I think, four rooms.

Aceves

The first dormitory was--what was it--[Sunshine]? I don't remember exactly, but then there was Bluebird and then there was the sun porch and then there were the rooms as you got older. But first you were in the big dormitory. When I went to school there was enough room for ninety-five girls, but when it first opened, I understand, in 1900, they took girls from the time they were in the first grade, but by the time I got there they would take them from the third grade. Then they had another building that was called the California Hall, and that was for the big girls, when you were in the seventh grade, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth. But you were in Whitson Hall from the third grade through the sixth grade.

Aceves

So I went there and somehow or other I took to it right away. Many of the girls never liked it and they were always very homesick, and most of the girls were very homesick and said that they didn't like it, but I took to it right away, maybe because I'm an only child, well, my mother's only child, so that at home I was pretty much by myself all the time. Every weekend we went over to my cousins and I had the kids in the neighborhood to play with, but in the home I was by myself. So I get to Whitson Hall, they put me in the little girls' dormitory, and so right away all the teachers were home missionaries, Methodist Episcopalian home missionaries. They were all Caucasian, and I don't remember any of them being any other ethnic group, and all the girls were Mexican. In those days there was no such thing as Mexican American, you were Mexican.

Espino

Were they young? The teachers, were they young? Were they older?

Aceves

Well, they seemed old to me. Most of them were single, and I don't know if any of them had been married before, but they lived there with us. They lived there with us. So right now I'm having a little hard time thinking of the first house mother I had. So we had house mothers and we had teachers that taught in school, and then there was a superintendent, so I'll start when I got there. So like I said, I took to it right away. I liked being surrounded with--and I don't remember not getting along with any of them. I think I got along with most of them, although sometimes when I meet up with others, sometimes they'll say things that I did. I became a tease. But anyway, let's see.

Aceves

We went to school. It was a long day. When we were little, we all got assigned duties, so I remember that I cleaned up in the dining room after we got through eating. We had a dining room in the middle. Between Whitson Hall and California Hall there was a dining room and the kitchen. As a matter of fact, that dining room was sold to a restaurant and it's still there across the street from Kaiser on Sunset Boulevard. They sold that building. So I remember we had to put the dishes on the counter so that they could wash them, and then we swept around the floor, and then we set the table, and we

had to have our cleaning checked by one of the older girls, and then we were free to go play.

Aceves

So then the other job that little girls had was drying the dishes. The big girls washed the dishes, but the little girls dried the dishes. And you also cleaned the yard, and a big girl was the one. I mean, I eventually became one of the big girls, and you cleaned the yard. So then we went to class. I don't remember what time we went to class. I think maybe about eight-thirty, and we got through about three-thirty, and I guess we had free time, because then we had our dinner and we had to clean up, and then you had story time. Your house mother would have you come into her room and they would tell you stories or you would talk. Now, it was a Methodist Episcopalian background and you were being taught that religion, which I didn't find it that much different from the Catholic religion, because I went to catechism all the time. I think I told you last time that I was thrown out of catechism. But in this particular school you were allowed to ask questions. They would try and answer them to the best of their ability. But when you were little, they weren't giving you challenging stories. I mean, they were all Bible stories and they were very interesting. And I accepted if there was a miracle, like with-- you were little and you didn't know anything about sex, so you didn't--I didn't challenge the fact that Jesus was born without being married, with Mary getting pregnant before they were married.

Aceves

So there was story time and we were close. The other thing that I do remember is that we took baths twice a week, whether we needed them or not. They had tubs. You had tubs, and you alternated, the dormitories alternated. One day Bluebird would take a bath. Now, the older girls, you could take a bath anytime you wanted to, and most of us took a bath whenever we wanted to, any time of the day. But when you were little in Wittson Hall, you were more observed and more limited in what you could do. So we had our housekeeping duties to do and we had our school. Now, the classes were very small, and when I got there I think I was already in the sixth grade. I think I was eleven. I mean, I think I got there when I was ten and my birthday is in February, so I think that I was probably eleven. I was in the sixth

grade, and that grade was in the California building section, and if we were nine girls, that was a big class. So I remember I have a couple of people--well, a lot of us remain in contact, and the twelfth graders were maybe two or four, but as you got older they kept losing--the girls didn't stick around.

Aceves

So anyway, the teachers were very--since it was a small class, there was a lot of dialogue, a lot of questions. I remember this Miss Straley was one of our teachers and we would go--she taught history and Bible, and I think one was right after the other one or I don't remember, but that's when all the questions came in, all the questions, and she tried to answer. I remember one time, because we kept in contact till she was in a coma for about five years, and she was right here in Pasadena in that retirement home for missionaries Aldrige, and so I saw her as an adult and Miss Alridge and Miss Jakes, and something happened with that property and they moved down to La Jolla at some beautiful resort. About five of us went to visit her, and then we went to the dining room there and she was so proud, "These are my girls." We were already adults.

Aceves

But anyway, going back to Miss Straley, I remember her saying one time that there was a point in her life when she questioned the Bible, and I thought it was probably when we were asking her so many questions that she couldn't answer. [laughs] They had a library there. It wasn't very adequate. It was a small library. I think I read all the books they had there. And you could take piano lessons, I took piano lessons, and we had a choir and I was part of the choir, and those students that were not selected to be in the choir, they had a music club and they learned about music. I could ask my comadre what they learned in her music class. But they took us to the opera, and I remember going to the philharmonic and sitting in the last row and promising myself that when I grew up I was going to get one of the loges.

Espino

So did you speak Spanish to your classmates?

Aceves

Oh, yes. We spoke Spanish all the time. Well, in the dining room we all had a teacher that sat at the table with us, so some of us, I think when we were little we weren't even allowed to visit in the dining room. But when we were older we could talk. Nobody used to tell us, "Don't speak Spanish." I don't ever remember speaking Spanish in front of the teachers, just doing it. I think that we just automatically knew not to speak Spanish in front of them, because they didn't speak Spanish, at least they never did to us. Maybe they did know, or maybe they didn't.

Espino

Do you think most of the girls were bilingual? Or did any girls come that didn't speak English that you recall?

Aceves

Yes, as a matter of fact there was a group that came from Mexicali and they were pretty monolingual, but they picked up the English right away. And there were the Chee sisters. There were three of them and they were from Mexicali, because there is a colony of Chinese people in Mexicali, so they came, and they took them because they were from Mexicali, but they were Chinese. They were the only non-Mexicans that we had, and then there was Alice Ono that was Japanese, and they brought her, I understand, when she was in the first grade. She must have been an orphan, and even then when they had the, I don't know, I keep calling them concentration camps for the Japanese, they came and took her, and the home missionaries fought and fought that she has never been outside of that home and she wasn't Japanese, so to speak, except that she was born Japanese. But they still took her, and I know that the older girls, I know Vicki and I forget who the other one was would go, because she was in San Anita at the racetrack for a while, and they would go and they would slip beans underneath the fence or something like that. Vicki ran into her and I saw her, but she never talks about it. Vicki said she doesn't want to mention it, she's like it's not part of her life.

Espino

What's her full name?

Aceves

Alice Ono. I mean, I know why that one came down. So anyway, like I say, we were all Mexican, and we spoke Spanish and English and some of us knew better Spanish and English than others, so we were pretty free, especially when you were older. Well, we always knew what to do and what not to do, because you got punished if you did the wrong thing, and some of us picked up real fast. There were other ones that didn't. Now, when I was in California Hall, now, they had the three dormitories there, one of them was Sunshine. I forget the other one. Maybe that one was a Bluebird and then another one, and then there were rooms for the older girls, and since I left there when I was fifteen, then I only got to the second one, which I think we were probably ten in that dormitory.

Aceves

So we just, like my voice carries. We would talk at night, so they would come and say--of course I wasn't talking by myself, right? So they would come in and they would take me down to the kitchen, and I would have to scrub the kitchen, and in those days you didn't use mops. Up to the time I had these surgeries, I always scrubbed on my knees. I mean, that's the only way you could really clean. That's what we believed and that's what we were taught. So I was always getting punished, but I was already, between the seventh, eighth, ninth grade, when you were in California Hall--

Espino

So you started getting punished when you were older, not when you were--

Aceves

Yes. When we were younger, the worst punishment we got was to sit up on the stairs. There were some stairs that went up to the attic, and you would go up to there and sit up on the stairs. Yes, I got punished. I remember one time, because on our birthdays we had everybody that had a birthday in the same month, they had the birthday table and you sat at that table, and it was fancier and there was a cake, so that's why I got kind of close to the gals that had birthdays in February. So I remember one time I got punished for doing something and I was over there, and then when they were all sitting I was supposed to be at the birthday table, so somebody sent for me, said that, "Lilia, Miss--," I don't know who it was, "Miss Edwards says to come down." So

I had my play clothes, so you change clothes. You went to school, you got up in the morning, you put on your play clothes. Then when it was ready for school, you went back to your dormitory and got into your school clothes. When you got out of school, you went back to your play clothes, and then when you went to dinner you put on your school clothes. So I had my play clothes and I remember Miss Edwards saying, "Take off that jacket." I don't know if she felt bad that she forgot all about me or something. [laughs]

Espino

Do you remember feeling like it was too strict, like you didn't have the kind of freedom that you had at home?

Aceves

No. I just remember this one time that I got into a fight with one of the Chee girls, and then they went and told Miss Edwards that I had said something about them being Chinese, and she didn't believe me that I didn't, that I didn't say anything about their ethnic background. I don't know what we were fighting about. That was the only time that I think my feelings were really, really hurt, that she would take their part. And we all thought, and probably it was true--I don't know how the rumor started--that they had money, where all the rest of us were very poor, and that's why they got in that school. I mean, the girls from Mexicali also belonged to the Methodist church in Mexicali, and that's how they really got to know the school. But, I mean, the school was charging. I mean, I'm sure some of the people didn't charge. I mean, they charged my mother, Francisca Medrano thirteen dollars a month plus two dollars for piano lessons, based on her income I imagine. How did they come up with that amount? And I assume that some of the parents didn't even have money to pay, and most of them went through their church.

Espino

Wasn't there a Methodist church in downtown?

Aceves

Yes, the Placita. It's still there, I think. Yes. Then when we got older--see, when we were little we went to the Baptist Church right around the corner on Fountain. We would walk there. Then when you got a little older, you went to

the Methodist church up in Los Feliz, and we walked up there. Then as you got older you either went to All Nations [The Church of All Nations], which was downtown L.A. in my own neighborhood, or to the Placita over there, and a lot of the girls got married with boys that they met at La Placita.

Espino

Were they mostly Mexicans, the Methodists?

Aceves

Yes, yes. They were all Mexicans. I don't think there were any--in those days it wasn't very much intermarriage. Oh, and then there was a couple, Dorothy Lee and Alice Lee. They were Korean, but I think they were half Mexican, I'm not too sure. They took them to the Korean Methodist Church and they got married with Koreans. Dorothy's first marriage didn't work out, and she got married with this other fellow. I have his book there. He was a, was he a screenwriter? Yes, because I have a book. He wrote the book. They got married with very affluent men, where all the rest of us got married with poor, working Mexicans. So that was how we did.

Aceves

So the training was the religion, they were there. I mean, I believed everything. I believed everything, so when they asked people to be saved in the Baptist church I'd raise my hand, and we got saved. Helen Hernandez and I got dunked under water and I was baptized. Then I know I also was baptized in the Methodist church. I mean, I wasn't going to take any chances. [laughs] So, whatever they said--

Espino

You were up for it.

Aceves

Yes. And I know I was already baptized in the Catholic church. I lived across the street from the Catholic church, and everybody in the neighborhood was Catholic, and everybody except my mother and father were practicing Catholics. So I took in all the religious teachings, although I think I was a thinker already. I mean, some kids are more than others. Even I can notice it in my children. Anyway, but a lot of times they did a lot of contradictory things.

Like, for instance, when we went to the Los Feliz church I remember Miss Straley--there was always a teacher that went with you, and Miss Straley went to Miss Aldrige, the superintendent, and told her that she wasn't going to go back there anymore, because she didn't approve of how the other people there were discriminating against us because we were Mexican girls, but Miss Aldrige insisted that we go. But Miss Straley stood her ground and she wasn't sent, they just sent another teacher with us. So I don't remember noticing it or even taking it personal. But I don't know, I mean, the Los Feliz area, it's still pretty upper class, and I don't remember too much about it except going to the Sunday school and being there and then talking.

Aceves

But I began to see a lot of contradictions not with the teachers, but I remember that later on after we were all adults and we formed the FDPSAI alumni, because then there was the Spanish American Institute [SAI] for the boys, which was also supported by the Methodist Episcopalian Home Missionaries, and we had all the socials. But in my case, we didn't have that many socials because it was a war and they didn't have the gasoline to bring us to all the socials. So we had a couple of them. We had the valentine's party and we had the May picnic and that was it. But the others, they had socials once a month that you could have people come and visit you, and the SAI boys would come over, and the Plaza boys would come over, and a lot of the older girls got married with SAI men and Plaza men. And with us, we didn't have that opportunity to develop those friendships or even get to know us.

Aceves

I know that my friend José Castarena who has passed away, his two sisters were there when I was there, Mary Louise Castoren-Grande and what was the name of his little sister [Esther]? His little sister was in my age group, and she was a troublemaker, so they finally took her out. Her uncle and aunt took her out and she was brought up with them, but Mary Louise stayed at Frances de Pauw until she graduated from the twelfth grade.

Espino

Were most of the girls orphans? Or from single parents, do you think?

Aceves

I think so, yes. Yes, I do, because Joe Castarena, I guess his mother had passed away, I don't know, maybe his parents, because I know they were brought up by their aunt and it was him and his--no, I think he had a brother and Mary Louise, and I'll think of her sister's name. At Joe's--because I kept in touch with Mary Louise, and at Joe's memorial service right here on Bridge, I forget the name of that church, I went up to Esther, her name's Esther, and she didn't remember me at all, and I remembered her. So I don't know if they expelled her or they just said, "If she doesn't behave we can't keep her here," but at least she got what she wanted, right?

Aceves

So after we left, I don't know who started the alumni, and we kept it up for many years till just a few years ago, actually. It's not so many few years ago, maybe it's about ten years now, and I keep thinking of calling, and even my comadre, Connie Pardo-Muñoz, who everybody says we were inseparable, lately, I mean, I don't know how many years it's been now that we don't keep in touch as much as we used to.

Espino

So you developed really close relationships with the other girls.

Aceves

Right. Yes, right. And like I say, I still keep in touch with them, but not the way we used to. I think that maybe, I don't know, you think that once you retire you have a lot of time, but I haven't. Number one, you slow down a lot, and then I had the surgeries and by eight o'clock my back is hurting. But that was in boarding school. When I left boarding school, I mean, I think I had a better education than any of the Mexican kids that went to Belmont High School.

Espino

Did they focus on academics? Or did they have a lot of, like, culture? I'm thinking of etiquette classes or what's proper to do, this is how you eat with a--that kind of thing.

Aceves

No. You had that in the dining room. If you didn't eat right, the teacher would say--or when you set the table you were told how to set the table and to use--

but you didn't have classes for that. That was done while you were doing things. If you cleaned, they would tell you, "This is the way you clean," so it was actual. We had our sewing class. We were learning how to sew. We sewed for ourselves. The cooking class--well, see, then during the war what happened was that they couldn't get enough home missionaries to do the work, so then they started to send--I don't know if that was the year that I was going to go to high school is when they started to send them to Hollywood High School. No, but you didn't have etiquette classes, and as you got older you got different--for instance, you got older, you cleaned the teachers' rooms, and some teachers were very fastidious. Well, I was always a good housekeeper, so everybody wanted me to clean their room. And then since I always got so many demerits, because you got demerits and then you weren't allowed to go home. You know, you could go home.

Aceves

It used to be just the second Sunday of the month. Then it turned out that you could go home over the weekend and on Saturday, but if you got demerits you couldn't go. So I always was getting demerits because I talked so much, so I was always working off the demerits. I could get merits, so I was always going to this, "Can I do this for you? Can I get some merits for this, and can I get some merits for that?" So sometimes I had more merits than demerits, because I knew I was going to get so many demerits, so that I could go home over the weekend.

Espino

But it was for talking, it wasn't for talking back?

Aceves

No. It was mostly because talking after they put us to sleep. So, yes, I remember, well, Helen, she passed away maybe last year or a couple of years ago, she was one of my closest friends, and when they would catch her talking she would say, "Well, I wasn't the only one." [laughs] So she had company cleaning the kitchen floor. But the rest of us never snitched on anybody else, and she could get around because she was kind of clownish. Then I remember it was a point--I don't know how old I was. My mother was living with this man that had a tortilleria, so he lived in Santa Monica. She always kept her home

here. She always had her own home. So she started to get boarders that she would cook for them and they would pay her so much a week, and she would make their lunch and their dinner. So he closed down that place on Tuesday or something, so they would come down and visit me on those days, and they would bring me a stack of burritos. So sometimes she would bring me enough burritos for me to share with everybody in the dormitory, and sometimes she didn't, so that I would cut them in half. I remember this one night, because Connie slept on the last row and then Helen and then I, and I forget who this other person was. So I gave a burrito to Helen and I told her, "Give half to Connie." But she didn't hear, "Give half to Connie." So everybody else got a half, and, of course, I got a whole one. So then she turns on the light and she goes up and she says, "You guys, you guys, you see these tears rolling down my cheek?" She says, "It's because Lily didn't give me a burrito." [laughs] And Connie was almost through with it. She says, "Oh, yes, here, here's mine," because then I told her, "I told you to give half and keep half." And Connie was, "Oh, here." She kept us in stitches all the time. She was always a big clown like that.

Aceves

So we had fun, and we also got into little arguments. I remember Doris Linsky, Mexican, and she kind of seemed like a spoiled kid. I remember that she would sit down and put the book and then she would be reading a funny book, and so when the teacher would come in and I would go like that, so she would get punished. Then the others would get mad at me. I was a big mouth. Also, my best experiences were Miss Sterling, who was a music teacher, she had a quartet, and she selected me and then Helen, I forgot who the other two were in the quartet, and we sang. Most of them were religious songs. But we also always had once or twice a year the home missionaries, we would cook a dinner for them and then we would perform for them in the choir.

Aceves

We also had once a year, I don't know, maybe it was a fundraiser. We had what they called the Spanish dinner, and now that I think about it I'm sure it was a fundraiser, because all the missionaries would come. We would cook the dinner. It would be enchiladas and beans and rice, and the gals would sing and they would perform, they would dance. So I'm sure they called it the

Spanish dinner. I don't think they called it the Mexican dinner, it was the Spanish dinner.

Espino

But it was Mexican food and Mexican music?

Aceves

Right. Yes. And we had a couple of real good singers, like Harriet. I heard she passed away very young. She had a beautiful voice, and there was a couple of- -I can see the other one. She was from Cucamonga, I remember that, Agnes, I think maybe it was Martinez. She had a beautiful voice, too. So when Miss Sterling became our music teacher, she was very well-trained in music. Well, she was there all during the time I was there. The music teacher we had before was, remember I started taking piano? She was very impatient, but she wasn't there very long. She was there when I was in Whitson Hall. Then Miss Sterling came and she did the choir, she did the quartet, the singers, the girls that she noticed right away that had good voices, and then she wasn't going to leave out all the other ones that were not selected for the choir or the quartet or anything. She had the music club for them, so she was a very good teacher.

Aceves

Her sister was a missionary in some Asian country, and she was our nurse when she came to work there at de Pauw. She was our nurse. I remember when I was real sick one time, I don't remember exactly what it was, but I was talking to Mercy this morning. She was saying, "God, they sure fed us good food, huh?" I said, "Yeah, they always knew when I was sick because the tray would come back not touched," because you're growing and you would eat all the mashed potatoes and everything they served you and the dessert, and then if you didn't want the dessert somebody would say, "Can I have your dessert?" because they could see they were leaving it there. There were some desserts, some foods I didn't like, so they would always say, "Oh, Lilia must really be sick. The tray came down the same."

Espino

What was it like when you would go back home? Did you take some of those things that you were learning at the boarding school?

Aceves

Oh, my mother loved the way I cooked, because she had never eaten meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and any of the kinds of the dishes that I learned how to cook. She thought I was a terrific cook, but I was a meat-and-potato cook. We did have our vegetables. I remember there were a couple of dishes that I just couldn't eat, and one of them was eggplant. What was the other one? I don't remember what the other one was, but I remember the eggplant, and to this day I only like the way the Asians make it and the Italians make it, and I really like it.[Interruption]

Aceves

Let me go back. I think that the education was very intense. Not only did we go to school from 8:30 to 3:30. Then we had study hall. We had study hall to do our homework every night, so you had to go even if you didn't have anything to study, you had to go read a book or do something, so education was very, very stressed. And religion was, too, but it was done in, like I tell you, in a story time. What did we have? We had a lot of activities where we did a lot of singing. They were all church songs. Oh, we weren't allowed to dance. It was a sin to dance. We would still dance behind--"The teacher's coming, the teacher's coming." We'd stop dancing. This was all before I was fifteen years old, from the time I was in California Hall. Like I said, I must have been in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade.

Aceves

So like I developed real good friendships. As a matter of fact, the other day I called my--my insurance man, the one that has my home insurance was my first boyfriend Joe Anguiano in high school, and I called him to tell him something about the insurance, and he was telling me, "Was that your sister?" because I happened to say something about my sister, and I said, "No, we didn't connect till way after." And he said, "But you were inseparable. You were always with her." I says, "Oh, well, that was my comadre Connie." So there were friendships that we developed and that we kept on, and even when we connect after many years some of us become--like with Mercy, I hadn't seen her for many years. We've reconnected, and she has an entirely different lifestyle than I do, but there's still that love and that warmth that we have.

Espino

That bond that you developed way back then. That was a unique experience.

Aceves

It was, and I often wonder what would have happened to me if I hadn't gone there. I would have gone to Jefferson High School. You just wonder, like that story, that movie where what would have happened if she had never gotten married and she would have been an old maid. I forget the name of that story. I think it's a Christmas story, and they have it every year. But I'm glad, those were good five years. They were good for me. I felt very secure in the home. I thought I learned a lot, and when I came home my mother was already pretty caught up in her drinking, and when she drank she was, how would you say it, she was an entirely different person. She was indiscreet, that's what I should say, indiscreet when she was drinking. And then when she was sober she wanted to be a real strict mother with me and all that, and that didn't work out.

Espino

You mean indiscreet like with men?

Aceves

Yes. I would come home and there would be a man in the house. I remember this one time I kicked a man out and then he cussed me out and told me I was pachuca and malcriada, vocona and all of that kind of stuff. But I just sat there on the couch and waited for him to leave. So then the love-hate relationship developed between my mother and me, and, of course, everybody would just think I was a spoiled brat, and I wasn't about to say anything, why I was losing respect for her. Especially my cousins Nickie, Emily, Petra who, they adored her. She really helped them out a lot after my aunt died. She got them jobs in the laundry, so I mean, I wasn't going to tell them, "Yeah, well, I found her with this man, and she brought this man in," and all of this kind of stuff. Mostly that was the more anger. Well, the drinking because it changed her. I mean, it's a chemical imbalance and some people just change totally, and she was one of them, her and my son. They'd just change totally, from her being a very caring, strict mother, to a totally uncaring person. She was not a mother then.

Espino

Do you think that--because there's been a little bit written on missionaries and the Mexican community back in the early 1900s, and the emphasis of some of that literature is on how they were trying to Americanize the Mexican girls. Or even sometimes they would come into the homes of Mexican women. Do you feel like there was some sort of effort to make you more American?

Aceves

More Anglicized? You know, I don't they did it like going into a home, because we were in their home. We were in this home and they had these rules and regulations and you abided by them. Like I say, they weren't that different. My mother was very clean. She did all her cooking, her cleaning, and she was very clean. They emphasized a lot of cleanliness. They emphasized cleanliness, and I lived across the street from the church so that I went to catechism every day, and I did my First Holy Communion, and my ofrece flores [Spanish words]. I did all the things that Catholics do, so there was a lot of emphasis on religion, except that this time you're going to a Protestant church. But I saw a lot of hypocrisy in both the Catholic church and the Protestants, and I didn't think that they practiced what they preached. I think that my teachers and my house mothers, they were there for us, to do a mission, to teach us, and they did it.

Aceves

There was one time when I don't know what, we were having a meeting or a prayer meeting or something, and there were some boys on the outside that some of the girls knew that they had come over, and we were giggling. They were trying to look through the window and all of that, and I remember the superintendent saying something derogatory against Mexicans, and we all got real upset. But that was about the only time that I remember. And you go by--everybody is different. If I was a little more, what do you call it, not assertive, but a little more self-confident than some of my other classmates or even some of the other girls that were in school, they took things a lot more personally than I did. So from the very first time that I went in there--I hadn't been there for very long, and they had some kind of a little presentation and you got an award if you came in first place, and it was against alcoholism. I hadn't been there a very long time, because I was still being referred to as a

new girl, and I won first prize. And I remember Miss Watkins, she was our math teacher--we used to call her battleships because she had real big feet, and they wore these shoes that--

Espino

Made them look even bigger.

Aceves

Yes, yes. But you know that she would teach us--I remember this one particular gal, and I really think that she probably had a certain amount of retardation, she would hide from her in the closets and Miss Watkins would go out and get her, and get her to try to learn math. I haven't taken math since the eighth grade, and yet when I went to high school I passed all the tests, because the way that she taught us algebra, I didn't do it the algebra way, but I came up with the right answer. She was real good, and she was very determined that we were going to learn math. I remember one time that Connie, my comadre, they skipped her from one grade, so she was in class. We were having this math test and she asked me a question, I forget what the question is, and I told her, "Square it." And she turns around, "But it's a circle." [laughter] I couldn't go beyond that and get caught. We both would--but we got a good education for those of us.

Aceves

There was a young woman--a young woman; we were little girls. But I remember that she--now that I think back, she was very to herself, and they couldn't get her to study, they couldn't get her to do anything. Anyway, it turned out that they gave us all tests and she came out real high, real high. So then they decided that what was wrong was that she wasn't being challenged, because she passed--I don't remember how high. I mean, you don't pay attention to those things. But I don't know what grade they put her in. I just remember I can just see her sitting there, and she would just sit in with her head down and wouldn't cooperate. Maybe she was upset because they put her there, I don't remember that. But I do remember that part, that they tested her and then they found that she was very, very smart, and so they put her in a higher grade.

Aceves

Well, that was even what Frances de Pauw felt, that you educate a woman, you educate the whole family, so they were very, very much into--they didn't call it academics in those days. They just called it education. So we had an art teacher. She was the only one that had a little Ford car, and was she messy. We went to see her. She went to Mexicali and she was living in Calexico and we went to see her. I tell you, she was a rat pack, Miss Murray, I think her name was Miss Murray. She had a father and she had this little car, and she would take off all the time. She was the only one that left. Most of them were there all the time. I know that after the school closed we went to visit Miss Straley when she was living with her sister in a real nice home, then the retirement home. So, yes, education.

Aceves

In terms of them Anglicizing us, I don't think that--they weren't going to, aside from the Spanish dinner. They didn't give us any kind of history in terms of Mexican history or the Southwest history. The history was about the Romans. I mean, it was almost like the Bible. That's why there was so much contradiction. And as much as I love history, I really don't remember. I do remember my math class and my English classes. We had math, English, we had art, then home economics was also graded and our sewing was graded. Oh, then we had gym, we had our gym. We had a basketball court and we had baseball. Miss McNabb was our gym teacher. The girls used to call me Icabod Crane, because I had these big, long legs. I mean, by the time I was fourteen I was five-feet-two. I didn't grow again till I got pregnant with my kids. At least I wasn't aware of it, because that's when I got measured. But I guess they were--maybe that's what some of the gals resented a lot, but they were teaching what they were teaching, in terms of religion and in terms of education.

Espino

It sounds like it was probably the basic education that you would find in the public schools as well.

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

That's just what was taught. That's what was believed to be the curriculum, the basic history of the United States, not anything that kids might learn today about Mexican historical figures or African American historical figures, so that's really interesting. So then after--well, you said you did not finish there. You did not graduate.

Aceves

No. What happened is they couldn't find any missionaries. I mean, it was during the war. So that year they were going to send the girls that went to the tenth grade, they were going to send them to Hollywood High School, and so I talked my mother into letting me come home. "What difference does it make if I go to a high school, Hollywood High or I'm home?" And by that time I was a little boy crazy and I wanted to have boyfriends. My mother at that point was living in Aliso Village, and I was trying to remember the other day why she moved from 7th and Gladys to Aliso Village, and I have no idea why she did that.

Espino

Were they projects at the time?

Aceves

Yes, oh, yes.

Espino

They were public housing at that time?

Aceves

Yes, it was. But I think the most that she ever paid rent on 7th and Gladys was eighteen dollars. I know that we finally contacted the Chavez family, and they had moved to the West Side on Jefferson and Dalton, and he was paying thirty-five dollars, and my mother thought that was just too much rent. I remember him saying, "You should move over here into this area," and my mother saying, "Oh, we can't afford the rent." So who told her about the [housing] projects, to move in there at the time? She was living with this man, we used to call him Chuy, Jesus Bautista, and he's the one that had the restaurant, but she always had her place. So I remember coming and spending the weekends I had. Every summer she sent me with my Aunt Regina. She

moved to Tijuana in '39, I think, but she lived in Oceanside from the time she got married in '32, '33, till '39, and I spent every summer with them till I got a job when I went on the 4-4 Plan in high school.

Aceves

Let me see what else. I want to stay with de Pauw as much, because I think that really was very impressive in my life. I think that really made--I don't know. I think it was good, I think it was good for me to be in that school for five years. I don't think that I would have--I don't know.

Espino

Did people say, "Oh, you're different"? Like people from your neighborhood, or your cousins or relatives, did they notice a change in you?

Aceves

No. No. Well, in my neighborhood I was always different, because my mother was the only one that had a job. All the kids in the neighborhood came home from school and took their shoes off and went barefooted. I didn't do that. And my mother always dressed me real nice. I think partly it was to help this lady from Panama that sewed a lot. She always had me dressed real--so I did stand out different from the neighborhood.

Espino

Anyway. That's interesting.

Aceves

Yes. So not only did I have a mother that was assertive and free to a certain extent, as compared to the other women in the neighborhood. Later on I found out that a lot of the people there were not married, but they lived as if they were married. I mean, they had children and the man. But it was too late. That was the only thing that I really felt inadequate, that my mother and my father were not married. I mean, everything else, it didn't bother me, but that did. That did bother me. I mean, maybe the people next door--when the Chavez left I know I went to this lady next door took care of me, and they went to All Nations. They were Methodist. I don't know why they stopped taking care of me, and then Concha started taking care of me.

Espino

So All Nations was a Methodist church?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Oh, I didn't know that. I thought it was a community center or something.

Aceves

It is. It is a community center. It was a community center, or it is. I don't know if they still have it right here. They moved over here to Soto between that first street that goes south and now Cesar Chavez, they moved there. But yes, it was a community center, and that was also very beneficial in my life, because from grammar school then we would go down to All Nations and they had the programs for us from two to five. And like I tell you, I got married with a man [Bill Aveces] that was brought up in that neighborhood. The boys all went there to All Nations and for the boys'--they had a gym. So they did a lot of good by having that community center, and it was there every day, every day. Even the kids that went to Cathedral School, they would go there after school, even though a lot of time the priests and the nuns would say that they shouldn't go to a non-religious center. But they did. It was right there in the neighborhood. It was right there on 6th and Gladys. They had a nice gym, and even the person, I forget what his name is, he was very influential on all the boys in that area. Well, all my crowd. They even had him as an adult [unclear], they all got together and had him over for dinner or something, and must have made him feel real good to see the results of his work.

Aceves

So I would say that All Nations was a lot more influential, and they didn't teach any religion. It was just arts and crafts and the playground and music. The community center was--I mean, I stopped going there when I was, what, ten or eleven, so then I was in boarding school those years. But that was--I would go from school down to the community center. But then from boarding school, from Frances de Pauw, they sent us there to church. The Fisk family,

they were the ministers there, and one of the daughters, I had her as my gym teacher at Belmont High School.

Espino

That's where you went after--you went to Belmont. Did you find the curriculum there was easier or harder?

Aceves

No. What happened there is that the counselor called me in and she said, "You passed all your tests, so all you need to do is take English and history. Those are the only requirements, just English and history for you to graduate from high school, and everything else can be electives." And I told her, I said, "No, I want to go to college, so I want to take an academic course." And she says, "No, your parents can't put you through college, so either you take home economics or a commercial course." And I said, "Well, okay, then I'll take a commercial course." So I was pretty bored in school. I was failing history. I mean, either they didn't teach it right or--all I remember is that I had to memorize one war after another war after another war after another. Was that the way you were taught history?

Espino

Yes, all the dates and major events.

Aceves

Yes. And I was just so turned off. Well, anyway, let me go back. So then I said, "I'll take a commercial course." Well, by that time I'm beginning to date, and my mother won't buy me a new dress for every date. She wanted me to wear the same dress to every date. So this other friend that I had there, Norma Coulter, she was already working at the May Company part time. This was in '45. There was a lot of lack of workers. So I remember this day, I don't know, we had some kind of a day that we were all dressed funny. Maybe it was Halloween. I don't remember what day, but I remember the dress I chose to wear. It was long-waisted with ruffles, two or three ruffles, and, of course, the dresses were real short in those days, and I had freckles. I think I must have tried to be Raggedy Ann or something like that. So she says, "Yeah, I can get you a job at the May Company. Let's go." So I went into where they hire you

and the young woman said, "No, we're not hiring." So then Norma said, "Let me take you to my boss."

Espino

Was she Mexican, Norma?

Aceves

Yes. Yes. So then we went to the accounts receivable--I'll remember, I can see her, the name. So I talked to her and she must have liked--here I was dressed like Raggedy Ann. So she gave me a note and so I went downstairs and the girl says, "Well, you can't come dressed that way, and I see you've got your own job." So I said, "Well, I wasn't prepared to come and look for a job." So that Saturday, because I was going to work on Saturdays and after school, so I would go four hours to school and four hours to the May Company, and I'd get credit for that, because I had a commercial course and I was getting OJT [on-the-job training] as you would say. So I got hired as a clerk and I guess I picked it up, and then I would go by myself. They were NCR [National Cash Register] adding machines, and I would start playing around with them, and then the manager of that department said that I could train if I wanted to, and you could make more money, because after you billed a hundred receipts, then you got extra money for every other receipt. So I made more money, a hundred dollars a month on my bonus, because I was only making forty cents an hour.

Aceves

So I learned the machines, so I got onto the machines right away. But I remember when I was working as a clerk I had to pass out the work. So I go to this lady and I'm giving her the work. She says, "No, no, I don't get that work." "Well, who gets the work?" She said, "The girls over there." So I turned around and I looked. I didn't see any girls. They were all a bunch of old ladies as far as I could see. [laughs] And I told her, "What girls?" She says, "Those girls right there. Those girls." And I said, well, she must mean those old ladies. [laughter] They were all Caucasians, too, where we worked. So when I graduated, I just automatically--I graduated on a Thursday or a Friday and I went to work on Saturday as usual, but now it was going to be full time, and I worked.

Aceves

But I don't know. We tried--I remember trying to go to LACC [Los Angeles Community College], because East L.A. wasn't there. That was the only junior college there was. I tried going there, but somehow or other even Helen Hernandez and her sister, Alic Hernandez, we couldn't make it. Nobody was there to help us, to tell us, "Go here, go there," even to apply, there was no help, no support, no nothing, and we just didn't go there, neither Helen nor I, although we had planned. We had been told we were going to go to--I mean, LACC was right around the corner from Frances DePauw, and the girls like the Lee girls [Alice and Dorothy], I guess it was Alice, she went. She was still there at Frances DePauw, and she graduated from high school and she went to LACC. They just sent her. I don't remember exactly how long, but I remember she was one of the ones that was going there.

Espino

Maybe the people at Frances DePauw helped her register.

Aceves

Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure. I mean, if she was the only one. Maybe there was another one, two of them. And some of them, like I say, some like Miss Straley that was real upset and stood up for us a lot. Some of them were much more-- Miss Watkins stood up for us a lot. They all did.

Espino

You mean as far as being Mexican?

Aceves

Well, for anything. Like, for instance, I remember this time that I didn't like my--whatever food they served. I remember there was eggplant and there was another food that I didn't like, and I just refused to eat it. So if I didn't eat it at lunchtime, they would put it there at dinner time and I would just leave it there. And I remember one time, I don't know, maybe they put it there for breakfast. But I remember Miss Aldridge coming over to the table and telling-- because you always had a server. There was somebody at the table that served, to, "Take that dish away from her." It was kind of like the teachers, sometimes it was like a husband and wife, like a mother and a father. The father will discipline you and then the mother will say you don't have to do it.

Some stuff like that went on. It was more very discreetly done, but you were smart enough to catch on, so you didn't say anything. Except Helen would say, "How come she got away with it?" [laughs]

Aceves

But anyway, when I went to high school, actually what happened there, a group of us, there was about thirteen of us that became real close, and we're still to this date in touch with each other, not all of us, but some of us are. So we became real close, because we didn't fit in with the Temple group, which was a pachuco group at that time, and we didn't fit with the people in academics, because we just weren't in their classes and made friends and all of that. So we kind of stuck around together. We had our own parties and we did our own thing.

Aceves

When the G.I. Bill came, my friend Ray Guerrero talked all the guys that we hung around with to go into the service, because when they came back they would be eligible for the G.I. Bill, and they all did that. There was only one that got killed, and he was a twin. His name was Olegario, we called him Ole, and he had a twin brother, I'm not too sure if it's Edmundo or something, or Raymundo, because we called him Mundo. Mundo was real short and very feisty, and Ole was real tall and very calm. But he got killed in Korea. He was the only one that got killed over there of our friends. They all went, and I don't know if he's the only one that saw action. But anyway they came back. There was two of them. The mother wouldn't sign for one of them, and then the other one, he was supporting his mother so he couldn't go, because his mother had no other means of support if he went. So they were the only two that were left of the group while they all went. I don't know how many years they were gone, and they all came back, and I'm not too sure what--we used to call him Rabbit, but his name was Robert. But I know that Ray and Lencho--he now goes by the name of Larry--they became engineers and they've done very well. Lencho's a widower now, but that's what happened to us. I don't know about the other kids. For a long time we kept in touch with them, and I don't think any of them went on to college.

Espino

Even after the G.I. Bill was offered to them?

Aceves

Yes, just those boys, those fellows, but I'm thinking of the girls. I don't think any of them went on to college. I remember one of them, she was a relative of this movie star that just did Mexican pictures [Leo Carrillo]. I'll think of it.

Espino

Not Dolores Del Rio?

Aceves

No, no. No, he was a man, and he did a lot of Western pictures. They lived in nice homes in Echo Park, not like where we lived in a little--the house is still there. When we got evicted, they said they were going to tear it down and build something, but they didn't. They built like a little fast-food place, like a hotdog stand, and when I pass by there it's still there. And then Ray had a bunch of brothers and sisters, and they lived on Temple, so Annie, the one he got married with, she passed away, too, she lived over there on Bunker Hill. But the gals that lived in the Silver Lake area and the Echo Park area, they had very nice homes, so their parents, they were not the working poor, maybe the working middle or something. They didn't have luxurious homes, but they had a lot nicer homes than we did. We barely had a home. I mean, home is what you make it. We always had a home, but in terms of the physical aspect of it you could see that we were the working poor.

Espino

Do you remember anybody who went to World War II before the Korea?

Aceves

Oh, yes, yes.

Espino

Did you have relatives or friends in your neighborhood that--at this time you were in the boarding school, during World War II?

Aceves

Yes, yes. Yes, the people that got us that place on 2nd and Bixel, her son went to--he was in World War II, because I remember somebody brought me a little handkerchief with a Japanese flag. I thought it was real pretty, so I put it under the coffee table and then there was a glass, but you could put something in the middle. I remember him coming over, because they didn't live too far, and he saw that and he got real upset, and I couldn't understand why he was upset. I just couldn't understand. I couldn't see that he would consider the Japanese his enemies when they were my friends, and all this harm--that's all I saw, the harm. They were sent away when they didn't do anything. They were my friends, and the bomb was dropped and then that's all I saw. I didn't see the war or anything like that. That was my aspect of how I saw the Japanese.

Aceves

Now, Hitler, that was another thing. There were so many movies in those days, and every movie was about how horrible Hitler was, and everything I read, because I did read a lot, so there were all these books on how terrible Hitler was, but I never developed any kind of animosity towards the Japanese, so I was very surprised. My brother-in-law went. Of course, we didn't connect--well, when did we connect? I ran into my sister [Jennie Acuña Macias] at the May Company, and she recognized me and right away came up and asked me what was my name, and she was crying, so that we reconnected. Now, her husband [Felix Macias] and Rose Acuña Rodriguez, my oldest sister, her husband, they all went to World War II. Yes, my cousin Nicki Cardenas was a WAVE [Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service] in World War II. Yes, everybody in the neighborhood that was of age went. Just like now they joined up, too. They were seventeen years old and sometimes they got their parents to sign for them, and I guess they were so insistent that they did.

Aceves

All of my ex-husband's [Bill's] brothers [Presiliano(Toto) and Eldefonso(Poncho)], they all went into the war, and that's why he dropped out of school and got a job. He was left to help support his family, because he was left--there was his mother and then there was him and then there was three younger ones and his sister, and all the rest of them had gone into the service. The Aceves was Presiliano Aveces and Eldifonso Aveces. I guess there was the two, because Mike, the oldest brother was, from the time he was little, he was

in and out of correctional school and out of prison, so that left--I'm sure his sister Helen was working, too, and helped support, but that's when he dropped out of school to support the family, to help support the family. And that's what you did in those days, that the minute you could help support the family you did, because there was barely enough income to get by.

Aceves

Sometimes like my mother-in-law used to say, because the youngest one, Louie, was taller than all the rest of them, and she would say, "Yeah, well, el ya comio carne los otros no mas papas, frijoles y tortillas."

Espino

He had the good stuff. It was different economic conditions.

Aceves

Yes. Well, all his brothers had to come home from--well, there's a big span of years between Louie and the other four that were in that age group. So in the neighborhood, as soon as you could go out and work you went out and worked, and there was no moving out. You stayed in to help the family. The only ones that moved out were the ones that got jobs in homes. The girls got jobs working in Beverly Hills or who knows, but I know they had telephones wherever they worked.

Espino

They were live-ins someplace.

Aceves

Yes, yes. So that was the way it was, and we were the working poor. And like I tell you, in my neighborhood my mother was never without a job, but a lot of the people were without jobs all the time until, well, actually when they started to make the ammunitions for the war, I think about 1938, and people started to work. The garment shops organized and they started to pay better than the laundry, and my mother switched over to the garment shop, but she was still a presser. So the money got a little better during the war for the working poor, and people started to buy houses.

Espino

Do you think people started to spend more money on their clothing? Because it seems like at the same time that's when young men were taking more pride in their clothes and the whole drapes or the zoot suit.

Aceves

Well, no, the zoot suiters were always proud of how they dressed. But I remember one time being in the California Theatre, because we just went to the Spanish-speaking theaters, with my mother or the comadre that used to go to the bingo or the keno every week or so. We walked from where we lived down to the California, and the Million Dollar [Theatre] was Spanish-speaking, the Mayan Theatre was Spanish-speaking, and there was another one over there on Grand Street. I can see it. But anyway, I remember sitting there in the California in a movie and the sailors coming in, and there was a lot of commotion and all of that. Later on I realized that the sailors had come in and were, I don't know--anyway, but there was a lot of fighting between the pachucos and the sailors. I mean, at this point I really don't understand it, why the sailors here are going to war, they were going to go to war, they were sailors, there was a war going on. Why did they get this animosity against the pachucos? Unless it was just strictly racism, they were coming from the South or, I don't know. I read a lot about it. I read Carey McWilliams' books and some other books, but I still to this day don't quite understand it except that it's racism.

Espino

Did you know anybody who was hurt or got into an entanglement with the sailors?

Aceves

Well, they talked about it. I had a couple of friends that talked about it, but just that way, you know, "They came and they picked us up and los agamos de chingasos," and stuff like that, but no real details. By that time we were all grown up. So I do remember friends saying going from one territory to another territory and getting all beaten up and landing, and it took forever to get well. I mean, there was the same thing here that's going on right now, that--but in those days there weren't so many guns. I mean, there were chains, but that's about the most I ever saw. I remember one time coming

back from the movies. The Dorkal was right there on 7th Street, and there were bars all along 7th Street. I remember walking and somebody coming out of the bar and there was some shooting, and I remember I was with a neighbor and she just says, "Duck! Duck!" But I didn't see anything. I heard the shooting, and I heard the noise, but that's about it. I don't remember the details, whether I even saw them or I didn't see them or was I traumatized. I don't remember that.

Espino

You said earlier that you weren't really part of the pachuco group and you weren't really part of the--

Aceves

Well, this was in high school. Yes, in high school that was already toward the end of the pachuco era, but some of them still dressed that way and there was still the Temple. And the guys from Temple, they all worked as--well, I don't know about all of them, but some of them worked in some high-faluting restaurants as waiters, and they earned pretty good money. I know because I remember one of the gals went around with one of them, and I know that some of them didn't like Lencho at all, I don't know for what reason. But I guess when we get together it's so much to talk about, we forget to ask all the details.

Espino

Did you have an opinion about them, about the pachucos, positive or negative, or do you remember feeling any--

Aceves

No, I didn't. I know that a lot of people thought that they were not a part of the Mexican tradition to be proud of, but I myself didn't--like I say, by the time '45--I'm not too sure exactly. I guess we could look into exactly the dates. But I remember even them joking a lot about the fingertip jackets. I remember having some--there was Murry's store on 3rd and Broadway or something like that, and they would make tailor-made clothes. Well, you bought the clothes and then they would tailor-make them for you, and I remember getting some fingertip suits, suits with a fingertip jacket.

Espino

For yourself?

Aceves

Yes. Yes, by that time I was buying my own clothes, and so you were part of-- they were your neighborhood, and all of them were handsome.

Espino

But you never dated a pachuco?

Aceves

Not while they were pachucos. When we were older--

Espino

They changed their dress then.

Aceves

Yes, we were older. Well, because I dated ex-pachucos after I was divorced. By that time we're in our thirties, our late thirties, something like that.

Espino

Right, because, well, some of the ones that were caught up in the whole Sleepy Lagoon case [1943-1944], they were twenty-ish, nineteen. They were over eighteen, that's how they were--

Aceves

Yes, but see, I remember the Sleepy Lagoon, because I remember my father coming home and had the article on Sleepy Lagoon, and so this is before I went to boarding school, so this was before eleven years old.

Espino

Could that be? Because if you were born in 1930, you would have only been--

Aceves

The Sleepy Lagoon must have been--

Espino

That was in 1941, right? If you were eleven? I thought it was '42.

Aceves

But this was before. I think it was before.

Espino

I can't remember the exact date, but I thought it was '40-ish, because World War II was also 1935 to 19--

Aceves

No, World War II started in '41.

Espino

[19]41? I'm sorry. [laughs] I should have my time line with me.

Aceves

Yes, that was when Pearl Harbor [1941] was bombed, in '41, and then it ended in '45. Because I remember from boarding school they would take us to the Los Feliz area to go shopping. If we had extra money we could buy things there. So I remember seeing in the newspaper where they had the paper stand, they had a big "Remember Pearl Harbor," and I remember my housemothers were Miss Edwards and what did I say the other name was? Wait, I'll load down. I told them and I asked them, "What does remember Pearl Harbor mean?" And I remember one of them answering, "Well, that's when the Japs bombed us." And I remember asking them, "So why didn't we turn the other cheek?" That's what I was being taught, right? If somebody hits you, you turn the other cheek, you don't fight back. And I remember them standing still and not being able to answer me. That's why I say I've started to see a lot of hypocrisy. We were taught not to hit, you know, Jesus going and doing all of these good things and yet we weren't practicing what it was. So, yes, I'm pretty sure that Pearl Harbor was bombed in '41 and the war ended in '45.

Espino

Yes. I'm sure about the ending date, but I'm not sure about the--

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

So the zoot suits must have been like '42, I'm thinking.

Aceves

Well, I don't know, because I can remember the day my father came with the article of the Sleepy Lagoon case. Now, I don't know if I was home on vacation or I was already in boarding school, but I kind of in my mind thought that I was still living at home. He would come home every day after dinner, after he had dinner with his family. He would come over, and my mother would always be ironing or doing something around the house, and they would sit around and talk till we all went to bed. I remember him bringing this article, and I already knew how to read by that time, and he was telling my mother everything in Spanish, and I don't know if I was reading it or anything, but I remember the little article. It was like a two-page little article, and he was telling her all about it, and it got to be a lot of discussion about it. My father Miguel Acuña had two friends that he brought over a lot, El Guerra and what was the name of the other man? I mean, they're the ones that finally talked my mother into becoming a U.S. citizen, and they were very much into politics. They would come over and I know that they would sit around and talk a lot. They had these organizations that raised money to bury the dead, to have a funeral.

Espino

Like a mutual aid society?

Aceves

Yes. And I remember going to the fundraisers, because nobody ever left their kids at home, going to the fundraisers. I remember here at the Paramount, going there, and all the kids would sit in the chairs. It was a ballroom and the kids would all sit in the chairs. We'd finally fall asleep and somebody would come and cover us up and put the coat under our head or something like that. I remember going, and there were a lot of talks about politics. Well, I remember them talking a lot about the Sleepy Lagoon case. Everybody was feeling that they were really getting a raw deal. So I don't remember anybody

saying anything against them. They were really standing up for the kids that had been accused of that. We could look it up. That's an easy one to look up.

Espino

Yes, definitely, and I should know that. I did a lot of research, but the dates just don't stay in my head unless I have them right here in front of me. But, yes, that's true. Well, I think we're going to stop here now, Lilia, and we'll pick up--I guess you married your husband. Is that what happens next in your life, is that you meet your husband once you're working at May Company?

Aceves

Actually, yes, I met him while I was working there. I met him when I was, what, seventeen years old, I guess. Yes, I was in high school. I was in Belmont. I guess maybe I was older. In the tenth grade I went around with Joe Anguiano. While all the fellows went into the service, then I went around with Joe Padilla. He was the only one left. I went around with him and then I met my husband and I started going around with him, and I went around with him till I got married, and I was twenty when we got married. By that time we got evicted from the house on 2nd and Bixel, and I talked my mother into buying a house, and I couldn't believe that she didn't have a lot of money saved up, but she didn't. But I told her, "We'll buy the house and I'll help you. I'll go work full time and we can pay for it." Houses were very scarce then. Rentals were very scarce. We moved in--this couple wanted to sell their house and we moved in with them until they found a house to move to.

Espino

Were they Mexican?

Aceves

Yes. Well, I think he was Italian, but he spoke Spanish.

Espino

Interesting. Well, we'll pick up there the next time, okay? Thank you.[End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (January 16, 2009)

Espino

Today is January 16, 2009, and I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, you were going to tell me a little bit about your first job at May Company when you were fifteen, and then we can move on to maybe dating and what kind of social life you had as a teenager, and if you went to college later on or did you get married, or what happened after that?

Aceves

Well, actually, my first job was in a garment factory with my mother, because I wanted to go to work, and I went looking for work at the, what do you call them where you go, the employment agencies. I couldn't get a job, so she got me a job where she was working, and I helped the floor lady. But that must have been during vacations, vacations from boarding school. I think I was about thirteen, yes, about thirteen, and I made up my mind that I was not going to work in a garment shop, and my mother was all for never working in a laundry or a garment shop. She thought that at least a secretary or in an office.

Aceves

But anyway, when I did go to high school I was kind of bored with classes. The ones I had were interesting. Well, the English class was interesting. The history I flunked and then I took it in summer school and I was flunking all the tests. I kept submitting book reports, and the instructor said, "No, I don't want a book report. I want you to pass a test." I just couldn't pass those tests. I just couldn't stomach that history. It was just repeating one war after another war and after another war and memorizing the war. I don't know what resistance I had, but I just couldn't get it, and so he gave me a D. I turned in four books reports. I think it was a six-week course.

Aceves

So then my friend [Norma Coulter], I think she died very young when she was having her tonsils out, she introduced me to her boss at the May Company. That day, I don't know, we were having a field day or something, and I was dressed like--anyway, I had this red dress, but I had put freckles on my face. I went to the employment office and they said they didn't have any jobs

available, so Norma, who was already working there, introduced me to her boss, and her boss wrote a note and they hired me. I remember the office girl there in personnel said, "Well, you can't come dressed that way." I said, "No." So then that following Saturday I went with the one suit that I had, the skirt and the little jacket. So I started working there just doing things in the office, like an office girl. Although the war was over, there was still a scarcity of people. That's why they were hiring high school kids.

Aceves

So I started just going on Saturdays and then my boss, the supervisor, asked me if I could work more hours, so then I started working on Sundays and then I heard about the 4-4 program, where you got credit for four hours of work and four hours of school. Well, it was just right because I had a commercial course and this was their accounts receivable department. I picked up real fast, and you could earn a bonus. After you billed a hundred receipts, anything over that you got a penny or something. Anyway, I used to make a hundred dollars a month on my bonus, and I was making forty cents an hour in my pay, so I actually made more money on my bonus than I did. I liked it and I was pretty good at it.

Aceves

I met some very interesting--I remember a couple of ladies that I met. As a matter of fact, one of them, Ann Wallace, the name came to me, her husband was a writer. I know they moved to Arizona, and they were very politically conscious. Her and then there was Betsy, I think her last name was Betsy Siegal, and she lived in the Fairfax area. I remember going, her inviting us to her house and meeting her family, and I think that was the first Jewish family I ever met, well, that I guess that I was a good friend of, because most of the people that came to Roosevelt, this was a big Jewish community. But at Belmont there was mostly Caucasians, and we made a small percentage at the time of Mexicans and maybe a couple of blacks, but it was still predominantly Caucasian in that area.

Aceves

So then I stopped--I used to spend every summer with my aunt [Regina Medrano Mendoza], first in Oceanside and then when she moved to Tijuana in

'39, but then when I started to work, well, then I was working all summers. So I was working every day, Saturdays and Sundays and then anytime that I was on vacation I would work. So the first year that I got my W-2 form I made more money than my mother [Francisca], and I just felt so bad for her that here I know how hard she worked. I had seen her working in the laundry, pressing, and I had worked with her, and she was also a presser at the garment shop. One garment shop she was a presser. In another garment shop she sewed, and I saw how hard they worked, and I just really felt bad that it was so unfair that she worked so hard, that they all worked hard. So I had a lot of empathy, and I still do. I still identify with the working poor.

Espino

Do you think she was proud of you that you were able to bring that kind of--

Aceves

Yes, she was very proud.

Espino

And that maybe her investment in that boarding school was--

Aceves

Oh, yes, yes. She felt very proud that I was working in an office and I was bringing money in. And then in those days, anything you earned you just turned it all over to whoever the head of the household was, and I know that because we all talked about it and sometimes we'd complain. Somebody would say, "My dad only gave me five dollars, and I brought thirty dollars." And somebody would say, "Well, my mother didn't give me anything." But we just turned over the checks. The idea for anybody going to work was to make some money to help with--we were all the working poor, all our families were working poor. I'm sure that in the old neighborhood there were people on welfare. I remember telling my mother that. "Why don't you go on welfare? That way you could stay home with me. Everybody else is on welfare."

Espino

Oh, when you were little?

Aceves

Yes, yes.

Espino

How did she respond to that?

Aceves

Ooh, she would say, "Mientras que yo tengo dos manos no le pido a nadie."

Espino

You don't think--even during the hardest times of the depression, she never asked for any type of relief?

Aceves

No, no, she was--well, I understand now that she came from a history of land owners. Her grandfather [Bonifacio Pichardo] and her mother [Valentina Pichardo de Medrano], although her father [Credencio Medrano] was a peasant and a hard worker, but I guess that was the work ethic that they believed in. I'm sure that's the way she believed. But I also know that when my uncle [Jose Villagrana] had to go on welfare, I remember him coming home one time and I was there, and he had to go someplace and get these big cans of food or something. He just came and threw it on the table and walked out. They just felt, so many of the people--I think that was why there was so much domestic violence, that the men felt that they couldn't provide for their families. Like they would be on the corners and then not be able to bring any money that day or that week or something. I guess the word that comes to my mind is they felt castrated.

Aceves

And yet at the same time, everybody had a guitar at home. Everybody got together for any little excuse. Nobody went anyplace except to other people's houses. Everybody celebrated everybody's birthday, and the women all made whatever. I know in my neighborhood there was never any lack of food. Everybody had food and everybody cooked big meals for the parties, and there was always--by that time, by the time that I can remember, Prohibition [1920 to 1933] was over. I think it was over in '34 or '36. I guess we could look it up. By that time--but I know that my uncle still made beer at home up till the time that we moved. It must have been that my mother and I moved by

ourselves, and he was the last one in the family that we were still living with, because everybody else had gotten married and gone to Mexico, so I guess I could look up those dates. But there was always a lot to eat and festivities, and everybody brought out the guitars and there was a lot of singing, so it didn't seem like all gloom and doom, especially for somebody that's little. The little kids, we just played. Maybe some other people, kids that were more sensitive or older and they understood more, because I--

Espino

Or whose parents couldn't find a job. Like your mother always worked.

Aceves

I know also that a lot of the young girls, they didn't go to high school because they went to work, and I know the comadre next door, she sent her daughters as soon as they were graduated from junior high, would get them--I don't know how she got them jobs in what we considered a rich family's home. They had a telephone. I know we would go down to the Ford Hotel, I would go with my friends and the mother would send them to go call their sister for something or other.

Espino

So how do you think people responded to you working at the May Company? Was that something very different from what other young girls were doing?

Aceves

No. As a matter of fact, during the war practically everybody in all neighborhoods--now, I don't remember this, because I was in boarding school, but later on as an adult people would talk about it. So they all, they were working at Clifton's, wherever they could find jobs the families, and they were all big families, they would go out and work. Like, for instance, my ex-husband [William Aceves], all his brothers went into the service, and he was the oldest one left. He was, what, about thirteen years old, and before that everybody was shining shoes or selling papers. So I know that he went to Cathedral, so I don't know at what point he left school to go get a full-time job and turned over all his check to his mother. He was left and three younger siblings, they're all boys, were left, so that was what we did. We didn't even question it.

Everybody just went to work as soon as they could and earned money, and whoever graduated from school.

Aceves

Of course, when we were in high school, then they had the G.I. Bill, and I know my friend, one of my best friends, Ray Guerrero, he talked all the guys into going into the Army so that they could come back and get the G.I. Bill and go to college, and they did. The only ones that didn't go from--we were about thirteen that hung around together. We didn't fit into the academic group, and we didn't fit in with the Temple group, with the pachucos.

Espino

This was from Belmont, when you were in the public high school?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

And these boys weren't from the--last time you talked to me about the boys from La Plaza.

Aceves

Oh, from SAI [Spanish American Institute]. No, these were from Belmont High School. So the only ones that didn't, one of them, his mother didn't sign for him, and the other one was supporting his mother. But all the rest of the fellows--oh, yes, another one didn't go. His parents wouldn't let him go. So I know that at least three of them that I can remember, they went, and they came back and I think they all became engineers and they've done well financially. So we lost track of one, but I know last year or maybe a couple of years--the time goes by so fast--I kept telling Ray, "Let's get the crowd together. Let's get the crowd," and he finally did, and there were a few of us there. So that was in high school.

Aceves

I did try to go to college. I went to LACC [Los Angeles City College], but we didn't have any support. We didn't know--I mean, I was already working, so I was going to go to LACC part time, but I didn't know where to register, I didn't

know what to register or with who. I remember going, I don't know how long I stuck it out. I remember Helen [Hernandez] and I went and her sister. I don't know if Alice [Hernandez] would remember. And then I just gave up, I just gave up, and when I graduated then I went to work full time. I mean, I graduated, what, on a Thursday or a Friday and I went to work full time on Saturday, and I worked there till actually I was pregnant with my first one. I didn't know I was pregnant, because nobody had told me anything about morning sickness. Everybody knew I was pregnant except me.

Espino

Let's just step back a little bit and maybe you can tell me a little bit more about some of the things you did for fun with this group that you hung out with--

Aceves

In high school? Well, we were--

Espino

Because how old were you when you married your husband?

Aceves

Twenty.

Espino

Twenty, okay. So there were several years when you were out dating and hanging out with your friends.

Aceves

Yes. I still keep in touch with my old boyfriends. I mean, we're friends. Yes, well, when I went to the tenth grade, well, I didn't know anybody except Helen. Her sister was already at Belmont High School. Let me backtrack a little bit. My mother had moved to the Aliso Village Projects. I don't know why, but she did. They were on First Street. They've knocked them down last year or a couple of years ago. But Aliso Village has a real good history during the war. There were a lot of people that were very politically aware that lived there, because it was government subsidized and you paid according, I guess, to what you could afford. So she moved there, and I guess she told some friends

that I wanted to come home and I would be going to Roosevelt High School, and they told her that Roosevelt, a lot of wild kids went there or something.

Aceves

And then somebody told her about this house on 2nd and Bixel, and she squatted. She went and she moved in with--so when the owner came, by that time I'm home. I was the one that spoke English, and I talked to him and we paid him rent and I started going to Belmont. Helen lived in the Temple area, and she came home that year from boarding school, too, and I think even my comadre Connie [Pardo] came home. Frances de Pauw couldn't find enough missionaries to teach, so they were going to send the students to Hollywood High, and I told my mother, "Well, I mean, I'm going to go to high school. What difference does it make where I go to high school?" So that's how I talked her into allowing me to come home, and I guess maybe Helen and Connie did the same thing with their parents. Well, we were now of dating age and getting a little boy crazy and wanted a little more freedom, so we thought, and I guess our parents weren't strong enough to resist our manipulation.

Aceves

And then Alice, Helen, her sister, was already at Belmont, so I got in with this crowd, with this group. I remember exactly who I met first or how we met, but I met someone, and then that somebody introduced me to others, and then we used to--most of them lived on Temple, and we'd have good times. Then Belmont had teen dances and we would go there. It wasn't at Belmont. It was someplace downtown at some other hall, but it was sponsored by Belmont, and some of the kids would volunteer to have the socials. I don't know if they had bands. Probably, because there were so many little bands around. So we were a lot into dancing. We just loved to dance.

Espino

What kind of music did you dance to?

Aceves

Jitterbug. I've always like the blues and jazz, probably because on 7th Street when Skid Row--I think I told you that Skid Row during the depression was jumping. They had wonderful music, and it was alive. People didn't seem to be

depressed. I mean, there probably was, but there was a lot of good music, a lot of good music on Skid Row, on Central, so we liked to dance. I mean, if we could dance everyday, wherever there was a dance we did. As we got older, we started to go to like the Avodon that was where Main and Spring meets, on 8th Street I believe, 8th Street. Then later on they opened up the Zenda, and then there was a Mexican restaurant that was in South Central that one of my co-workers, or they were sisters, they would go, El zarape or El Sombrero, like that, and they had great music, too. So there was a lot of music and a lot of dancing. I mean, we'd just dance as fast--and we started going to the Palladium also.

Espino

So you would dance with boys that you didn't know?

Aceves

No. Most of the time we went with a crowd and we'd dance with them. At the Angelus Temple right here on 1st Street, Johnny Otis used to play there. I've been meaning to find out if his son, or if he's still around. He must have been not much older than we were. So, well, sometimes other people from other areas would come and ask us to dance, but let me see. My first boyfriend was Joe Anguiano. He's my insurance agent now and we keep in touch. So I don't know how long I went with him, maybe a year or two years. In those days it was truly a friendship and there were no premarital affairs or anything like that.

Espino

What kind of things were there, though, holding hands or kissing?

Aceves

And kissing. That was about it.

Espino

No fondling?

Aceves

There probably was as we got a little older. I know with my husband [William] there was. And who knows? I mean, nobody was going to say what anybody

did, right? Because you weren't supposed to do it. So if they were doing it, they weren't saying it.

Espino

Okay, so the values were pretty strict that girls don't--

Aceves

Girls didn't have--I mean, there were a lot of girls that did, that got pregnant at a young age, but none of the group that I went around with did, not that I can remember. But then, yes, I mean, if they did it was pretty private. You just didn't go around saying it.

Espino

Even to your best friend you wouldn't tell?

Aceves

No. No, not if you were having sex. I don't remember discussing too much about it. So, I mean, Joe Anguiano was my first boyfriend. I don't know how long I went around with him, maybe a year or two years, and then all the boys left for the service, all the ones that we were friends in the crowd. So then I went around with this other young boy, Eddie Padilla, who's the one that was supporting his mother. He had dropped out of school. He didn't go to Belmont. I think he must have just graduated from, what was the name of that middle school that they went to, we called it junior high [Central Junior High]?

Espino

King?

Aceves

Oh, no. No, this was downtown where they're building the school now. It'll come to me. So then I went with him, and then I met my husband when I was about seventeen years old.

Espino

Seventeen. Okay, so you were young.

Aceves

Yes. So I met him because one of my friends, Stella [Lopez], well, one of the gals that went to Belmont who's my comadre, too, her name now is Lilian Esqueda. At the time--I'll download. She moved, her parents moved over here to Euclid and Whittier, so she was going to Roosevelt. So she started to go around with Ruben [Esqueda], who she married, and who's also my compadre, and Stella, who were good friends because they lived in the Bunker Hill area, her and another girl were real good friends with Lily. So they had had a party or something, and Stella was coming over here to meet everybody. They had had a party the night before, and she was going to go there to Lily's house, because Lily also had a brother, and these were all the guys that he hung around with.

Aceves

So I came, so I came with Stella. We came on the streetcar from where we lived. She lived on Bunker Hill and over here to Whittier and Euclid, and that's where I met my husband, and then I started going out with him. Because he was around when my graduation, yes, he was around at my high school graduation, I remember going out with him, and I graduated in summer of '48, and I turned eighteen in February.

Espino

Of '49?

Aceves

No.

Espino

You graduated in the summer of '48?

Aceves

The summer of '48, and I had turned eighteen the previous February. So I met him and we just hit it off, and we went together after that, and then when he started to get drafted, got notice that he was being drafted, it was the Korean War, then actually his sister was very encouraging in us getting married. He would vacillate yes and no, yes and no, and finally we did get married and he did go to the service. But do you want me to say more about my high school before I get into--

Espino

No, I think that's--

Aceves

We were pretty healthy kids. We were all working. We all worked, and we spent a lot of time dancing. We'd go to Echo Park, and at the time it was Silver Lake Park. It's now MacArthur Park, and everything was walking. We'd go to the movies a lot. We went to a lot of movies, and we'd meet at each other's houses. We met at my house a lot, even though it was a little three-room house. I know Ray was teaching the fellows how to dance. So I think looking back that we were a healthy group in spite of the fact that our parents were dysfunctional. But I remember we used to go and knock at Ray's house to see if he could come out and go with us someplace, and, "Oh," he said, "I can't. I just washed my hair," and his hair would stand up like that. [laughs] When I see him now I say, "What happened to your hair, Ray?"

Espino

Now you don't have any.

Aceves

No, he does, but it's real smooth. It's gray but it's real smooth. But I think, like I say, we had good times. I guess we also had good morals. Nobody was--we weren't politically aware or anything like that, although a lot of things were happening. I guess it wasn't until--and only Ruben, my compadre Ruben and my ex-husband Bill were the only ones that got drafted. Or, of course, one of the twins, Ole, there were twins, Olegario and Raymundo Vidaurri. Now, Ole got killed in the Korean War. They were twins and Ole was real tall and had a real laid-back personality, and Mundo was real short or is real short and had a Napoleon personality. But, I mean, it was so sad to experience that one of your buddies, and the nicest one had died. That was quite a shock for us. It was kind of hard to believe.

Espino

Did they bring his body back?

Aceves

You know, I don't even remember if we went to the funeral. I don't remember any of that. I don't remember what happened there. I just know that we found out that he had gotten killed, so that was hard.

Espino

So you're sad remembering that. It must have been hard for you at that time. It impacted you a lot.

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

And he's the first person that you knew that died from military service?

Aceves

I believe so. Yes, I believe so, because practically everybody that I know that went to World War II came back. Of course they were older, but I do remember my cousin. She Nicke Nillagrana was a WAC [Women's Army Corps], and that was kind of nervy of her to join the WACS, but she did. Practically everybody that I knew, that I didn't have a personal relationship with.

Espino

He was the first one.

Aceves

I believe so.

Espino

He must have been, what, nineteen, eighteen?

Aceves

Well, we were still in high school. I don't know at what age they start drafting them. I don't think he joined.

Espino

Oh, so he must have been older than eighteen.

Aceves

But after--no, I guess Ray encouraged the other fellows to join. I guess they didn't--but the war [World War II] was over. The war was over when they joined, and it was good thinking. We didn't have the means to go to college and support ourselves, and it was good thinking to do that.

Espino

So they weren't risking much, because they knew the war was over.

Aceves

Yes, the war was over. Yes, because the war was over, what, in '45? Yes, it was after the war. This was between '45 and '48. It must have been about '47. I guess we could look it up.

Espino

Right. So your husband, you met him at seventeen and you married him at twenty, so you had been dating just him for--

Aceves

Well, I'm sure I went on other dates with other fellows. I remember a couple of dates, because I remember one. This fellow was a football player. I don't know if he's still living. He probably doesn't even remember me. But I don't know how we--a football player from Roosevelt. I don't know how it happened that I dated him and I ended up with him, and he had a lot to drink, and so I told him I could drive myself home. Well, I couldn't drive, but I drove myself home. [laughter] And I wrecked his car, because the next day he had to come with somebody. Somebody else came. I don't know if I ruined the brakes or what, because in those days it was just a shift gear, and I don't know how I got home, but I got home and I left him there parked out in the street in the car passed out, and I went in. I went home and the next morning I could see through the window that they were doing something to his car and they drove off with the car. I don't know what I did.

Espino

So was that common, drinking in high school, among you?

Aceves

Well, we did some drinking. I was always real hurt because I never got invited to the pot parties.

Espino

The marijuana parties. [laughter]

Aceves

When I would hear about it, I'd, "How come I didn't get invited?" I just never did. But we used to buy a little pint of whiskey, and all of us would get drunk, throwing up and everything else. So we did, yes, we did some drinking in high school. And then we still remained friends after high school, so between eighteen and twenty most of us got married around that time, so we thought once you graduate and you're working, you're an adult and you felt you could do things even if they were illegal, just as long as you didn't get caught.

Espino

Right, right.

Aceves

So, yes, we did--I mean, we didn't know how to socially drink. You either drank too much or you didn't drink at all. I know that my cousin still tells me, I mean, I've even forgotten all the drinks I used to drink. I would start liking a drink and I would drink that a lot, and then I'd like another drink and I would drink that a lot, and every time we get together or something, he'll throw a little word about that. Well, I do remember my cousin one time, he's passed away, my cousin Joe Villagrana. I don't know how many of us went out. I was with my ex-husband, my boyfriend then, and my cousin Joe was with my friend, and I don't know who else was with us. But they asked him if he could get us some pot, so we did. We went someplace and he got some, and then when we were smoking he said, "They just gave us--," what is that herb that they--I don't know. He said, "It's not marijuana." It's some kind of herb that he said, but we all got high on it anyway. I know that we were in his little car, and he ended up, he got caught, and I remember that was a big scandal. But I didn't want to say I had passed out because he had gotten us some so-called marijuana, although he said it wasn't, or that it was mixed with some kind of herb so that

it wasn't all that strong, but we didn't know. That was the first time. So I guess if you had the connections and you knew, you could do all of those things.

Aceves

I don't think there was--I don't know. I know there was marijuana and there was liquor. Anything else, I didn't know. Although I remember they used to say that Gene Krupa, he was the--

Espino

Musician?

Aceves

Yes, he was a musician, but he played the drums and he was very popular. I guess people would read in the paper that he got caught with some kind of heavy, maybe cocaine or something like that, so that's the way that we would know, but I imagine nobody could afford that. So it was around, but it was only done socially or part of what we thought was social.

Espino

Right. And it wasn't part of your everyday experience, because everybody would get up and go to work the next day. It was something that happened on the weekends, would you say?

Aceves

It was a party thing. It was a party thing. So dancing and drinking. But aside from that, from the tea parties [marijuana-smoking parties] that I didn't get invited to, and that one time that my cousin Joe introduced us to pot, mixed pot he said, I don't remember any other time that it was around. I'm sure it was.

Espino

Right, right. But that's interesting, I didn't realize that, because in one of my other interviews the person also talks about prevalent marijuana was where he was growing up. Other hard drugs, no, but marijuana was really, you could get it pretty easily. Okay, so then you decided to get married, and that's because he was going off to war. Do you think if he was staying you would have waited a little bit longer, or maybe not married him at all?

Aceves

I don't know. I mean, that was one of the reasons that he kept--I'm sure his mother kept talking him out of it, that's it's easier to leave a girlfriend than it is a wife, so I'm sure that when he was with me he probably wanted to get married. I think that's why we married so young. I think many of us were more in lust than in love, but we were all good kids, so that you stuck it out. But I think because of that reason, I think that all of us got married so young.

Espino

You wanted to have sex, but you wanted it to be with your husband and not just--

Aceves

Well, you were programmed, you were programmed, at least most of us were. And even if you weren't, I think you felt a little guilty when you did. But like I say, nobody talked about it, at least I don't remember anybody talking about it.

Espino

Where do you think that came from, that pressure to get married before you had sex?

Aceves

From our families.

Espino

Or to marry the person you have sex with. From your parents?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Not from the church?

Aceves

Probably there, too. I mean, the whole society was like that. There was no question about it, or you didn't question it. And it was acceptable that men had sexual freedom but women didn't, and you knew that, and whether you felt resentful or not--I guess if you wanted to have sex you probably would. And I'm sure that if you were very sophisticated and you knew about birth control and all of that, that you wouldn't have been so--I don't know, it was just the times. It was just the times, the thirties and forties. I'm not too sure exactly when it became that to have premarital affairs was okay, because my mother--but she felt that she'd gotten married when she was eighteen, and she didn't have me till she was thirty, and during all that time I'm sure that my father was not the only one. So I mean, she was pretty liberal in that way, but I think that she believed that at least the first time you should be a virgin with your first marriage.

Espino

Did she tell you that?

Aceves

I would hear her talking, and I remember her also saying that you shouldn't take care of yourself to have babies until you've had the first one. Then after that you do, because you never can tell whether you can have them or not. I remember her talking about that, I guess because that happened to her. I don't know that she took care of herself, but she didn't have any children till she got pregnant with my--as far as I know.

Espino

So when you had this serious boyfriend, she didn't counsel you or talk to you about birth control or not having sex? She didn't assume that you guys might be having sexual relationships since you had been together for such a long time?

Aceves

No, no. She just expected me to know things. The one that would talk to me more was my aunt, my Aunt Regina Medrano de Mendoza, but then I don't remember her talking about sex either.

Espino

You were kind of just out there on your own, figuring things out as it came along?

Aceves

Yes. And you heard a lot of conversations. I mean, women would always be talking, and you weren't allowed to talk or ask questions, just listen, so you picked up a lot then. I remember picking up a lot with my aunt when she talked with her friends and comadres, and they would talk about sex. They were young, they were very young. I mean, how old was my aunt when I started spending every summer with her? I guess she was in her twenties, and all her friends and comadres were that age, and they would sit around talking about sex and exchanging, and the men would be outside smoking and drinking, so you picked up a lot. I did anyway, I picked up a lot of information that way, and you just store it, because you really are supposed to be seen and not heard.

Espino

So then when you got married, she didn't explain anything to you?

Aceves

No.

Espino

Was she happy for you?

Aceves

I don't know. I think she had mixed feelings. She got sick. She got yellow jaundice, is that correct? Yes, she got yellow. All her face got yellow and everything, and I think that it was due to how emotional she felt. So, yes, I think she never did think that Bill was a good partner for me, and neither did--I know my mother-in-law, Bill's mother used to say, "You're better off--." I would hear her saying the sons were better off if they got married with somebody that was humble than somebody that was outgoing.

Espino

The total opposite of yourself, right?

Aceves

Yes. So I guess that everybody could see it. But like I say now, it just turned out that I was lucky that he's a good person, and we stuck together while he was in the service. I mean, just before I had the baby I got a notice that he had been wounded in Korea, but I had already gotten a letter from his buddy telling me that he had been wounded and he was sure that he was okay. But still, when I got the telegram it was--and then my sister-in-law told me not to tell my mother-in-law, so when my mother-in-law found out, she came to tell me off, that here she was having a good time and all the time her son was wounded and this and that. I just looked over at my sister-in-law and she felt that way she hadn't suffered so long in knowing, because she had all her sons in the service. Well, two of them, yes, two of them were in the service during World War II, and that's when Bill went to work.

Aceves

He went to the service and I guess he came home when my oldest son [Billy] was thirteen months old, and he had never met him. I used to write to him every day and send him pictures, so that adjustment was pretty hard. Then he came home, I think I got pregnant the first night he got home. I was nursing the baby. I nursed him for actually eleven months, but I started weaning him at about nine months, and during that period that he came home was my first menstrual period. I didn't have them. And then I was very irregular, so it didn't--you know, if I missed a menstrual period I didn't worry about it, because I was so irregular that I couldn't keep track. But as soon as the morning sickness became, I knew that I was pregnant for the second one. So him just coming home from the service, having another child and getting pregnant, it was a hard adjustment. It was a real hard adjustment for us.

Espino

Did you live on your own?

Aceves

I was living with my mother. We had gotten a little place down on 20th and Normandie that's where my friend Helen had lived there. This family had a converted little apartment in the back, and we lived there I guess for about four months before he got called in.

Espino

And that's the period that you got pregnant, those four months you got pregnant right away?

Aceves

Yes, I must have, because I remember--I don't know if I kept any of the letters. I don't think so. But I mean the letters that he would write to me, I don't know if I kept them or not. I don't think so. I think that one time I was cleaning and there was just too much. So, yes, when he came home, like I said, there was a hard adjustment when he came, and we were living with my mother. Then the back house got vacated, because my mother and I had bought--oh, that was a story in itself. I remember we were getting evicted from the house on 2nd and Bixel, because the owner said that they were going to tear it down and build a business. Well, when I pass by there, they put a business like a hotdog stand in front, but I don't know if the houses are still there. We didn't go by there when we went to see the puppets Sunday.

Aceves

But anyway, so then I told my mother, "Well, let's buy a house." And she said, "Well, I don't have any money to put a down payment on a house." I said, "What do you mean you don't have any money?" I remember her showing me her checkbook, her savings book, and she had \$800. And I said, "Well, I'll give you all my check." By that time I'm working full time. "I'll give you all my check and let's find a place." And my uncle [Joe Villagrana Sr.], who was her sister's widower, they had always owned a house. He had always been talking to her about buying one. So she worked with this lady that had her house up for sale, so we moved in with them until they found their place. But, I mean, we were already buying it. So we bought that house. That was the first house that we bought. And my mother just felt she had to pay it off right away.

Aceves

And then that area--a few years later I was pregnant with my third kid, which must have been about '57. Then the county bought that area because they wanted to build. Well, it's all built up right there. We lived on Kingston and Marengo, right where the General Hospital, right one block east of State Street. So they bought us all out, and then we bought the house in City

Terrace, which was more than the house that they had paid us for on Kingston, but that's how we became homeowners. And once you're a homeowner, even if you're not actually a homeowner--like, for instance, I had to refinance a house in order to retire, because I didn't plan to retire when I did, but healthwise I just couldn't--when I fell down the second time I said, no, my body's telling me something, and I'll wing it. I'm not going to starve to death, that's for sure. So that was how we got our first house. But she couldn't be with a debt. She had to pay it off. It wasn't that mortgage mentality that I have or that I know that everybody has at this point. You never even think of paying off your house, and I got a good deal with this one.

Aceves

Anyway, but going back, we managed, Bill and I. We had, with his friends now, because he was from 7th Street originally, the first ten years of the area that I was brought up in, so I knew some of the people, so it was kind of like going back to the old neighborhood. So we had then his crowd, the crowd from 7th Street and my Belmont crowd, so we kept a lot of socializing. Now there were babies and showers and weddings, and not only our birthday parties but our kids' birthday parties, and the family. I've always been very close to my cousins and my mother's oldest sister [Lupe Medrano de Villagrana]. My mother was the second to the oldest, and she had seven children. We used to go down here to East L.A. all the time, so I spent a lot of time and we were always very close, and even as teenagers kind of hung around with my two cousins and the youngest cousins, who were the same age, except my birthday's in February and hers is September. So there was always the family and the friends and there's always a lot of socializing, so it kept us busy.

Aceves

However, when I was pregnant with my third child I decided, I said, "This is not a life for me. What I'm going to do is I'm going to give myself ten years and I'm going to go back to school. I'm going to get my teacher's credential and then I'll go to work. By that time this one will be ten years old. The other one will be fourteen, and the other one will be sixteen, and I'll be able to live and help support them, and I'll work all year." In those days it was a year-round school, "And in summers we'll travel." And that's what I set my mind out to do. About six years down the road, then I started going to night school, and in the first

class or two I talked Bill into going with me and he did, but then he wasn't interested in it. So I kept going, and when the little one was in kindergarten, I put him at Robert Hill Lane, which was across the street from East L.A. College, and I started to go to--took on the bus, would take the Kern bus and then walk and I would take him there, and I would take a class or two, whatever I could.

Aceves

But then I didn't like Robert Hill Lane. At that time it was predominantly, I think, Japanese, and they were very, how would I say--in other words, whatever kindergarten, whatever they would give them to do I think they wanted to be real perfect and come up with the best they can do, and we weren't like that, especially Bill. I remember them asking them to do a little plane, and I had Patrick [Aceves] do the little plane like a little kid did it, and all the mothers came with a real fancy plane, so that kind of atmosphere was not that I enjoyed or liked, so in the first grade I put in Malabar, which is a school that the older kids, that Billy and Paul went to, and I already had a reputation there. But he did go to what I was telling you, Heights Co-op Nursery. Well, Billy and Paul went to Ramona Co-op Nursery in Ramona Gardens. I went down to Ramona Gardens and I heard that they had a co-op nursery. I had read about co-op nurseries in Parents' Magazine. I used to subscribe to that.

Aceves

So I went and I looked at it and I met this--she was a director and the teacher, Loretta Genzler, and she was very good, and there were about ten families. Then I talked my neighbor, who we're still friends, and her son became my oldest sons' buddies. They were inseparable, the Zepeda family. So we lived on Kingston and we walked all the way down to Ramona Gardens, so she took turns taking the boys, and I took turns taking the boys. She also by that time had two kids--I guess we could figure it out--and I already had Paul [Aceves]. So then when Paul got a little older, well, then he went to Ramona, too. Then all that area was bought up, so we both moved to City Terrace, and then we heard about--well, we also had programs with Heights Co-op Nursery, who was located in City Terrace in the Jewish Center. They rented the basement to us. So Patrick went to Heights Co-op Nursery.

Aceves

And actually the director there, Ethel Young, she just passed away I think last year--it was a very political or social school in terms, because we were the first ones that--well, not us but the movement of the co-op nurseries had a "no guns for toys." We didn't believe in war toys.

Espino

This was in 19--this was prior to the Vietnam War.

Aceves

Yes. This was in about 1960, because Patrick would have been three years old. Yes, he would be pre-kindergarten.

Espino

Like three or four. He didn't start when he was two?

Aceves

No. He might have started--because he went there a couple of years and then went to Robert Hill Lane. Yes, so we belonged to the Wabash City Council with things that went around in the neighborhood. We belonged to the general, to the overall co-op nursery movement, and so we began to go out, and then she insisted that we all be presidents and take turns being president, and it was truly, truly a co-op. Of course, most of the mothers didn't work, and some of them were going to school at the time, so we participated in taking care of the kids once they were there. There had to be one adult per five children. That was the law at the time. Now, because we still get together every other month and have lunch, and we'd say, "Imagine--." We'd pick up kids, whoever's turn it was to be the mother at the school would pick up kids in the surrounding area. Well, I don't know if you've been to City Terrace with all those hills that are up there, so it was our turn together. There were no seat belts in those days, and like my son Patrick and his buddy Ricky, they didn't stop. They would just be--they were very active and didn't pay attention. But none of us that I can recall, and we talk about it, none of us ever had an accident with those kids. No seat belts and I'm sure like everybody--

Espino

Or car seats?

Aceves

Everybody had at least one kid that was incorrigible in the car, so that was a lot of--and it was purposely done for it to be multicultural. So you had the Jewish community, the Mexican, and you had Japanese, and then there was one black, because there weren't any blacks that lived in the area, but that moved into Monterey Park, and the people in the area didn't want them to move in. Well, a lot of the people from Heights went and demonstrated up there. I think their names were Jones. So they finally got the house, and that was about the only ones that moved in. There was a Filipino couple, too, with their little kids, but mainly we were Mexicans and Jewish. And then we celebrated each cultural celebration, like we did the Cinco de Mayo. I know I have--because Ethel fixed a little book when they were graduating. She did a real good job. I'll find it and show it to you.

Espino

With pictures?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Oh, that would be nice. Well, now we understand that even as early as the 1930s there were a lot of progressive-minded people, but this is definitely pre--well, I guess it's around the Civil Rights Movement, too.

Aceves

I remember when the [Joseph] McCarthy group came over and it came out in the paper, all the people that had been called in, and I remember one of our friends was listed, and most of the people that were listed lost their jobs, but Bertha [Marshall] didn't. So I wanted to go down and demonstrate in front of wherever they were meeting, the courthouse or wherever, and I couldn't find a babysitter. I mean, I never had a problem, because we always exchanged. If you were going to be home, you could leave it with this mother, especially if it was somebody that your kid hung around with. So I remember that day I couldn't find anybody. I finally found someone. When I got to the demonstration a lot of the parents were there, but we didn't know that we

were empathetic with anti-McCarthy. You didn't talk about those kind of politics. And I know that we had formed a Democratic group here, a Democratic Club here in City Terrace, and one of the persons that was a member had read in the paper about--I think her name was Bertha Marshall, that she had been called before the McCarthy group, and he wanted her out of the club. So we all came and actually we made him leave the club, because we took people for who they were, what they stood, and like I say, I've always to this day identified with the working poor. That's who I identify with. That's where my roots are, and those are the people that don't get recognized for all the hard work that they do and all the contributions that they make.

Aceves

I'm not too sure. I used to have an article on the co-op nurseries. I don't know if I still do, and when they started, but that would be easy to find.

Espino

So do you remember thinking that she was a communist, or do you remember having any feelings about communism?

Aceves

I didn't. Well, there was also one of the assistant teachers, she's since passed away. Her nickname was Bunny. What was her real name? I don't know. Her last name was Rabirosso. I think Muriel or something like that. Anyway, as a teenager she was very active in the Communist Party, and she had testified. But I don't know, she had been very disappointed at something that evidently Russia or something--I remember her telling me, and I can't remember exactly, that was very disappointing, and when she went to testify she testified the wrong way or something. I remember her telling me that. So there was a young group. What were they called? I'll remember. There was a young group in the area that I don't know if they were communist, but certainly I would say they were socialist, and Bertha did belong to the Communist Party.

Aceves

The fellow that I worked with, Delfino Varela, he was a communist. As a matter of fact, he worked for the international institute doing or coordinating

applications for permanent-resident visas, and they wanted him to sign the loyalty oath and he refused, so they fired him. So then he opened up his own business and did very well, and when I got divorced and he found out that I was looking for a job, he offered me a job and I went to work there for him. I worked for him for about five years and learned a lot. He trained me I think for two weeks and then took off for Russia for a month. I never read that law so much. I think I had memorized it. And he did everything perfect, because he knew he was being watched all the time. But I was fearless. I mean, I never joined. I mean, I joined the Democratic Clubs in the area. When somebody asked me that they were going to form a Democratic Club of City Terrace, I guess City Terrace or anyway someplace, East Side Democratic Club, and they needed so many to become a club, I said, "Oh, yeah, I'll sign up."

Aceves

But as far as I'm concerned, Jesus teachings aren't much different than truly a Marxist, the little bit I've read. I haven't read that much, nor do I consider myself a scholar in Marxism. But the little bit I've read with socialism and communism, I think that Jesus was teaching that, the way that I was brought up, the way that all of Jesus' teachings were taught to me. That's why like I tell you that when I saw in the newspaper "Remember Pearl Harbor" and I asked what did they mean by that, and the housemother said, "Oh, that's when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor." And I said, "Well, why didn't we turn the other cheek?" So like I say, very early I learned that people don't practice what they preach, including our parents, all of these things that they teach you, and they don't set an example, so you're kind of torn if somehow or other it has been embedded in you psychologically.

Espino

Well, how did your husband react? I mean, did he have those same feelings about here you are, you're a stay-at-home mom, correct?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

And you have three children, two children at this time?

Aceves

Three, three.

Espino

And you're going off to demonstrate against the United States government, essentially, the House Un-American Activities?

Aceves

I don't know that he knew about that, because he was working all the time. I don't know that he knew about that. He didn't like it too well when I joined the Democratic Party. I mean, he always felt that if you're going to be out in the street so much, you should go out and get a job.

Espino

He would tell you that?

Aceves

Yes. I would say, it's not different. I said, "My kids get sick. I don't have to go to any meeting, or I don't have to do anything. If I have a job, the job comes before my kids. No way." And there was living on his salary, it was hard, it was very hard, but there was no way I was going to go to work and leave the kids, knowing how it felt to be home without your parent. So that was very important to me, very important to me. I did go to work. I mean, when we got divorced it was in '64, so Patrick was, what, seven years old, and the other one would have been eleven, and the oldest one was thirteen. But my mother by that time was living next door, although her drinking gradually got worse and worse and worse. But the neighborhood was also kind of safe to leave them, and most of the parents there in the area didn't work. There were always mothers there, and so you had this kind of neighborhood relationship, not like when you move and you don't have kids. There's days that you don't even see your neighbors or just wave at them. You don't have no real interaction. But the neighbors here that brought up their kids when they were little, because we all moved in about the same time, they seemed to have a friendly relationship.

Aceves

And then when we moved in, the Arias over there, the Fourth of July we had kind of a party, Fourth of July, close off the street. But then I started going to Mexico to my uncle's birthday party on the Fourth of July, so I would just contribute for a couple of years I was here. I mean, I got active and I liked it. I liked learning and going off, and when we did get divorced, Bill did help me a lot with the kids, because I remember him coming home one time--and we ended up very friendly, because he came to me, he said, "I need out. If I stick around any longer, I'm going to resent all of you a lot." And I just said, "Well, just think about it real carefully, because we'll never get back together again." Of course, it was six years down my plan, so--

Espino

You were already thinking that the marriage wasn't going to work?

Aceves

Well, no. I mean, I tell you when I was pregnant with Patrick--

Espino

Oh, you didn't finish your education.

Aceves

Yes, I said I'm going to go back to school. I'll give myself ten years to do this. Because it was not a life--I just knew it was not a life for me, and I wasn't afraid, if I could earn a good living that I would be okay. And I was fearless. I think of some of the things I did--one of the things that as a teenager, when one of the fellows had a car, I don't know if you've ever been to Elysian Park all the way up there. I would think I was so cute, I would step on the gas pedal and make them go down. I mean, we never got hurt or anything, and everybody would be giggling and laughing, "Stop it! Stop!" And we did all these crazy things.

Espino

Very daring.

Aceves

Yes. And there was a carload of kids that did get all killed except one. They got in an accident, and like I say, they all got killed except one. And I remember he

used to come over to the house and sit there and the tears would just roll down. He said, "There I just came to, and all these bodies and all this glass." I forget what his last name was, but I think his first was Robert. But a lot of those things like that happened when you were in high school, when you're young, but it did, because then it took me sixteen years to get my B.A. But in the meantime I got some pretty good jobs, like I got that job with Del [Delfino Varela], and then from there I went to community Euclid Foundation, and I went to D.C. for three months for some training in economic development. That was quite an experience, and Bill stayed home with the kids. I called him up, because I asked my boss, he said, "We can't find anybody to go take that program for economic development." He says, "Connie," [Menard] my other co-worker, "she's taking the housing, but we can't find anybody for economic development. And I said, "Well, why don't you offer it to me?" And he said, "Well, you have the three boys." I says, "Wait a minute." So I went and I called Bill and I asked him, "If I go to Washington for three months, will you stay with the kids?" And he says, "Yeah, go ahead. All that education might help me in the future."

Espino

Wow, that's amazing.

Aceves

Yes. So I went there.

Espino

That's a lot of support. Not too many men who would do that.

Aceves

Yes. But there was no threat then. Like I say, we ended friends. I mean, I think that a divorce is ugly when there's another person involved, that the other person feels a little betrayed or whatever, but at that time there was no girlfriend and there was no boyfriend. He wanted out, and I knew eventually I was going to leave him, but I wasn't going to stop him if that's when he wanted to go. So he did, and so when he'd started to complain about that it was so expensive to live by himself, especially eating out all the time, I said, "Well, look. I make dinner for the kids before I leave, and I feel guilty working

all day and then going to school at night time, so why don't you come home and give them dinner, you eat dinner, put them to bed, and by that time I'll be home." So that's the way it worked for a number of years till one day he said, "You know," he says, "I'm sitting here all by myself now. Patrick is at Salesian Boys Club. The boys are at the park playing ball." And he said, "They don't need me anymore." I said, "Fine." So like I say, when they were little he was very supportive.

Aceves

I mean, like when my son was heavily drinking, those were so far the hardest years of my life, and I got no support from anybody then. I was on my own. But AA helped me a lot. I used to come home and see him all drunk here. I would just turn around and go to a meeting. Sometimes I went to as many as three meetings a day, and they have them practically 24/7, and I had my little booklet. I would just look it up and go. The later the meetings were, the heavier they were, I mean the more intense that they were. But I learned a lot about alcoholism, learned a lot about myself, too.

Espino

Well, I'm thinking that even though you weren't working for a wage, that experience you had with the co-op must have taught you some skills that you used later on in your work life.

Aceves

Yes. I did also work--I got work with Occidental College with the Sheldons the professor there and his wife. They were doing studies here. They did a study--I know that we were interviewing parents from, I think it was a study on the school-dropout, and then they did a study on working mothers, and those were all night jobs, just interviewing, so I worked on those and earned a little, not much. I don't know it was, but that was a real learning experience, too, very.

Espino

Right. And this was while you were--

Aceves

Yes, I was married. Or was I married, or wasn't I? I could look it up. I could look up when those studies were, because I'm sure that Occidental College has all of that information in their archives.

Espino

So when you were with the co-op, did you have weekly meetings or monthly meetings, or did you have officers?

Aceves

Yes, yes. We had to have, because that's the way it was licensed. You had to have an educational meeting once a month, and you had to have a business meeting once a month. That was with all the group. Then you had your little meetings that you had, little emergency meetings or whatever that you had. Yes, you were meeting quite a--it took a lot. The fathers had to come on weekends and fix up the toys and clean up things and do the heavy work, so it was a real family effort, and some did more than others. And we had socials, too, the parents did, so yes, it was like a total little community.

Espino

Yes. So how did you come to have no war toys? Is that what you said? You had a group, or just a policy?

Aceves

No, the co-op nursery movement, that was one of their--

Espino

Oh, okay. So there was a hierarchy even above you of nursery schools throughout the nation?

Aceves

Yes. Yes, and then the local ones. Yes, I think I went to one or two of their conferences. They were very, very businesslike, and most of them had a lot of education, and I'm not too sure, but at least that's the way they appeared to me. I always watched--their English was impeccable. Their pronunciation was perfect, so I guess I could look into it some more, or ask some of the people that--we're meeting next month at the Plum Tree. We've been meeting at the Monterey Hills and then we kind of changed it around a little bit. Somebody

said, "How about changing it?" And so I said, "Well, the only Chinese food I like is at Plum Tree," although San Gabriel is supposed to be known for the best Chinese food.

Espino

Right, right, that's true. That's true now. Well, that's just interesting to me, because it's just a weird kind of digression in your life. You're reading a magazine--not weird but interesting. You're reading a magazine about this co-op, and then it puts you on this whole path to people that you're still meeting with even today. Do you think that many people of your generation were reading Parents Magazine? Was that a popular magazine among your friends?

Aceves

I don't know. I don't remember, and I don't even remember how I got to subscribe to it. The only thing I can think of is that maybe when you have a baby and it's registered, that these advertising companies get your name. I don't remember. Or there was a lot of door-to-door [sales companies]. I remember there was the--what's the name of all those people that used to sell--

Espino

Amway?

Aceves

No, no. That was way after. [laughs] As a matter of fact, they still have that makeup, and as a teenager I had a lot of pimples.

Espino

Avon?

Aceves

No, no, it wasn't Avon. I have the bottles, I still get some. I had a lot of pimples here, and I don't know if I told you that I went to this dentist. We just used the neighborhood, and there were dentists--this particular dentist was from, where, I don't know if he was from Mexico or Central or South America. But he didn't have a license, so people would say, "Well, he's a real good dentist." So my mother sent me to him, and I was all full of pimples from here to here,

and he says, "You want me to help you get rid of those pimples?" And I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, the first thing you have to do is stop using makeup." He says, "You're going to wash your face." I remember what he told me, to wash your face. He says, "You're not going to use powder. You're going to use this boric acid. You're going to put the powder in." And then he made a little thing with his little machine there, a little cream. He says, "You put this on every night. In the morning you wash your face real good and you powder yourself with that powder, that boric acid," and he says, "I'll bet you that you'll get rid of them." You know that they were all gone in three months? And I didn't wear makeup again. I mean, I was so afraid that I would break out again. And then this woman came door-to-door and I told her, "No, I don't wear makeup." And she says, "If you use this makeup and you break out, I'll give you--," I don't know what, a big amount. I don't know how much she said. If she would have said a hundred dollars, it was a lot for me, but a big amount, and so sure enough I didn't break out, so I started using that makeup. For years I wouldn't wear anything, I was so afraid I would break out again. So, yes, there was that.

Aceves

And then there was--I see it in the catalog, these other people. So it might have been somebody that came door-to-door. I don't remember how I got into getting the Parents Magazine, but yes, and then I got Dr. Spock, and I was going to raise my first kid--I mean, I wanted to follow everything. It was so anti-, so different than the culture I had been brought up with that I guess that's why my son was incorrigible. [laughs]

Espino

That's interesting. Dr. Spock is also another person from the popular media, from just popular culture for a lot of people, but not someone you would think was entering into the minds of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles. But his influence was so strong.

Aceves

Yes. Well, once you started--well, Heights Co-op did open, or even Ramona, even Ramona, Lorrett was very good, and as a matter of fact she could see the problems, the marital problems I was having, and she sent me to a

psychologist, and I remember she used to say, "The problem with you is that you were never allowed to be a child." And then also because Billy was--he wasn't bad, I mean, he just had all this energy and he just didn't stop. He was 150 percent taking care of him. And then if he got David to go along with him [laughs], so he was a challenge. And she opened, like whoever heard of going to a psychologist? You just do that when you're crazy, right? But this particular woman helped me a lot, too, and then she resigned. It was a Presbyterian hospital down there, and this was all free. I guess maybe Lorrett had something to do with it. So that helped a lot, to air out your conflicts, because there was a lot of conflict, but that was helpful. So Lorrett, the director of the Ramona Gardens Cooperative Nursery was very, very good.

Aceves

And then, of course, going to Heights was a lot better, because at Ramona there were the Zepedas and the Tysons and me that were more outgoing--I guess that the word is outgoing--and the other parents there were, how would I say, I guess less outgoing. I wouldn't say that they were any different than us except that we wanted to broaden our lives and our sphere more so than they did. The other eight families seemed to be more satisfied than we were. Now that I'm old I say that's a good feeling, not to have to be struggling to do this, to do that, and if I could just calm down, because I still have that, "I'm not doing enough." It's just so embedded in you.

Espino

It also might be a little bit of your personality as well, and that's what helped you to achieve so much is because there was always something else that you still wanted to do or to accomplish. Anyways, I'm going to stop it here and next time we'll pick up on after your divorce, I guess, with what happened there.[End of interview]

1.4. Session 4 (January 23, 2009)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino, and today is January 23, 2009. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, last time we talked a little bit about the Co-Op Nursery school [Heights Co-Op] that you had your

children in. That was during the 1950s, and I want to go back to the 1950s a little bit and talk about some of the other organizations that you might have been involved with, starting with the Community Service Organization, the CSO. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

Aceves

Yes. Well, I didn't really belong to the CSO. I believe that when I was working I met this young woman by the name of Elsie Quintanilla, who's since passed away. As a matter of fact, she was my maid of honor in my wedding. So she was from Roosevelt [High School] and we used to go out, and we would go a lot after to eat at the--oh, what's the name of that? I think it's still there. It was a restaurant and she had a bar on 1st and Soto. I'll remember the name of it in a while. One of the bartenders there I dated for a while, and he belonged to CSO, so that's how we started going to CSO, mostly to the fundraisers and the dances. At the time they were campaigning for [Edward] Roybal to be the councilman, and I wasn't directly involved, kind of indirectly, because all the young men were very involved and very enthusiastic, and so we would go to all the dances with them.

Aceves

Also I think it was a canteen that they had at--now I don't remember if it was a YWCA or the YMCA or it was CSO that had their headquarters right there. I can visualize it. It was on Whittier and Euclid. So they had dances there and that's how I got to see and know Roybal, but like I say, that was very indirect. But I worked real hard for him when he ran for supervisor and then I could look up the dates, I don't remember exactly, and he lost, and we thought that there were some shenanigans with the voting and we had a recount one time, but we couldn't afford a second recount. Now, that one I was very active, too.

Aceves

And then there was another judge that--what was the name of the person that wrote "Among the Valiant"? [Raul Morin]. I think I have his book there. He was very active, and there was a judge in East L.A. that was a very racist judge.

Espino

Would that be Cary McWilliams?

Aceves

The one that wrote that? No. No, this is a--

Espino

Latino?

Aceves

Yes, he was. So he came around and said that there was a young man that had just graduated from law school, and he was able, he had all the credentials to run as a judge, and they wanted to displace this racist judge. So that was Leopoldo Sánchez, and he was a very young man, and, of course, we didn't have any money, so we did a campaign door-to-door. I remember going door-to-door with my middle child [Paul], because I couldn't leave all three of them home. I remember one time it was raining and my little boy was all in his boots and so was I, and we went knocking all around City Terrace, and I remember the people coming out and saying, "Well, if it's that important for you to be out in the rain with your little boy, yeah, I'll vote for him." Like I say, we didn't have the money. We would have the fundraisers. Everybody would bring something to eat and a bottle, and we would sell it to each other. So, Morin, his last name is Morin, the author of this "Among the Valiant," and him and his wife were very active. So we got Leopoldo Sánchez in, and it was really a real community organization getting him in there, community organizing, so that was also one of our victories. That was a big victory.

Espino

Would that be through the CSO or through some other group?

Aceves

I don't remember if CSO was active in that or not, or whether it was just the community, that Morin had gotten us all together. I'm not even too sure if MAPA [Mexican American Political Association] was already in the makings. It must have been in maybe '58 or in the late fifties. We could check that out, I'm sure, and I know that Leopoldo Sánchez I think is still around, too, so we could find out the dates exactly. So that was the political, but I really got active in politics when I was in Heights Co-Op Nursery, because they did some

outreach, and there was the Wabash Coordinating Council that we had, and I do believe that at the time--did you read about Martin Ortiz passing away? His memorial service is going to be Sunday at Whittier College, and I kind of think that he was in charge of the Coordinating Council that they had at Estrada Courts, and I believe that that's where I met him. I didn't read all his obituary, but I plan to go to the memorial service on Sunday, and I'm sure that all of the information will be there. I believe that that's where I met him and that that's where it started.

Aceves

The the Co-Op Nursery, I believe it was national, because I went to a couple of conferences, and that's where I started to--now, the Wabash Coordinating Council dealt with issues in City Terrace and that area there, very local issues. There were coordinating councils I guess throughout L.A.

Espino

Of the Co-Op Nursery movement?

Aceves

No, no. That was separate. But the Co-Op Nursery was involved in these local organizations.

Espino

Which were?

Aceves

The Wabash Coordinating Council is the one I remember.

Espino

What is that, though? I don't know.

Aceves

It was just like a neighborhood organization, and they dealt with issues like the playgrounds, and they organized programs. I know that I also, when I moved to City Terrace, joined the City Terrace parents' organization, and there was this man, Mo [Moses] Garay, I guess his name maybe was Moses or Moises, but we called him Mo, and he was a director of the City Terrace Park on

Hazard, and he organized the parents' organizations. We had baseball teams for everybody in the area, and the fathers were the coaches, and that really helped because some of the boys when they were little that were in those programs later on were part of gang groups, so when my kids would be coming from City Terrace Park down to where we lived on Dittman and City Terrace, they would have to pass by--what was the name of that gang that was up in the hills in City Terrace? Well, I'll remember them.

Espino

Not Hazard? Not Happy Valley?

Aceves

No, no. That was down in Lincoln Heights. But there were these--I'll ask my son--this gang, and so they would be stopped because they would take a shortcut and come down through the hill coming down, and this fellow, what was his name, he used to tell them, tell the other gang group, "Let them go. They're okay." I think we called him Gordo. He kind of protected the kids that he had played with at the park, and whenever we ran into them they were always very polite to the adults. We knew they were part of the gang group, but we knew them when they were little, before they were part of the gang groups in City Terrace. So that was how--we weren't political, but we were political, but we weren't affiliated with any political group.

Aceves

Then my friend's husband, Connie's husband [Frank Muñoz], started the East Side Democratic Club and asked me to join, so he needed so many and so I signed as--I don't know how many you needed. That was my first political, that I would say the East Side Democratic Club. Then we had meetings and somebody became the president, so that was the first, and also probably by that time it's the sixties. By that time it's the early sixties or late fifties, because we moved to City Terrace in '57 and that's when I went to Heights, and we were part of the Coordinating Councils, and we were part of the Co-Op Nursery movement. But I remember just that before that when I was at Ramona Gardens I was talking to the director there, her name was Lorrett Genzler, and telling her that I wasn't too sure where I wanted to bring up my children, what kind of religious training I wanted to give them, because I was

very disenchanted with the Catholics, and I was very disenchanted with the Protestants, but she didn't say anything.

Aceves

But I think it was Connie that told me something about the First Unitarian Church, and so I went there and I liked it, and lo and behold, Lorrett was in charge of the Sunday school nursery there, but I don't know for what reason she didn't want to influence me in that direction. But when I went there and I saw her there she said, "Well, I wanted to tell you about this," but for some reason or another she didn't, but she was real glad that I learned. So I brought up my children in the First Unitarian Church, and I don't know if you're familiar with--oh, I had his name--the minister there. It was a church that I felt practiced what they preached. So I became active, I was one of the parents Sunday school organizers in that church, and I met Guillermo Martinez, who was very active. I don't remember the name of the organization, but they were very political, and I know that he was very instrumental in getting them to pay for an international meeting that they were having in Canada.

Aceves

I do believe that they belonged to the Communist Party. I know my boss did. I went to work for him, and he was open about it. That was his name, Delfino Varela, and he was very open about the fact that he was a member of the Communist Party. He was working at the International Institute. They were coordinating applications for immigrant visas and he refused to sign the loyalty oath, so he was terminated. So he started his own business and he was very successful, and when I got divorced he offered me a job there, but, I mean, I had been divorced for a while. I had already had a couple of other jobs. But he trained me for two weeks and then he took off for a month to Russia. But in those days I was fearless. I just kept reading the immigration law over and over again, and I took the applications for the people that came in, and some of them wouldn't deal with a woman. They just waited for him to come around. But all the new cases that he got, he was turning them over to me. I had a caseload.

Espino

How did you know that they wouldn't deal with a woman?

Aceves

Because they would say it.

Espino

They would be blunt.

Aceves

Yes. They would tell him, "I don't want a woman to take care. I want you to do it." But I had a caseload. He had a lot of business. During the time I worked there, he hired--well, no, I was the only one that was doing actual applications for permanent visas. But his secretary, who had been his secretary for many years, when she saw how well I did, then she asked him, she wanted--consultant, they call them, consultant. He also hired a friend's wife who was a bookkeeper, and then he had two secretaries. Then I had one secretary and then there was the part-time receptionist who was also the accountant, so he was doing very well.

Aceves

Anyway, there was enough to organize, because then I noticed that the way he treated Esther, his secretary, he didn't want her to leave. He was blind. He only had 20 percent vision in one eye, so he depended a lot on Esther. She was like his assistant, more than secretary, so he didn't want her to be a consultant, and so then I got the union. We needed five employees, so I said, "Well, we have five employees, so we brought the union in, or I brought the union in.

Espino

And this is a person who was a member of the Communist Party?

Aceves

Yes, yes. So I would tell him. I said, "You certainly turned into a first-class capitalist." [laughs] Well, he was saying that he couldn't make it, he couldn't pay the wages, but like I said, I did it mostly for Esther so that we could be more--how would be the word that I want to use--so it wouldn't be all so emotional and so individualized. I wanted it to be where we could be--I'll think of the word, and it wouldn't just be based on personalities. So everybody went

along with me. We were five of us. We were more than five. Let me see. There was Esther, and then he had the other secretary, I can visualize her, and then there was his accountant and there was myself and my secretary. Yes, I guess that was it. I know he brought other people. I can visualize another young woman that also helped me, because he had two secretaries and I had the one secretary and the receptionist, because we did our work in the morning. We didn't open up the office till one o'clock, and we had it open from one to seven. I know I took Mondays off, so I was off on Sunday and Monday, because we had all the working people that came on Saturdays. It was very, very interesting work. I really learned a lot. And like I say, when Esther saw with a little training how well I did, she says, "Well, if she can do it I can do it." And she could. She was very capable and very able. And she--I mean, Spanish was not her first language, but she was pretty bilingual.

Espino

This was your first job after your divorce?

Aceves

No. Actually, the first job I got, I think I was working for the Sheldons [Paul M. Sheldon, and wife, and they had gotten a grant. I can ask Connie [Pardo Muñoz] what study we were doing there, because it was after the dropout study [Mexican Americans in Urban Public High Schools: An Exploration of the Drop Out Problem] and it was after the working mothers' study, and I don't remember what that was, because Connie went to work as the--she took care of all the office, and I know I was in charge of the kids that went out to do the investigations. I remember they did a lot of cheating, because they were part of the Du Bois [W.E.B. Du Bois] group, all these kids that came to work for me, and while they were out there doing their organizing, then I had to keep after them a lot to do what they had to do for the job that we were doing.

Espino

What's the Du Bois group?

Aceves

Well, maybe I'm not saying it right, but it's D-u B-o-i-s.

Espino

You don't mean W.E.B. Du Bois, the African American?

Aceves

Yes, yes. They had some organization that they were organizing for.

Espino

Were they white kids?

Aceves

No, most of them were Chicanos.

Espino

And they were part of this--

Aceves

Yes, this group, yes. I don't remember how many I had working under me, but by that time I have them doing the interviews, so I didn't know that they were doing this. It wasn't till after that they told me that they were out organizing. Well, if you're an interviewer, you pretty much set up your time and you're out in the field, so you can take as long or as little as you want, or you can be as thorough or not as thorough, or you can be very detailed. Like I was one of those interviewers that was very, very detailed and got more information than I really needed. So they were able to do that, and like I said, I don't remember exactly how long the grant was, but I do know that Sheldon was still teaching, and I know his wife was in charge of this program. But it was through Occidental College.

Espino

Okay. But I'm curious about this Du Bois group. What were they doing for the group?

Aceves

They were organizing. They evidently had also their organization. I can see them, but I don't remember their names, and I don't know if the Sheldons--I mean, they both have passed away, but I don't know if their children are--you probably could find out something about them.

Espino

Yes, I'm going to look into that. But I guess I'm curious about their political objective. It wasn't related to union organizing or to a specific candidate? What was their--

Aceves

I think that they were just kind of like--

Espino

Civil rights?

Aceves

Like the other groups, like there was a Marxist group and they mostly had classes on Marxism. But how do you say Du--

Espino

I think you're pronouncing it correctly in French, but the way that he's known is Duboyce [PHONETIC], yes, W.E.B. Du Bois, a really important African American. But I think he was already dead by then.

Aceves

Yes. So I think they probably had workshops, and there was a lot of that kind of activity. Like then after, when I went to work for Euclid Foundation, there was, oh, what's the name of that group that Montezuma Esparza, the big producer, he was part of that group and David Sanchez. What was the name of that group?

Espino

It was before the Brown Berets?

Aceves

That's who they were. They were the Brown Berets.

Espino

So this was more late sixties?

Aceves

Yes, yes. That was after I had left my job with Del [Delfino Varela], because I worked with Del for four or five years, and then we got into this argument, or I didn't like the way he was treating Esther. He was really, what's the name, what they do so that you can't be successful? Anyway, so I don't know. He accused me of something and I got very upset and I told him, "I'll give you one month. I'm resigning in one month." And it just turned out that I belonged to the Euclid Foundation Board of Directors, and that's when Reverend Antonio Hernández said that they had a grant to send somebody for economic development and for housing, and Connie Mendard, his secretary, had agreed to go take the training for housing, but they couldn't find anybody for economic development. And I said, "Why don't you offer me that training?" He says, "Well, you have the three kids. [Bill, Paul, and Patrick]" So that's when I think I told you I went and called up my ex-husband [Bill Aceves] and I told him if he would be willing to take care of them while I went for this training, and his response was, "Yeah. If you're getting up there, you might be able to help me in the future." [laughs]

Aceves

So I took that and I guess that Del didn't believe me that I would leave the job. He knew how much I liked it. I enjoyed it, and I was earning, what, I think a thousand dollars a month. So I went to Washington, D.C., for the three months, and was that 1970? I think I have information on that someplace, I'm pretty sure. Because I got my first job after with the Sheldons. Then I went to work for a teacher that had got also a grant at Cal State L.A., and I worked for him for a few months during that grant, and then I went to work for Del. I worked for Del I think for four or five years, from '64 to '70. Yes, it must have been in '70, and it was spring, because I remember when I went over there they said you couldn't have picked the best months of the year to work in Washington, D.C. They provided the apartment, and there was a young woman from Texas who was also taking that training.

Aceves

There was this former priest, [Miguel] Barragán, that was taking the training, and this young woman that roomed with me from Texas, that this young man who was very active in Texas [José Ángel Gutierrez], and they had that independent party, too.

Espino

La Raza Unida Party?

Aceves

Yes, yes, that was it. I think in Texas he was the leader.

Espino

Corky Gonzales [Rodólfo "Corky" Gonzales]?

Aceves

No. He was from New Mexico. They were from New Mexico. So then there was this young woman from Texas, and then there was Barragán, who was an ex-priest, or maybe he was a priest during that time, too. And there was this young man that was an African American, I don't remember from where he was, and then there was this young man that looked totally Caucasian, but he was a Native American from one of the reservations. Now, he didn't last. He was not able to take that living out, and he left right away. But the rest of us, while we were there taking this training in economic development by--what was the name of that organization? I think I have all that information.

Espino

That was [L.B.] Johnson's Great Society, wasn't it, the War on Poverty funds? Well, if this was seventies, this was a little bit later than that. Economic opportunity?

Aceves

I don't know if I told you that I did become, when we got the money for the anti-poverty program that the community went to bat for me, and I was appointed as one--for the first six months I couldn't run until they had elections, and I was appointed by the Supervisor then, [Ernest E.] Debs, who was the one that had defeated Roybal. But his representative, the people in the community put a lot of pressure on him, so they appointed me and I served as the first community poverty representative for six months. That was very interesting because then, I don't know how many years later, when I was working for [Thomas] Bradley, they appointed me to represent the City of Los Angeles, so that was very interesting.

Aceves

I wasn't a different person. I was the same person, and the first representative for the poverty community, and then I don't know how many years later--it was after I was the director of the Chicana Service Action Center that I got a job. I had worked on Bradley's campaign, and Francisca Flores, who was the founder of Comisión [Comisión Femenil Mexicana], became disenchanted with me, and so then she was making it real hard for me. So then I told Tony, the reverend [Reverend Antonio Hernández], who had gotten a job for this friend who had worked in the Bradley campaign, so I said, "If you got her a job, you can get me a job. I work just as hard or maybe even harder than she did." Her and her husband had worked in it. So I got a job with the city in Bradley's department, and his deputy, we didn't see eye to eye, too, but we had to talk to him. Tony had to talk to him to get me the job, and so we made peace, too, so that was interesting. Now, that was--

Espino

That was '73 when Bradley was elected, 1973.

Aceves

Okay. So I worked for Bradley from '73 to '78, when I went to work for the Department of Fair Employment and Housing. But I got a little job for six months with the City of South El Monte in between, because Bradley felt that the mayor had too much power, and so he wanted to put the departments that he was in charge of under civil service. Those were plum jobs. I was earning \$1800 a month there. When I went to work for the City of South El Monte, I think it was a thousand. When I went to work for the state it was 1200, although I bought the house when I was the director of the Chicana Center. Anyway, that was a fluke. I tell you, in those days I was fearless. I didn't think of anything.

Espino

Well, it's just interesting just your evolution of your political involvement, because you did participate somewhat in the CSO [Community Service Organization], but did you do it because of your political beliefs, or just because it was a good party to go to?

Aceves

It was mostly social. CSO had a lot of boys, and it was a place to go. There were more young men in that organization than there were women, than young girls. But actually it was, I tell you, through Elsie [Quintanilla] and her friends that knew all these fellows. I know that it's still there, and he just happened to be the bartender there. I remember him calling me up at my house, and I was still living on Kingston, and I happened to tell him, "You're not pulling my leg are you?" That was a saying then. He says, "No, but I'd like to." [laughs]

Espino

And this was before you were married?

Aceves

No, no, I was already--

Espino

Your husband was away in the--

Aceves

No, no, no. He was back. No, I could get the dates maybe. Maybe we were already divorced; maybe it was the sixties. No, I guess it was before I was married. Yes, because Elsie was my maid of honor. No, I don't think it was--no, because, see, when he went to the service, when he went overseas I was pregnant. I didn't know I was pregnant, but I was pregnant, so I didn't do any partying after that, maybe the movies or things like that.

Espino

And then after you were married I can't see you going out to dances either.

Aceves

No.

Espino

So it had to have been before you were married.

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

And then it seems like after that you got involved in the Co-Op [Heights Cooperative]. Would that be your next political involvement, that would be the Co-Op?

Aceves

Yes. The Co-Op was the one that opened up the activity. Like I say, the co-op movement was anti-war toys. It was that kind of an organization. I mean, I can ask, because like I tell you, we still get together from the Heights Co-Op every other month, and I know some of those women are still working and they're teachers, and I'm sure that they probably could dig up all the history or direct me to it, because I know that it was a national program, and like I say, I know that a couple of times I went to conferences. So they were very--would I say that they were radical? Or they were progressive. Well, to be anti-war toys during those periods, and I never did have--I had a hard time with my great-grandchildren that my grandson is very pro-military and hunting, things that I'm totally against, and I let them know. But then he got married with a young woman from Virginia, and her father is very into hunting and things of that type.

Aceves

Well, my aunt and her husband [Regina and Fortunato Mendoza] did hunting, and I used to go with them in Oceanside, and I would pick up the dead rabbits and bring them to the car and just be petting them all the way home, and I would see when they would take the skin off of them and sat down and had breakfast with them. I had no--like I hear a lot of children, they wouldn't eat the rabbit or they wouldn't eat the chicken, because there were chickens and rabbits that were their pets. I never thought of it that way. I mean, I knew that we killed them to eat them, so I felt sorry when I saw them dead, but that was the extent of how I felt about the animals. They were real cute when they're--my aunt had the incubator and the chickens would pop in. I mean, that was a real good experience, but I didn't feel any qualms about eating them. I know some of my friends still do.

Espino

Right. I guess the idea of the war toys, no war toys was a little bit different. Do you remember the philosophy that the school had? Was it specifically related to World War II? Because this was before the Vietnam War, wasn't it, in the late fifties?

Aceves

Yes, because I marched a lot in the Vietnam War. Yes, for ten years we marched against that war. I guess it was pro-peace. It was pro-peace. Well, like the Unitarian Church, the people there were against World War II, but that was before my time. And I don't know that a lot of the Unitarian Universalist Churches were like the church on 8th and Vermont, which is Fritchman, Reverend [Stephen] Fritchman. I mean, he was called before the [House] Un-American Activities, and a lot of the people that I knew, well, not a lot, but a few that were. A lot of people were terminated from their jobs because it came out in the paper all the people that the Un-American when they came into town were going to call. A lot of them didn't even get called, but because their names were listed in the paper they got terminated.

Aceves

Now, Bertha Marshall, she didn't get terminated. Her boss stuck to her. I mean, I know that they had meetings and that there was a Communist Party organization in the area, but as far as I could see they were all good people and they were dealing with bread-and-butter issues that I was brought up and was very familiar with. I mean, the last time that San Gabriel Valley Neighbors for Peace and Justice got here together was just before Christmas, and they started talking. I heard them. They said, "I think Lilia belonged to the Communist Party," and I told them, "No, I didn't belong to it, but I knew a lot of people that did, and I certainly--a lot of the philosophy that they had fitted in with my religious upbringing." It was like, we should all share, and I was pro-union and having good salaries. My mother--like I tell you, I was so taken aback the first year that I worked that I earned more money than she did, after she had been working for so many years, and hard work, very hard work. So it was not out of the realm of thinking that I've had without taking any of the classes in Marxism or Socialism or anything of that type.

Aceves

The first book that I read that I agreed with was Cary McWilliams, "Southern California Country," and all the others I couldn't agree. I know when I went to East L.A. College and one of the classes that I had, the instructor had us make some kind of an essay, and I remember one of the young students, one of the younger girls, while here I am already married and already planning my divorce and going to school, and this young woman did her essay in a very racist point of view, the book she read and she made a report on that, and the instructor was so mean to her and she dropped out of that class. And I thought that wasn't his--I didn't think that was his--his duty was to have opened it up for debate, not to chastise her for taking that point of view, and even though I didn't agree with it and I used to get very angry in classes with some of the things that students and the teachers would say, but I didn't think that was the place to chastise any student. We could have good debates, but I was open to having some fascist dialogue in there, although like I say, I mean, I would get very emotional and not even be able to really debate in a very intellectual way.

Aceves

But, I mean, there was a class there at East L.A. College that I really learned. I did more reading there, and that was a speech class, and the speech teachers there--I think I took it for two semesters, and the speech teachers there were very, very open for debate, and it was very, very interesting. But that's what the class was all about. I guess some of the other teachers were, if somebody was giving a fascist point of view, it was hard for them to tolerate, knowing that there were some of us there that suffered due to the fascist point of view.

Espino

So at that time, how would you describe the ethnic makeup of that?

Aceves

Of East L.A. College? There were very many minorities. There weren't a lot of them. Most of the people that went there were Caucasian. In the classes that I had, well, you have to take--the first two years you don't have much of a choice. You have to take a certain amount of those classes. I would say there were a few minorities. There were hardly no blacks as we called them then.

Now the correct word is African Americans. There were hardly any, and there were a few Mexicans, but I would say that the majority were Caucasian. I guess they were coming from the San Gabriel Valley, from Monterey Park. There was also--and he's still living--a biology teacher that was very good. He was one of the few Mexican Americans that were there. There were no Chicano studies at the time. I'm not too sure when that came in. That came in later.

Aceves

During the civil rights a lot of the kids that were active, like, for instance, I don't know if you know Professor [Rita] Ledesma at Cal State L.A., her brothers went to Heights Co-Op Nursery. I don't know that they knew about Heights Co-Op Nursery. I could ask her. We're still friends and we're close.

Espino

I think Grace mentioned Jerry [Ledesma]. Was it Zapata before she got married, and then she changed her name to Ledesma?

Aceves

No, no. It was Ledesma, her first husband was Ledesma, and then her second husband was Zapata.

Espino

Oh, okay. And her children went to Heights as well?

Aceves

Yes. At least I know Ricky [Ledesma], and my youngest son Patrick were inseparable. And then during the civil rights her daughters, her children became active, and so Rita is a professor at Cal State L.A. No, I'm sorry, not Rita. Rita works for SEIU. Yes, Rita is the oldest one. Kathy [Ledesma] is the one in the middle. Yes, Rita is a professor at Cal State L.A., and they went to UCLA with the Civil Rights Movement, so they were able to take advantage of that. And Jerry [Ledesma] was very active, too, and she worked in the community programs.

Espino

Did you know her like in the fifties?

Aceves

I know her from Heights. We met at Heights, and she lived a block away, so yes, she has a very interesting background, because she's half Native American. Her mother's, I think, Sioux. She was born on the reservation and she was there on the reservation till her mother passed away.

Espino

Grace [Montañez Davis] said something about how they would call the three of you the holy terrors. Do you recall that?

Aceves

They probably did. I don't remember. What, it was Jerry, Connie, and me, or who was the third?

Espino

I think she said it was Grace and you and Jerry, because you were always involved in different organizations and different--

Aceves

Yes. Well, Grace was one of the founders in MAPA, and that's when there was a lot of sexism, openly sexism. Her and Francisca [Flores] and what was the name of that other lady? She was a teacher also. I'll remember. They were the intellectuals. We looked up at them, because they were all--of course, Francisca didn't go to any college, but she had tuberculosis at a very young age, and she was a reader. She was really a reader, and she was very, very educated. But Grace went to UCLA, and this other woman--and she was a teacher. I don't know what school she went to. But, yes, they were very, very--like I said, we looked up to them. They were very educated. And they were not accommodating like some of us were, until all the doors were opened. Actually, when Comisión started in the seventies, that's when we got a little more vocal and stood up and spoke out.

Espino

Were you a member of MAPA?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

In the early years when it first started?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Do you have any recollections of how--because you said that they were very sexist. Do you have any specific examples of that kind of behavior?

Aceves

No. I just remember Francisca and Grace and these other women, Morin, I can't think of her first name right now, they were, "How about a woman being elected? And how about a woman being nominated?" They would speak up in that way, so that the men--and I guess maybe because a lot of us had children and they were little, we didn't want to take on more than we could, or we didn't want more responsibility, so we didn't speak up. But like Grace and Francisca and some of the other women that would be willing to speak out, "How much longer are we going to just be doing the mailing and doing all this work?"

Aceves

I remember also when this fellow was running for, was it councilman or assemblyman? And Del [Delfino Varela] paid to rent this building right there on, at the time it was Brooklyn, Brooklyn and Soto, and they asked me to be the voter registration chairperson. And Enid [Fisher Varela], who was married to Delfino Varela at the time, her name was Enid Fisher Varela, she said, "I'll help you." So she did all the work and I just kind of would go to the meetings and speak and tell them, "This is what we're going to do." I remember her doing all the posters and she just did a lot of work. I don't believe she was working. She was a schoolteacher, but I don't think that when she was married with Del she was working. But she worked in his office and she was his backbone, although he had gotten that far just by himself, but she was really, really very helpful, and I remember her practically doing everything, and then I would just go to the meeting and speak. We did this voter registration and just

getting out the vote for Tony Bueno was his name. I could look at the years when he ran. I think he's still living.

Espino

It also sounds like everything was very interconnected with Delfino. What was the name of his--that's not One Stop Immigration?

Aceves

No. It's still the Mexican American Social Service.

Espino

And so he was one of the first immigration offices in East Los Angeles?

Aceves

Well, it was international, which was still going big. No, One Stop Immigration came much later. Yes, I was working at the Chicana Center, I remember, because the director [Armendariz] and his secretary, Grace Martinez, anyway, her and I'll think of her name, she's a real good friend, Cecilia Sandoval, came to me and asked me if I would help them out with the Hispanic Women's Council. But, see, the One Stop Immigration had just started, so that was in the early seventies.

Espino

That was much later. And Delfino was part of the International Institute in Boyle Heights?

Aceves

That's where he started working, because he was from Chicago. Actually, he was from New Mexico, Pecos, New Mexico, and what he told me was that he went to school, he went to blind school and he was working. After he graduated they got him a job in some little store, and I don't remember who came across and told him that he would send him to college in Chicago, the same college that Tony [Hernandez] and his wife [Lucy Hernandez/Lucy Nava] went to in Chicago, and he went all through school there. And when he graduated, I know he had a master's. When he graduated, they got him a job as a schoolteacher, and he said that the kids were incorrigible and they would take advantage of the fact that he was blind. And then I don't know how he

got the job at the International Institute and how he got involved in Marxism and the Communist Party.

Espino

Was that Fred Ross and Saul Alinsky?

Aceves

It might have been.

Espino

I'm going to look up that history a little bit.

Aceves

Yes, Fred Ross was with the farmworkers, and he was very involved in CSO [Community Service Organization], too. I remember reading Fred [Saul] Alinsky's book. So it might have been from that that they got there. I know that Fred Ross was very much into the farmworkers, and I remember going to the CSO. Well, when I became the representative in the anti-poverty program, then I got very involved with CSO, because then Ursula Gutiérrez was the one that was voted in the position that I was, and then when I was appointed through Bradley's office to serve as a city representative, we got real close. Then Porfirio Miranda, who was a teacher at UCLA, he was a student of Tony Hernández [Reverend Antonio] when Tony was in college in Chicago also at that university, and he was a Boy Scout there. So when he heard he was in L.A., he got him to come, and he was teaching at UCLA. He got him to be on the board of directors of Euclid Foundation, and that's how Porfirio and I got real close. Then he was appointed. He also served on the board of directors of GLACA, the Greater Los Angeles, and the director there was also a friend of Porfirio's in Chicago and gave him such a hard time. He's an attorney. He's still around. When did I see him last? At the People's College of Law, one of the last fundraisers that they had.

Espino

So how would you describe some of the important issues of your early years as a community activist with the co-op in the 1950s? You just talked about no war toys. That was one thing that was important to you. What were some of

the other things that were important to you, do you think, at that time when your kids were little?

Aceves

Well, education was very important. I remember there was a period--at one point my husband and I separated. I didn't have the third child yet, and I put the children in--my comadre got me a job where she was working, and I put my children in the nursery school that was right near there. That nursery school was part of--it was in public housing, Estrada Courts. So I would take the bus, until I bought a car. We'd take the bus and take them to the nursery school and then walk to my job, and then eventually I don't know how I got a car. Somebody sold me a car for fifty dollars or a hundred dollars or something, and I would pick up Connie and then drop off the kids. I know that in the warehouse there were a lot of Mexican women working there, and when I would go out to the warehouse they would kind of sing a song, like making fun of me. But then when they saw me taking my kids to nursery school and taking the bus, their attitude changed. But I went to work there, and we were separated for a while, a few months. What was the point I was going to make there? What was the question you asked me?

Espino

About some of the important issues. You said education was one of the important issues for you.

Aceves

Okay, that's what I was going to tell you. So the kids were going to that school right there in that area. At least I think my oldest one was going to kindergarten. But anyway, I went to a school conference there, and I was talking to the principal, who was giving a talk, and after the talk I told him which were some of the better schools. So he took me into his office and showed me a map and showed me where the better schools and how East L.A. didn't have the better schools and all of that, so I knew that was--oh, I don't know if I told you that I was still married when we started the Mexican American Education Committee, and that was with, who was the one? Anyway, there was a department, the Human Services Department. They were the county department, and I think that some of the people there, some of

the people that were on staff came to us. I know there was Jerry and there was Connie and Irene Tovar, and there were some people from the Bay Area, and we started the Mexican American Education Committee.

Aceves

Well, around that time there were a couple of people that were running to be on the Board of Education, and when they came to us, they pointed out how the schools on the West Side got a lot more money than the schools on the East Side did. Of course, they changed once they became on the Board of [unclear], because I remember going and speaking before them, and what was her name? Well, it's there. I think one of them was Richardson and the other was Georgiana Harding I believe. I remember after I got through speaking she said, "Well, if you're an example of what the L.A. schools, the city's put out, I don't think we're doing such a bad job," or she said something along those lines. And I remember thinking how you've changed. When they were trying to get out votes getting them into the Board of Education, then they were real upfront as to how the schools in the poor areas did not get their fair share. And I know now why that is. I don't think it's fair, but I know the mechanics.

Aceves

Like, what's that saying--I'll think about it. But anyway, on the West Side the people were active, the PTAs were active, and here we were active but we didn't know all the political ramifications of getting funds, or we didn't get into the funding area of it. The PTAs did their cookie sales and things like that, but not into the funding of the schools.

Espino

So you were worried about the education of your children?

Aceves

Very much, in terms of our community.

Espino

The whole community.

Aceves

Yes. Well, that was one of the things de Pauw [Francis de Pauw Boarding School for Girls] did instill in you. Like I say, that de Pauw said that when she came to southern California, the most deprived group of people were the Mexican women, and she felt an educated woman means an educated family. And the religious aspect of the teachings, that you're here and your job in this world is to leave this a better world than you found it, so I took those things pretty seriously. So everything kind of went along with, well, I mean, I didn't call it a philosophy at the time. I evolved into calling it the name. You just had the energy and you had the desire to make this world better for your kids, and it just spread all the way around.

Aceves

That was the thinking of all of the people that I hung around with, and nobody was--well, there were a few of the people that were kind of greedy and power hungry and things like that, but by and large, most of the people that I knew and that I was friends with were not like that.

Espino

So the Mexican American Education Committee, that was one of the first organizations that you were a part of or that you formed?

Aceves

Well, actually, I think it was the L.A. County Department of Human Relations, that they were instrumental in getting us together. Now, after all these Mexican American educators found out that we were doing this, then they formed the Mexican American Educators, and a couple of the people that were part of the Mexican American Education Committee were educators, so they went over to help form that group also, but that's how they got started, when they saw what we were able to do, and they were more ambitious. They were more ambitious. We didn't have any ambition as far as doing anything for ourselves, but once they became educators, once the educators took over, they did, and then they formed an organization, because they were being very discriminated. They weren't getting any being principals or any of the other jobs that they did, because I remember that--he's still living, he lives up north--Arnold Rodriguez was heading a group of educators, and they were being interviewed for some positions, maybe to be principals. I don't remember the

exact details. And he had us doing some of the interviewing, so I remember that. So that was the beginning of the Mexican American--I think it was, I'm pretty sure, the Mexican American Educators, so a lot of good people and a lot of ambitious people, too.

Espino

So was that the group that you put your most energy in in the beginning? Comparing that to, say, MAPA or--

Aceves

Well, I think that the Mexican American Education Committee I think was even before MAPA, and it was certainly--yes, it was in the early sixties, because it was just before my divorce, because I got divorced in '64, so that was in the early sixties, the very beginning sixties.

Espino

And did you help Julian Nava get elected [to the Board of Education, 1967]? Was that part of that?

Aceves

Yes, oh, yes. Yes, yes, we were very instrumental in that.

Espino

Can you describe maybe a little bit of your activities for that?

Aceves

Well, there was mostly it was all door-to-door. It was all getting the vote out and being a precinct worker in your precinct. I remember going around letting them know about getting the vote out and then on that day actually pulling people out of their homes to go vote. I mean, it was right around the corner from where I lived. But I remember I would go and check the list, and if the people I knew that I had contacted weren't voting, I'd go out to their house and knock and, "Oh, well, I'm busy right now." "Well, I'll stay with the kid. You go vote." It was that. Then I remember also coming across some people that didn't know how to read and write, and I would say, "Sure you do. You know how to read and write. You know enough to vote," and I would stay with them. They probably had dyslexia or something.

Aceves

I remember being there and sticking there until they were able to do whatever they had to do, or pass a test in order to register to vote, so there was that precinct work that we did. I know I remember doing that for Roybal when he ran for supervisor after councilman, and like I say, he lost to Debs. And for Tony Bueno and who are the other ones? Probably for the Board of Education, too, but that was L.A. City. But I don't remember. I'll have to talk to some of the women from Heights. We're meeting on the twelfth of next month.

Espino

What did you like about Julian Nava? Do you remember anything specific that stands out about him that impressed you?

Aceves

Well, he was part of the Nava family, and I knew them because of their activities in--well, I knew of them because one of the gals from de Pauw lived on Bridge Street right next door to them, so I knew of them. But it wasn't till I got active with--how did I get on the board of directors? First it was the Mexican American something or other organization, and I was on the board of directors there. Okay. I remember going to Frances de Pauw, because they had some kind of a luncheon, and the Reverend Antonio Hernández was there as a speaker, because he went to the Spanish American Institute [SAI]. He was there, a speaker, and that's where I met him. He was a director of, what was the name of that organization of that neighborhood home? It was right here on--I'll think about it. So he was there, so I started to go there and I'd take my son. I know my son got a job there, working there. They had a program there. His wife had a program, and I started to volunteer for that program there. Both Lucy [Hernández] and Tony are dead, but maybe his daughters are still around.

Aceves

And Rosamond [Flores], one of my friends, they knew him from the time he was a minister in San Bernardino in Riverside, so that's how I got into the community organizations. Then he got me on the board of directors, and then I got a job with him. Well, first I was on the board of directors. Anyway, we

organized this group. It was during the civil rights. It was the first group that also organized that was against the war, and they had this big--

Espino

Against the Vietnam War?

Aceves

Yes. That was when Ruben Salazar got killed.

Espino

The moratorium?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

What was the name of the group, do you remember?

Aceves

Yes. I think it was Mexican American something, Community Organization or something, and we got funds from the Ford Foundation, and I know that we were funding the Brown Berets for community action. All we paid was the rent and the telephone, and the IRS came after us. I remember going before the IRS with the director then. Then it was the Southwest Council of LaRaza. Now it's the National Council of LaRaza--with him and the attorney. The IRS, I don't know why they're all six-footers, but they were real big, or come across. And Tony, who was the attorney, Tony Bueno, and the director of the Southwest Council of LaRaza, I'll think of his name, they weren't able to defend us. I stood up to him, and after the moratorium when we had a big meeting at [Church of] All Nations, I remember the director of the Southwest Council of LaRaza saying, "And who was the one that got up and swayed the whole group?" It was going just very one-sided. I guess people were intimidated, or they didn't have the courage to speak, and I felt strong enough I would get up and speak. If I thought about it, then I would get self-conscious, but as long as I was just thinking about the issue I wanted to put across, then I did come across, because it was really coming across from my beliefs and what I thought we should do.

Aceves

So that's how I got in with, as you say, with the Navas, because Tony was married to Lucy Nava, to Julian's brother--

Espino

Sister?

Aceves

Yes, Julian's sister was Lucy. Of course, she was a lot older than Julian. So that's how we all got into getting him in. You know, the community was really a community. Everybody was kind of interrelated and everybody knew everybody, so that's the way it was in East L.A.

Espino

Well, I mean just the fact that this community center, All Nations that you went to as a child, was a place that you went to in the seventies to talk about Ruben Salazar's death after the Moratorium, so that's really interesting as well.

Aceves

Yes. They opened a place over here. I think it's still there on Soto and, well, it's one block south of at the time Brooklyn, Cesar Chavez now, and upstairs was where the Sheldons rented that upstairs to have that study that they had gotten a grant for that I worked for.

Espino

All Nations, the All Nations building. Wow.

Aceves

Yes. So they opened that. I don't remember when they came down here. The building over there on 6th and Gladys is still there. I pass by there once in a while, and the building is still there. They kind of made a little park of it, but there were houses. Everybody lived around there. And then it's very interesting that most of the people that lived on 7th Street, when they bought homes they moved to the East Side of town, like the Jordans and the Aceves. I know that my cousin's widow, her cousin said that she has a neighbor that

lived on 7th Street, the Porters. And when I got active and when I moved-- when I was little, everybody knew everybody it seemed to me, the Mexican community was--although my aunt and my uncle, they all lived over here in East L.A. and we lived downtown. And then I know that there was some very progressive--I know that the people that got my mother to become a U.S. citizen, so they had these organizations that were going on.

Aceves

Someplace I remember reading a booklet, it wasn't a book, a booklet, and that's when I realized what these organizations were. They would bring their funds together so they would have enough money to bury their dead, like insurance. Maybe I still have those booklets.

Espino

The Mutual Aid Society type of thing?

Aceves

Yes, something like that. So going back to Nava, that's how--and then he was going to be the first Mexican American on the Board of Education. That was a big deal for us. Like with [Barack] Obama, I mean, I can understand how the African Americans feel that way. I wasn't too excited about him, because I still feel he belongs to corporate America [laughter], and we only got a woman and an African American as candidates because they're part of the system. But in those years we were very connected, very connected.

Espino

Okay, this is my last question and I'm going to pause it just to see the time, but just contrasting those two experiences, saying Obama is with corporate America--and Julian Nava, what was different about him? What did he represent that was different? Was it just because he was Mexican, Mexican American, or did he have ideas that were different from the dominant society? Anything that you remember that was different about him, or was he just Mexican?

Aceves

No. You have to remember that in those days the discrimination was very blatant. I mean, it wasn't hidden. The police department would say things

about, "Those Mexicans," and people would make statements. People were not as discreet as they are now, so the discrimination was pretty blatant. I mean, and we even discriminated against our own, because I don't know if I told you that even in high school I almost beat up this girl because she kept saying she was Spanish, and I thought that she was just denying that she was Mexican, and that was an insult. How dare you deny, be ashamed of who you are? And later on to find out that really she had come from New York and her family was from Spain. [laughter]

Espino

Oops.

Aceves

And I was very proud of being a Mexican. I was very ashamed of being a bastard, my mother and my father not being married, but that was my pride, that I was Mexican and proud of it. In those days it wasn't Mexican American. You were Mexican. So you didn't doubt that whoever you got elected, he was going to represent you. And the system has gotten, well, I hate to say more corrupt, but yes, I don't know of another word. It's gotten worse and worse in terms of--I mean, in certain ways, like, for instance, we're more acceptable of interracial marriages, we're more acceptable of our sexuality and all of these things were more acceptable, but the political system has gotten more corrupt in terms of manipulating the people. Or maybe, no, I was going to say maybe I've just become more savvy, more knowledgeable about it, but no, because there wasn't that manipulation. We didn't have television. All we had was the radio and organizations and people getting together as I was growing up, so there was no doubt that Julian Nava was going to represent us, that Roybal was going to represent us, that anybody that you got up there was going to represent you, because you felt that they went through the same thing that you went through. So maybe that was naive on our part.

Aceves

Because I remember, and I think I told you that when I went to visit Roybal in Washington, D.C., that he told me, he said that he got there thinking that he was going to do so much for his community and he was going to do so much for his people, just to find out that they had the seniority system and if you

didn't play with the people that were there before you, you couldn't get any bills to pass. So I became very disenchanted, but, I mean, I didn't stop being active. I mean, I know a lot of people that did and said, "Well, I'm just going to take care of myself," and they became economically very well, but I still felt that we had to do something. You just can't sit back and allow them to do everything that they want to do. But he's the one that set me straight, so I guess I didn't have any illusions after that. But I don't know, there was Ramona Banuelos after that who ran for treasurer, and she was the first Mexican. By that time they were calling us Mexican American.

Aceves

That's when Francisca [Flores] had the first women's conference in Sacramento, and she asked me to go, that she was going to have a women's workshop and I managed to get some kind of an appointment with Dr. Galarza, because he lived up in San Jose, and so we made it a business trip and I was able to go to the women's conference. At that point I was still working for Del, and Banuwelo's, she owned a tortilla factory, and she was also on the board of directors of the First Bank in East L.A. But then I had a friend that worked for the produce, Local 660 of the Teamsters, and he tried to unionize that tortilla factory, and he told me all the things that they did to the employees. Then when they would come over to start their application to get a permanent visa, what the employees would tell me they had to do in order for them to give them a letter of employment, because if they came they had to have a letter, a job here before they came, and things like that. So when I went to the women's workshop for the issues conference, I couldn't stay for the conference. I just stayed for the workshop and then I had to go meet with Dr. Galarza coming back.

Aceves

So I didn't know I was being taped, and so I told the women in the conference why I didn't think that we should endorse Banuelos, even though she was a Mexican woman and all of that. So they went and they stated this. Well, I was the director of the Chicana Center, and I had a couple of men come and talk to me and really tell me off royally, that I would deny--I mean, she got the job. She got appointed treasurer. I don't know if it was U.S. Treasurer or state treasurer.

Espino

I think it was U.S., and then she was found corrupt later on. Is that--

Aceves

I don't remember that. I don't remember that.

Espino

Well, I shouldn't say that, because that might not be true, especially since we're on tape. But I'll look and see if that's the case.

Aceves

But that was the first time I started to go look at people for what they were and not just necessarily because I thought they would represent me. Although I remember this guy--there were two fellows that had the same name, Nacho. They were both Nachos, and they both had the same first name and last name, and I remember him coming and telling me off. We later became friends, but I just listened to him. I told him why I thought that she wasn't good. I said, "It's not up to me. That's my opinion." But from there on I began to look at people for if they represented or didn't represent me, but it wasn't until then. But like you say, like with Roybal and with Julian Nava and Tony Bueno, I mean, I didn't even question. We're going to get a Mexican in there. And MAPA, the Mexican American Political Association, they were the same way, too. We'd just get a Mexican in there.

Aceves

I really believed, and I thought they did, too, that if we got Mexicans we would make a change. But it wasn't till I had that conversation with Roybal that I thought, well, it's going to have to be more than within that. And I guess kind of indirectly I must have thought--I'm thinking about it now--that I felt that they're going to be as strong as the community is, so I do really believe in community organization. But like I told them Tuesday at the Alhambra Democratic Club had a little thing at the Veterans, and they had the screen and all that, of the inauguration, and after that we went around, everybody speaking, and I said, "Well, Obama's only going to be as good as you young people make him. Because the spirit is willing, but I mean the body is giving out. I can't give as much physical support as I used to." But I find myself in a

good stage, not being so romantic in my way of thinking. I'm being very realistic, but still optimistic.[End of interview]

1.5. Session 5 (January 30, 2009)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino, and today is January 30, 2009, and I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia. Last time we went through a bit of the fifties, and we touched a little bit on the sixties and your activism in Comisión [Femenil Mexicana Nacional], but I want to go back a little bit and remind you about one organization that I think you were involved in and if you can tell me a little bit about it, it was called the League of Mexican American Women that was founded in 1959 by Francisca Flores. Were you a part of that organization?

Aceves

Yes, yes. As a matter of fact, she honored me with Dolores Huerta that day. She started that organization because she wanted to bring attention to Mexican women and their activities. I know that the first one she honored, or one of the first ones that she honored was Lucille Roybal, and Francisca and Grace [Montañez Davis] and Evelyn Valverde Benson, I remember those three, and there are a couple of others, this other woman that was killed. Anyway, they were active women, so she knew that Mexican women were active and doing a lot and they weren't getting recognized, so that's what she did. The organization was to bring attention to active Mexican women. So I knew when she asked me, she wanted to honor me, she got real upset with me because she says, "Here I'm trying to honor you, and you don't want to." Well, I didn't think that--I mean, and then I was going to go next to Dolores Huerta, who was already pretty famous, but she talked me into it. I'll dig the pictures out. They're someplace there, that she took the picture.

Aceves

So, yes, that was the first one in terms of women, and then she started the Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, and that was supposed to be a national organization and it was. There was a chapter I think in Arizona, and there was a chapter up and down the state. As a matter of fact, I think that there are

some women up in Fresno that are still active, and that was specifically why the League of Mexican American Women was--she organized that or she founded that.

Espino

Were you part of that early founding, the beginning, with her?

Aceves

Well, what I remember of it was we just had these banquets every year. Every year we had these banquets where she honored women, and we were active in everything else in the community. Now, she had that newsletter. What was the name of it? [Carta Editorial] I think I still have some. As college women are doing their dissertation or something, they've interviewed me and so I've given them a lot of stuff. But, of course, Comisión's archives Nacional are in Santa Barbara, the archives in Santa Barbara, and then Comisión de Los Angeles, because we have chapters, are at UCLA. So that was about the only thing that I remember about the League of Mexican American Women, those banquets, that led up to those banquets.

Aceves

Now, there was Dionicio Morales with the Mexican American Opportunities Foundation--I don't think I'm saying the right name, but I have his card there. At the same time, he started to honor women more or less around the same time, and he would have a real big banquet and honor the women and started to give them a lot of attention. I remember Irene Tovar was one of them. Do you know Irene Tovar? Okay, she's in the Valley, and somebody called her up the other day and she was so delighted to hear from her that she said she wanted to get together with us, but she had an accident and I think she was in a wheelchair or something. Now, the last I heard, she was a director of, what was the name of that first Head Start that they had in the Valley? Well, I'll think about it. She's a little younger than I am, maybe ten years, maybe younger. As a matter of fact, I remember she was very young when we started the Mexican American Education Committee. She was one that they brought in from the Valley, and then they brought in people from the Bay Area and us, and I think that's about the group that was there.

Espino

So you don't remember any formal meetings about the--just to get back a little bit to the League, any formal meetings?

Aceves

No. We ran across each other all the time, because we were always doing something, so I guess we had kind of informal meetings not as a group but we would be doing--like I said, Francisca always had a newsletter. She had the Carta Editorial, and then she had the other magazine that she put out, so she was always writing. That was her thing. That's what she liked to do. I know that they met a lot at my house when they were doing--Regeneración was the other one that she had. I know when they were doing the Carta Editorial, I know that she met with Delfino Varela, and it was her, I think it was Gonzalo Molina. There was just a few people, so they would ask me if they could have a meeting at my house and they would come over and we met at my house.

Espino

So you think that these banquets where she honored were probably similar, that she met with a small group of people, organized these banquets, and then the main event was the actual banquet itself?

Aceves

Right. That's what I recall. I don't remember going to any meetings. Like she was in MAPA [Mexican American Political Association] and she was very active when we were trying to get Tony Bueno as the assemblyman. She was a good friend of Delfino, my boss. I don't know that he was my boss then, but they were real good friends. I think her nephew wrote her biography. Now he's in San Diego, and I know that he's in some university, but I don't recall his name right now.

Espino

Okay. Yes, I was just curious about what role you played in that and what recollections you had about the League of Mexican American Women. So you recall them as being banquets.

Aceves

Yes. Like I say, her purpose was to bring attention to Mexican women, because we were active. We were there but we weren't getting the recognition. Not

that--I don't think any of us wanted any recognition. I think that we wanted to do our thing and be able to--like my ex-husband [Bill Aceves] used to complain a lot. He said, "You're out in the street so much you could be working and earning some money." But I would say, "It's different when you're active. If my kid gets sick, whatever commitment I have gets put to one side and my kid comes first. If I'm working, my work comes first and my kid comes after." So that was the argument that I gave him. And the only training that I had then, which was obsolete, was the job that I did at the May Company for five years. Those machines [National Cash Register] were obsolete, and so I could only be a secretary or a bookkeeper assistant, and they weren't jobs that I really liked. They were jobs of necessity. They weren't jobs like I got after that I really enjoyed, or even the last job I had.

Espino

So how would you describe your feelings about being active? What did it give you as a person?

Aceves

Well, like I told you before, that it was so ingrained in us that we were put in-- in both religions, even the Catholics and the Protestants, that you're put in this Earth to leave it a better place than you found it. So I always had that; that was a reason. And I always thought that everything that I was doing was to better ourselves, especially the Mexican community, which I felt to this day gets shorthanded, doesn't get its full share of what is coming, either materially or education-wise, which would lead you to a better standard of living. So that was the thing, but, of course, your home came first. I always did everything in the house. There wasn't anything that went without doing. I did everything. There was no sharing of work while I was married. Like I told you before, after I got divorced, well, the boys' father [Bill Aceves] was very helpful when they were little, and he felt that they needed him.

Espino

So during your marriage the roles were divided by gender, by what the man did and by the female, what was expected of you?

Aceves

Right. Although he was very much into a woman helping with the expenses, but I didn't think that it would work out. I don't know if you still see it, like I think I see it less and less now with this younger generation, but in those days if the women went out to work, they came home and they did all the housework and everything. There wasn't any dividing of the housework. And many times if they had a yard, the man took care of the yard, and most of the men were handymen. But there was a division of work for sure in my generation. It's changed a little bit, and it all depends, I guess, on the group of people. Well, even like my nieces in Zacatecas are all professionals, and their husbands help. Of course, they can afford assistance in the home.

Espino

So basically you did the cooking?

Aceves

I did everything, including the yard.

Espino

Including the yard.

Aceves

Yes. [laughter] Yes. I did everything around the house.

Espino

So if you would have obtained some sort of a wage employment, you would have been working your fulltime job as well as--

Aceves

Right.

Espino

Did you understand that at that time, in those terms?

Aceves

Oh, yes. But that wasn't the reason I didn't want to go to work. I tell you that I had a hangup, because my mother was a working mother, and she was the only working mother in the neighborhood, and she was the only one that

wasn't there. Now I think it kind of was a lesson in disguise, because I don't think that I would have been so outgoing if I hadn't had that kind of freedom. And the neighborhood provided. It was a community. There was the [Church of] All Nations [Community Center], there was a library, and oh, I loved walking through Pershing Square and there are all those men preaching and talking, and I would stand there and listen to them and they made kind of sense. But then I would hear from my father's friends that they were political and I would listen to their conversations, and they were pretty similar to what these people were saying in Pershing Square.

Aceves

I don't remember so much--there was the Salvation Army that had their little bands, and that was interesting to watch, but like I say, Skid Row was a lot of fun to walk by. They had terrific music. So in a way it did me good that I wasn't--because nobody else had the kind of freedom I had. That kids went to All Nations, the boys especially. They had a real good program for the boys, so like I say, it was truly a community, and people took care of people. The only thing that, as I say, that I witnessed and scared me was the domestic violence, which I never told anybody. I didn't tell my mother anything, because she was the type that would have probably gone and slapped the guy up. I was just talking to my friend, Mercy Perez Villegas called this morning. We were in boarding school [Frances de Pauw School for Girls] together, and she was talking about her mother, how feisty her mother was. But you found some mothers here and there that were--by and large, I thought most of the women were very, very timid and didn't say much outside of their home. That's the way I perceived them. Maybe they weren't that way.

Espino

Did you see, like in some of the women of your generation, some of the women that were active, that same kind of personality that you--see, it sounds like your mom was pretty feisty, and then you were also pretty feisty, and some of the other women of that generation who were involved in--

Aceves

Oh, yes. Well, you take like Francisca Flores and Grace Davis, they were, I would say, very forward, and they were very confident, and they were. Well,

Grace still is, but Francisca's gone, but they were very intellectual, and they really knew their stuff, and they could hold down a real good, maybe it was more of a debate than an argument, but it always ended up getting heated. Even the men with the men, the arguments or the debates or the differences always ended up getting heated.

Espino

Do you remember any specific arguments that Francisca or Grace might have had with anyone?

Aceves

Well, that was the one, especially with MAPA [Mexican American Political Association]. I remember going to the meetings that the women's issue, they never elected any women and they never gave positions to women. They were always just licking the stamps and doing the mailing and doing that kind of work. That was what I found that they argued a lot about. Well, like I say, those three I remember, Francisca, Grace, and Evelyn Velarde Benson. She's also gone, she's passed away. She was a schoolteacher, and she lived in the Silver Lake or Echo Park area. She had a real nice home. So they were very vocal, very vocal and spoke up, and they didn't get nervous when they spoke up, like the rest of us did. We weren't that confident out in public. But they're not that much older. How old is Grace, eighty-five, something like that? So it's not that. But they just seemed older. Well, then, Grace, she had gone all through UCLA, so you had a lot of respect for people that were educated. And, of course, Francisca didn't. She spent many of her years in--what do you call them when they sent them--she had tuberculosis, so she was in institutions for a good part of her life, and I guess she spent all her time reading, because she really--like I say, Grace and her, I looked up at them, and I think that my peers did, too, because there was no contradicting them, because we felt that they knew it, and you're not going to contradict somebody that knows it all.

Espino

What about the men's relationship to them, to Grace? It sounds like in one case Francisca worked with Delfino Varela on something. Were there men that they had conflicts with, and then also men that they worked well with?

Aceves

Oh, yes, yes. Delfino was one of them. Then the one that started the "Issues" conference. I mean, actually it was a man that started Comisión, right, because he invited Francisca to have a women's workshop in this Issues conference. I'll think, because his wife's name is Josie. I think she's still living. She's in the area, and I think she's two or three years older than me. I'll think of their last name. So there were some. Then there was--he's gone, too, Gutiérrez [Bill], and then there were the fellows at the L.A. County Human Department [L.A. County Commission on Human Relations Department] or what was it, the one that brought us in to start the Mexican American Education Committee. So there were men that respected women in terms of their intellect and in terms of what they could do, but by and large, most of them didn't think about including the women in decision-making positions.

Espino

Is there anybody that stands out that was really a hard person to convince to your position, or Francisca's position on including women?

Aceves

No, I think that they were all--what was the name of that fellow? I mean, Bert Corona was also one of the founders of MAPA. Now, I think that Negrete [Lou] still teaches at Cal State L.A. He was younger, he was a lot younger, and he wasn't as bad as the older guys were. The older guys were pretty set in their ways, and they did seem a lot older. I mean, they probably weren't that much older than I was, but they seemed a lot older, and they all had positions. [Edward] Roybal wasn't, if I remember him, he wasn't too much of a--what do you call it when the men are anti-women?

Espino

Chauvinist?

Aceves

Yes. So he didn't appear to be that much. But when we started the Chicana Center, we got a lot of backlash from the other organizations. Now, the one that we just had the memorial service Sunday for Martin Ortiz, he was very--brought in everyone. But when I met him and we were active, he wasn't working at Whittier. When I met him, he was the director of the Coordinating

Council in Estrada Courts, so he appeared to be real low key to me, and he was real soft-spoken. From all the history that I learned about him on Sunday-- of course, I'd lost track of him when he went to Whittier College and he kind of put all his time in that, and he wasn't active in the community in the things that I was active anymore, but you say, wow, you know him and he's one of the guys that you met, you've been active for years and you don't realize what an impact he had.

Espino

So he was somebody that you knew back then?

Aceves

Well, it must have been when I was even still married, although I didn't get divorced till I was thirty-four. I was married for fourteen years. But that was part, as I tell you, of the Heights Co-Op [Nursery School] that we belonged to, the coordinating councils. I asked David Lizárraga, he was there, and I asked him, "Was Martin the one that was at Estrada Courts?" "Yeah, that was him." Now, David Lizárraga was one of the young kids at Cleland House, and he's now a grown man and director of TELACU [The East Los Angeles Community Union], but they were kids. They were kids when I was already married and had my kids. Of course, I mean, I was in my twenties and they might have been sixteen or fifteen, so they looked real young to me, and now they still look young to me.

Espino

So he passed away, he's younger than you, Martin Ortiz?

Aceves

No, I don't think that he was younger. I think he was about eighty-two or something like that. No, he's not younger. David Lizárraga and Juarez and Montezuma [Esparza], they were all--like Montezuma was one of the Brown Berets and they were little kids, the one that started also, Rosalio Muñoz, they were all little kids as far as young kids, teenagers.

Espino

Right. They're part of the Chicano Movement generation. That was something that happened when you were in your late twenties, early thirties. So I guess

we can just move into the sixties now, since we're kind of talking about that already, and some of the things that might have been influential, because the League of Mexican American Women was actually organizing before MAPA was organizing, because MAPA was founded in 1960, so they had a little bit of a head start. It seems like even before that, Francisca had bringing women's issues as part of her objective.

Aceves

Yes. She was very pro-woman, and yet she was a hard person to get along with. She got along a lot better with men than she did with women. [laughs]

Espino

That's very interesting.

Aceves

Yes, yes. So, yes, maybe because the men had more education, formal education than most of the women that surrounded, than most of us, but at least that's how I perceived her, and other people would make little remarks like that.

Espino

Do you have any examples of the kind of remarks people would say?

Aceves

Yes. People would say, "Yeah, she's a chauvinist," or something. But intellectually she was way above, and she understood the struggle of the women and all of this. But on a one-to-one basis, I wanted to say she was controlling. I mean, what she said usually there was not too much contradiction, because she was pretty right on most of the things.

Espino

Like some of the issues that Comisión dealt with were family planning and jobs and things that seemed to be important to a lot of different women, so that's how she was able to get women to her groups. But do you think that she was a popular figure among the women?

Aceves

Well, some of the women did appreciate her and did respect her. Lorraine I think she's an attorney now, she's a little younger, I don't how much younger. But I know that she ended up being her assistant when the Chicana Action Center turned over strictly to finding jobs and job training. Then she didn't want to be--well, actually, when we started the Chicana Service Action Center, she came to me and asked me if I would be the director, and I told her no because I would be on the board and I would be doing a lot of things, and no, she insisted that I be the director. So I agreed to be the director, and what originally we were going to do, and we had a \$50,000 grant, it was going to be a front to organize women. We would do whatever we had contractually agreed to do on the proposal, but we were going to use that also to organize women, and that was going to be the main focus that we would do.

Aceves

Well, we would have the office open from eight to five, and it was job referral, that's what we did. We would close the office and then we'd have our meetings, and there was always a core of women that were very active. Yolanda Nava was one, Gloria Molina was one. I'll think--there were about six to eight. Then we would have meetings with the community on Saturdays, so there was a real tight core group that we started to organize. Then the feminist movement was beginning, too, but they weren't addressing our issues, which were jobs, which were education, which was housing and I want to say hardcore, but more issues like that. We weren't arguing about not being discriminated against because we didn't get the job. We weren't in those jobs yet, not enough, but that was the thing that we were doing. So we did.

Aceves

Out of that came Comisión Mexicana Nacional, and the reason it was Comisión Mexicana was so that we could remember that the Southwest used to be Mexico, and that there was a historical reason. Later on as Comisión got older and there was a lot of Central and South Americans, they wanted to drop the Mexicana, so when they would tell me that I would go to their meetings and tell them why we kept Mexicana there, and at some point they didn't notify me and they dropped it, so it ended up being just Comisión Nacional Inc., but that was the reason that we--she was very much into the historical aspect of the Chicanos here, the Mexicans here. I don't know that she liked the word

Chicano, but it was something that was becoming politicized, the word Chicano and Chicana. So that was how it was.

Aceves

Then when I left the Chicana Service Action Center, she took over and then she fought and argued with the Department of Labor, so the second year that Grace told us that there wasn't any money and that they weren't going to fund us, so then I don't know what happened. She says, "Well, I think I can get you 80,000 for the following year." But then when I left and Francisca became the director, she was able to get more and more and more. Then she got the director right now, I'll think of her name right now, and she did very well also. But Francisca was the one that started getting a lot of money for job training and jobs. I think they're in two, three million, or something like that.

Espino

So in the beginning, just to back up a little bit, the beginning of Comisión you started a \$50,000--

Aceves

No, that was a Chicana Action Center. That was separate from Comisión.

Espino

That's right, that's right. Something you obtained once Comisión was already founded?

Aceves

No. It was the other way around. Well, we had Comisión but it hadn't gotten real big. We had just had those two [National Chicano] Issues Conference, okay. So we had that first Issues conference, and at that conference what the women there said was that we needed a center where people could go, the Mexican woman could go and they could be organized. So at the second year that there was an Issues conference, then they said it would be the Chicana Service Action Center, and I'm not too sure where. It must have been after the second conference that the Department of Labor had a women's conference, and I think it was in Arizona and I wasn't able to go, and that's where this fellow, who I'm pretty sure he was Mexican, anyway, he had a Spanish surname, was, and I think Grace would probably remember. He was the

director of the Department of Labor, and Francisca approached him and said, "Why don't you fund us?" And he said, "Well, I have \$50,000, and if you give me a proposal I'll fund you." Well, she had the outline of a Chicana center, so she gave him the outline, but I ended up doing the formal proposal for submission, but he had already made a commitment to those \$50,000.

Espino

So then that was something that had been discussed at these two Issues conferences. Before the first Issues conference in 1970, did Francisca hold a meeting about what she wanted to talk about at the Issues conference?

Aceves

No. She called us all up. She called us all up and she said that, oh, I'll think of his name, had asked her to hold a women's workshop at the Issues conference that they were going to have, and if she had one, would I attend? Because she wanted to make sure that there would be people that went. And I said, "I'll find a way. I'll find a way. I'll go." At that time was I on the board of directors, or I was working for Euclid Foundation, I don't remember exactly. So we did go, and I don't know whether it was the first conference or the second conference where I know that I made an appointment to meet with Dr. [Ernesto] Galarza, and that was how I could travel up there and have a reason to go, because I combined the meeting, which Dr. Galarza was one of the founders of the Southwest Council de La Raza, so that was how I combined it. Like I said, I don't remember whether it was the first conference or the second conference, but I told her I would go.

Aceves

So she called and I remember, I don't know if you've heard of Gracia Molina de Pick? She used to teach at San Diego U., and she lives in La Jolla. So I know the last time I talked to her she told me that we should get together to write our memoirs, that so many of us are dying. I don't know if I sent her a book of Gloria Moreno de la Torre Wycoff. She wrote her memoirs and I usually send them as gifts to people for their birthdays or retirement or something, and I'm not too sure if I sent her one or not. But anyway, she was there and she was writing on the board all the notes, and there was a good fifteen, twenty people. I remember that one of those meetings, and I think I talked about it

last time, that Ramona Bañuelos was running for treasurer, and I was totally against her, and I couldn't stay for the--after all the workshops met they would go into a main meeting and I guess come up with some kind of, I want to say legislation but that's not the right word. But anyway, so I couldn't stay for that, because I had my appointment with Dr. Galarza. So that was how she contacted us, one by one when we got there, and then there were women from Sacramento and from Fresno and, of course, Gracia from San Diego. I don't remember who she brought also. So it was a very, very good meeting with real high energy, and exciting. It didn't take me much to get excited in those days.

Espino

And Francisca led the meeting?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Was that led by the formal Roberts Rules of Order type of thing, or do you remember it being more informal?

Aceves

I think there was probably a combination, and it still is that way, that until it gets kind of losing control, then you instill the Roberts Rules of Order. [laughs] But while everybody is letting everybody speak and everybody is raising their hand and things like that, well, you don't use them, or you didn't. I still, when I hold meetings, still do that. But if it gets a little out of control, then you have to put in some kind of limits.

Espino

Do you recall that most people were on the same page as far as the issues, or was there a conflict between what one group thought was the most important and what another group thought was the most important?

Aceves

No. About the only ones that were much more radical than we were the group from [Cal State] Northridge, with [unclear]. I know that they came--did we

have our first conference in--well, we had two of them in Goleta, and I know they came and there was a little conflict there. I don't remember exactly what it was. But they were the only group that I could see were a little more radical than we were, and I don't remember exactly what were the issues that they had that we had a little conflict on. Then there was the group also, there was the welfare group [Chicana Welfare Rights Organization]. They met and there was Alicia [Escalante]. She was the one that spearheaded--there was two or three of them, real go-getters. I remember Francisca writing an article in *Regeneración* on them which wasn't very flattering, and there was a little conflict there. I remember Alicia saying, "Well, people are beginning to associate us with Comisión and we're not Comisión." Welfare Rights Organization, was that the name of it?

Aceves

I think that what Francisca said, that they were very intelligent women and why they had to be on welfare or something like that, something on those lines.

Espino

Did she tell you that personally? Or was that something she would say?

Aceves

No, I think the article that she wrote, I believe. Hopefully I have some *Regeneración*. Well, I know that there's the whole ones that she made. I think they're in Santa Barbara. And the one that was real close to her at the end was Sandy Serrano-Sewell, actually, and she's the director of Los Ninos, the program there that she was very successful in doing that. I remember that when she went to that first conference, her husband--I guess you become brothers when you're married long enough, right? Her husband Mario Sewell sold blood so that she could afford to go to the conference. [Espino laughs] And now they have a beautiful home in La Quinta in the Palm Springs area. She has an apartment here in Alhambra where she stays all week and then goes to her home on the weekends.

Espino

Is she of your same generation?

Aceves

She's younger. She's a little younger, not much, but she's real interesting. She's from Kansas originally.

Espino

And she was at that very first Issues meeting?

Aceves

I'm pretty sure it was the first one, yes.

Espino

And then Ana Nieto Gomez was also at that first Issues meeting?

Aceves

I don't think that they stayed overnight, because we had the dormitories there in Goleta, the whole conference thing.

Espino

Well, I mean, excuse me, I'm talking about the one in Sacramento, the first?

Aceves

Oh, no. Ana Nieto was not there.

Espino

Where Comisión was founded.

Aceves

Yes, no, she wasn't there. But she had her own group in Cal-State University Northridge. I think she taught Chicana studies.

Espino

Was Sandy Serrano at that first meeting in Sacramento?

Aceves

I don't recall. I don't recall.

Espino

Alicia Escalante of Welfare Rights, do you think she was?

Aceves

No, she wasn't there. No, she wasn't there.

Espino

Okay. So this group of women, yourself--was Grace attending that?

Aceves

I don't remember, because she had a full-time job. I don't remember if she was there. I mean, I can see them right now sitting in the workshop, and a few of them have passed away. What was the name of Morin [Ramona]? She was one of the ones that hung around with Francisca and they were very vocal. They were very much like my mother, very vocal and how would I say, no le tenían miedo a nadie. I want to say that I perceived them as aggressive, but now I would say very assertive. But in those days you just acted that way at home, you didn't act that way out in the street. [laughs]

Espino

Well, okay. Did you find that behavior inappropriate?

Aceves

No, I didn't find it inappropriate--

Espino

At the time, looking back.

Aceves

Yes. No, I didn't find it, because they were making good points. They would make good points, and they wouldn't give up. They would stick to their point. Now, I wasn't much different than that. I just wasn't that way in public at that time.

Espino

So do you think that it was hard for a woman to be like that at that time, that people would criticize or talk?

Aceves

In my generation? Yes, yes.

Espino

Yes. Like somebody like Francisca, do you think it was hard to be assertive and to speak about important issues in an assertive way?

Aceves

Yes. For the average--well, in those days we were all Mexicanos, so I would say for the average Mexicana, yes. Like I say, they were very educated, whether they're self-educated, or like Grace that went to UCLA, but they knew what they were talking about. I guess they had more self-confidence. I think maybe that's it. And you always looked up at people that had education. You didn't contradict people that had education, because they knew more than you did. I remember a lot of times people would say something and I didn't think it was right, but I wouldn't argue. I'd go look it up and see if I was right or not. [laughs] So that's the way I was at that time, but that was because you don't have the confidence, and you don't realize that education doesn't necessarily make you smart or make you an intellectual.

Espino

So then it seems like people were drawn to her because of her assertiveness, and it came at the right time, when women were starting to look at their roles in society and in work and the family. I have a list here of some of the issues that Ana Nieto Gomez wrote an article about that, that Issues conference where Comisión was founded, and she said that abortion, birth control, child care, stereotypes, machismo and Chicano leadership were all on the agenda.

Aceves

Yes. I remember that--what was one of the ones that you mentioned--child care, okay. That was one of the criticisms that Francisca had about the Feminist Movement, that they were not addressing child care and that we needed good child care if we were going to go out and work. When the Chicana Center first opened up, we got a lot of publicity. I remember we were on TV a lot and on the radio, and I remember Francisca coming and saying, "Why don't you ask other people to be on TV?" I said, "Well, everybody's

working." And she says, "Well, it doesn't matter." Well, I mean, it didn't dawn upon me. I mean, I thought it was my job to do those things while everybody worked. I didn't know that they wanted to be on TV. So then they started coming, so we got a lot of publicity at the beginning, and the Chicana Center got a lot of publicity. So a lot of people came and I interviewed them, and some of the stories that I heard of some of these working women were worse than my history.

Aceves

I remember this one in particular, but this was a lot of women. They were on welfare and they still had jobs, and they still had to find childcare for their kids. I had to bite my tongue to tell them, "Why don't you just don't work and just stay home? You're on welfare anyway." But I didn't dare. I didn't dare say anything like that, because they felt that they had to work. But, I mean, I just thought it was so sad that here they had several kids, maybe some of them only had one or two, but most had kids and they went out to work, and a lot of them were single mothers. I just thought it was too much. I didn't understand why they felt they had to work in order to help. The welfare was very little. What they were earning was very little. To me it didn't make sense, but like I say, I didn't dare say.

Aceves

Then the Mexican American Foundation, they had a program for women that it was just a lot. I don't know how they did it. They were working, they were going to school, they had children, and in order to be in that program they had to be able to do all of these things well enough to qualify for the program. I mean, I just saw so much, what would I say, so much unfairness economically, and for these women to go to college because they wanted a better life for themselves and their children and all of that, and the sacrifices that they had to make, the stress that they were under. And a lot of them had to drop out. They just couldn't--it was just a lot. And I could see, I mean, I was doing a lot myself, but not to the extent that these women--of course, I wasn't receiving any money except my salary, but I was working and going to school and I had the children. Of course their father was very helpful while they were very little, but it was--it still is very unfair.

Aceves

Then I remember this young woman coming over, and she just talked and talked and talked, and I just listened to her. I didn't know what to make out of what she was saying. I mean, I wasn't a psychologist, but I didn't know what to say, so I just listened to her. A few weeks later she came and she brought me this big picture, this painting, and she said, "When I came last time, I was ready to commit suicide." She said, "But you were so nice that I went home and I painted this for you." I gave it to my friend who's since passed away, and she was going to frame it, and then she said her father had thrown it out of the garage. But I remember that. And a lot of people would come and just talk about their problems, and I didn't know what to say. I mean, I was in awe of what they were living through and what they were going through. Like I say, I just thought it was a lot more than I had ever gone through as a child or as an adult that I was living there. It was just--these women were just having such challenges. It's a wonder that there weren't--or maybe we don't know of the nervous breakdown that they all have, or nervous collapses that they have.

Espino

Yes, that just makes one think about the different responsibilities men and women have, especially at that time. Like you say, at that time in the late fifties, even in the early sixties, women were the primary caregivers of the home, and then if they had to go to work, they still had all that responsibility to do after they got home from work. And then if they were single moms, what role did men play? I think that you've talked about your husband being helpful, but maybe some of these women that came in to the center didn't have that same support. So what kind of impact do you think that in the first stages of the center, what kind of impact do you think it had?

Aceves

You know, it's hard to tell. Like, for instance, this one young woman that evidently was a painter or that's what she liked to do, it's hard to tell what impact you had. I know that the women that stayed, like Yolanda [Nava], she was a friend of Porfirio Miranda, who was a professor at UCLA and her friend, and he encouraged her to come to the Chicana Center and she became--she was at UCLA. She was going to school there. And I remember with Gloria Molina that we advertised that we were going to have this meeting, the first meeting of Comisión. Oh, as a matter of fact, Ana Nieto did come to that big

first meeting of Comisión that we had at the International Institute. Yes, I remember her there now. This was after, or was it before? I'll have to look at the dates. That's where Comisión de Los Angeles was organized, and that was one of the biggest chapters. I remember Gloria Molina just saw it in the paper and she came to that meeting. I remember it was a Saturday, and it wasn't a big meeting. It was in a little room next to the offices that we had.

Aceves

And I remember Sandy Hurwitz, who's since passed away, we were looking for somebody to be the chairperson, because we would have elections at that meeting, and I remember Sandy saying, "Get Gloria to do it. I'm sure she'll do it." So we kind of railroaded her, but it wasn't very hard because she was ready. So she was one of the ones that loaned a lot of time at the Chicana Center and was one of the organizers. She's now the L.A. County Superintendent. But also she decided--she used to work for, what was the name of that? Anyway, she got a job in one of the political offices, so then they decided there was an opening for an assemblyperson in the area. So she went to [Richard] Alatorre, who was the fellow that was kind of a Chicano organizer, and she says, "You know, I want to run for that office." He says, "Oh, no, they're not ready for a woman yet." So she came to us and we said, "Yeah, we'll get you elected," and we did get her elected.

Aceves

So, I mean, I know she grew. She already had it in her. What are the other women? I know that Esperanza Archie worked for the state, but she was one of the core group. There's quite a number of young women that were part of the core group that helped. Well, there's always a core group that helps, and Comisión de Los Angeles did a lot of things, a lot of things. There was also the one in the Pasadena area that they organized, and, of course, the one in Fresno. They kept the same name. They didn't call themselves Comisión. What was the name that we had before that? They kept the name of League of Mexican American Women. So there was one in Washington, D.C., also, but they weren't associated with us, MANA. It must have stood for Mexican American something, but I don't remember. Maybe I can find some things. I haven't given them away.

Espino

Well, that reminds me that word MANA, because it's kind of short for hermana. Like I told you earlier that I was reading Marisela Rodriguez Chavez's dissertation, and she has a chapter dedicated to or that explores Comisión Feminil [Mexicana Nacional] in its birth, and she talks about--and I think someone else, yes, Marcy Miranda wrote her M.A. on Comisión, and they both talk about Hermanidad, or like sisterhood, but translated into Spanish.

Aceves

Well, Hermanidad I think was started by Bert Corona.

Espino

Is there a way to say that, sisterhood, in Spanish? Is that hermanidad?

Aceves

Yes, yes, I would say.

Espino

That's not brotherhood?

Aceves

It might be, hermanidad, but it might be unisex. I can't think of--well, because I don't know of any masculine-sounding for brotherhood. We could look it up in the dictionary, I guess.

Espino

Well, I guess my point is that they both emphasize that Comisión Feminil, Francisca Flores and the women, the leadership, were trying to create sisterhood among Mexican women. Do you think that was one of their objectives? I mean, do you think they understood it that way, that it was building sisterhood? Kind of like the way the white women's movement was doing?

Aceves

I didn't understand it as that. Well, right now that you bring it up, there was already an hermanidad. I mean, you were in the same struggles together, so you weren't necessarily in competition as it's gotten now. I mean, I think that some of the younger women and some of the women that were going to

college, they were in a more competitive style than in the beginnings that we were. We might have gotten competitive going up the ladder, but as we started as an organization we were very supportive of each other. At least I believe that's the way it was. So it wasn't--like I say, I mean, right now that you say sisterhood, that never even occurred to me. That word is not something that I use, although I've read a lot about it and there are certainly a lot of things in the Feminist Movement that I certainly agree with. The reason that we felt, and Francisca brought it up and I agreed with her, was that they weren't addressing the issues of the Mexican women or the working poor. And we used to say that the feminist woman is a white woman's and a middle-class woman's movement. And we did go to several conferences or things that they had. I can see one. I don't remember it, but I remember speaking and getting into that kind of discussion in terms of the issues that they weren't addressing.

Espino

Some of the issues that they weren't addressing, well, there was obviously the conflict between NOW, the white women's movement, and then chicanas. It's been written about, the different issues that were relevant to each group. But within like Comisión Femenil, do you recall there were issues that--I guess you already talked a little bit about Alicia Escalante and welfare rights. Can you elaborate a little bit about that conflict between the welfare-rights activists and Comisión Femenil?

Aceves

Well, see, at the beginning and when I was there, it looked like we were going to be able to work together. But then I'm not too sure what it was that they felt. There was Alicia and this other--there were about three of them that were very, very bright women. Now I can say that at the time I didn't think that way, but they were critical thinkers, and I think that that's what Francisca saw in them, that why were they in welfare rights when they had the ability to be whatever they wanted to be? I'm not too sure or not. Maybe if I find that article, or maybe I can, like I say--I'm pretty sure that she wrote that article and that's what started the conflict, and that's when Alicia Escalante felt that they should separate, they were a group unto themselves and they were not part of Comisión.

Espino

But they did attend the meetings of Comisión?

Aceves

At the beginning, yes.

Espino

And then just from your recollection, do you think possibly it was that criticism that Francisca made of the objectives of the welfare-rights movement that kind of split?

Aceves

I believe so. I'm not too clear on that. I can see Alicia coming to the Chicana Center and saying that to me, "I think we have to separate. We don't want to be associated with it." Because then they saw us as being middle class, and, of course, some were. Yolanda was going to college. Some of the other women had gone to college or they had already graduated from college. There were a few that were working on their--so when they were dealing with bread-and-butter issues. Of course, we were dealing with child care was very important and good jobs were and education. But they saw us as we saw the Feminist Movement, and especially [unclear] NOW. Now that I'm thinking about it, maybe it wasn't so much of a conflict as a difference of opinion or difference of approach. I would have to really see if anybody would remember about it and discuss it and see what my memory, what I could download.

Espino

But you did talk about some women you felt you wanted to say, "Why don't you get on welfare full time and not do the split of working and welfare?" But you wouldn't say that. How did you feel personally about the issue of welfare and Alicia's perspective versus Francisca's perspective?

Aceves

I didn't have an opinion on it. I just stood back and listened to it, because I still feel if a person wants to stay home with her kids, they should have that right. I had already read about these socialist countries that give child care for five years. I don't even remember who. Was it Sweden and Norway? I had already

read about those things, I don't remember where, magazines or the research that I had done. I did a lot of reading in my first year at East L.A. College in that speech class. I've never been anti-welfare, whereas a lot of people including my mother [Francisca Medrano Perras] appeared to be. Maybe they didn't quite understand. And I know my mother would say a lot, "Mientras que yo tengo dos manos, nadie me tiene que mantener." And I know that a lot of people felt ashamed of receiving welfare during the depression, and I know that's why there was so much domestic violence, because the men would come home and they weren't able to find a job and they were angry and they would take it out on their families. I can understand. I didn't like it, but I can understand it now. But I didn't dare say anything, because I was afraid that they would go tell the social worker and we would get in trouble, so that's what I believed or that's what I felt, that I couldn't give them any kind of advice to be anti-work or anti-welfare.

Espino

Did you have a relationship with Alicia Escalante outside of Comisión?

Aceves

No, no, not really. I mean, I respected her and I liked her and also the other young woman. They came around a lot, the Chicana Center, when we first started. There were three of them, but I can't see the third one, but I can see the other two. So I agreed that they were very bright women and real go-getters, and they fought for welfare rights. But no, I didn't have a friendship. It was more of an organizational acquaintance, but we never exchanged anything. I ran into Alicia one time I think in Sacramento, because she moved up there, and we were real happy to see each other, and I felt a lot of warmth from her, but we never--because I consider a friend when you discuss your feelings, and there was never any of that except in terms of the issues. You were very adamant in how you felt, putting forth this issue or that issue.

Espino

How about with Francisca? Would you consider her a friend?

Aceves

No. I guess at the time I considered her a friend when she used to come around the house and have those meetings for Regeneración with, oh, José Castarena was one of them, and I went to boarding school with his two sisters. And Delfino [Varela] and I think it was [unclear], I'm not too sure. But she was the only woman with all of these writers, that they were writing, and I was there because it was my home. But I didn't participate, I listened but I didn't participate too much when they were all discussing stuff. But I learned a lot from them, and they did discuss and they did debate. They had respect for each other, so I learned a lot by just listening to the different points of view.

Espino

But you wouldn't consider her--because you were going to talk about whether or not you considered her a friend.

Aceves

No. Well, I guess at the time I would consider her a friend. At the end we clashed. What happened, I was working almost 24/7 at the Chicana Center. I would go down there on weekends and I was working real hard. Then a friend went to Spain. I took him to the airport and he says, "Why don't you go with me?" And I thought, you know what? If I can get my passport--I didn't have a passport. So I went to get my passport. I don't remember where it was, but they were building a new office for it, so I went and I made the application, and they told me it would be three to six months when I got the passport. I says, well, that does it. So then I went down to the cafeteria to eat, and like I say, they were remodeling or building it, I don't remember. Anyway, this woman came and said, "May I sit at the same table?" "Oh, sure." So we started talking and I told her that this friend had invited me to Spain, he had his brother that lived over there and he was going to go visit them, but I couldn't get my passport in time to meet him over there. And it turns out she was a director, and she said, "Well, you'll get it. You'll get it in time." So it came in the mail, in certified mail that week.

Aceves

So I called up all the board members and told them, because Francisca had gone to San Diego. I called up the board members and told them if it was okay that I took a week; I don't know if it was a week or two weeks off. And they all

said, "Well, you certainly deserve it," and they all agreed on it. So when I came back, she was very upset with me. She was very upset with me, and she made it very, very hard, so that I started looking for another job. I had worked in [Tom] Bradley's campaign, and my former boss, the Reverend Antonio Hernández, had gotten one of the people that were active--that's another one. I'll think of her name [Alvina] right now. She was another one that hung around with Francisca. He [Rev. Hernandez] had gotten her a job there, and I said, "Well, if you got her a job, you can get me a job there." So he did, so that's how I got to work, because they were political appointments, and so that's how I went to work for Bradley's office. Avelina? [Alvina] Her husband is still living here at Monterey Park. Anyway, I'll think of it.

Aceves

So then she [Francisca] kind of like aced me out. But I could see it right away, so we didn't part--I mean, there was a lot of friction there. I got an excellent job. Like I said over and over again, it wasn't that she terminated me or that she aced me out. It was the way she did it. I mean, if she would have just been frank with me and said, "You shouldn't have done this," or, "My assistant wasn't able to handle the job," whatever, but I just didn't like the way she did it. So we didn't go on the same path to begin with. But I did run into to Josie [FULL NAME?], the one that started the Issues conference at his memorial service or his funeral, his wake. She was there and she was very sweet. She was there with this other person that she had become real close to, as if nothing had happened or anything. I mean, she had a busy life. She wasn't the type that would, at least I never heard her gossiping about anybody or anything like that. She would say, "I didn't like this about her, and she's this way or that way," but it was usually organizational stuff.

Aceves

But I kept active in Comisión, and then she really got into the Chicana Center and worked real hard on that and became the director of that. Like I said, she was very instrumental in getting them what it is now, building it up. And then when she got this new director, I guess she was already getting sick. I don't know whether she got dementia or Alzheimer's or something like that toward the end. I wasn't able--they had a big thing for her, and I wasn't able to go to it, and at that point they had a hard time. I've heard that people that are very

bright don't usually get Alzheimer's or dementia, but I don't think that's true, because the first time that I heard about Alzheimer's was some movie of this famous writer, and she was an intellectual and worked in a university, so I don't know that has anything to do with it.

Espino

Do you think that, just getting back to why she got so upset, do you think that there were conflicts already brewing before you left to Spain? Or was it just that one thing that you did that upset her so much?

Aceves

I think that when we got the grant the second year and it was only \$85,000, she felt that I should have gone for more. I think that by the time she got to know me better, she didn't think that I was as assertive or as aggressive as I should have been. I think that that was one of the things that she became disenchanted with me in that regard, so that's about the only thing that I can think of. Other things, we really didn't have programs, but as I tell you, all the stories that all the women told us, it was very easy to come to the conclusion that what women need to do is get good jobs. They need training and to get good jobs, and then they'll get ahead, versus I think that she also changed her- it wasn't just organizing the Mexican women. I think that she began to see that they needed more training before they could be organized.[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, maybe you can tell me a little bit about that change, because you said originally you were going to use the Chicana Service Action Center for organizing women, and then later on it turned into job referral?

Aceves

No. We were going to get this grant from the Department of Labor. They were going to give us \$50,000 for a job-referral office. That was what it was going to be. But we were going to do the job referral, but we were also going to use that office to organize the Mexican women. I mean, we were going to do what our proposal said we were going to do, but we were going to use that as a front to organize the women.

Espino

Can you explain how you defined "organize the women"? What did that entail?

Aceves

Well, that would be going out and letting people know that we were there and that we were going to form this Comisión, this women's group, so that we could get the things that we needed, like child care, like employment, like education, and make the women more aware of what was out there and how they could get it. That was how we talked about it even in the very first conference that we had, so it was a combination. Of course people needed to work and get a job. They also needed education and if they were going to work, they also needed good child care. I don't know if we were too much into healthcare. I don't recall that too much. But employment and child care and education were big issues with us. So we were all used to working during the day or whatever, and all our meetings were at nighttime anyway. Everybody was working, so even those of us that didn't work, it wasn't until you put the kids to bed that you could go out to the meetings, so that was the thought.

Aceves

But then when she took over, I guess maybe because we were funded by the Department of Labor, that was a good avenue to go. But certainly there's no difference in opinion that women need good-paying jobs in order to provide for their families and for themselves, especially if you're a single mother and even part of the working poor. You always need two salaries, maybe two or three salaries. Usually the man and the woman have two jobs each in order to make it, because they are the working poor. They still are.

Espino

Do you recall that some of those other issues might have been--or was there a group that really advocated reproductive-rights issues like family planning? Because it seems like that was part of the agenda, but I don't know if it ever played out within your meetings or within the organization, birth control, abortion, right?

Aceves

I don't remember discussing that or even having a workshop on that. That was certainly part of what we all advocated, planned parenthood. You just didn't think of any other way, of any other means. Even a lot of Catholic people use birth control. I know that when I got married that the priest said that they believed in birth control, but it was a natural birth control. And I remember before you get married in the Catholic Church, at least when I got married, you have to go for some kind of education before the marriage, and I remember the priest, I remember this so well, because the priest said that you couldn't have sex during the time that you were fertile, and that was the natural kind of birth control that the church believed in. I don't remember in what context the priest said this, but he says, "Well, you know, priests don't have sex. We just have to pray harder." [laughs] And I remember going like that to Bill [Aceves], and he was so embarrassed because I started to giggle. But I remember that so clearly, but I remember that he said that the church believed in birth control, but a natural birth control, and during the time that you're fertile you abstain. I don't know if he used those words or anything, but, I mean, those are the words I use, but I know that was the message that he gave us. But there was no way; Bill didn't want any kids. He came from such a big family and they were so poor, he said, "Maybe one." We got three. [laughs]

Espino

Is that the method that you used, the natural method in the beginning?

Aceves

No, no.

Espino

So was it him who insisted on birth control?

Aceves

Yes. Yes, he used condoms, so yes, and then when he went to the service I was already pregnant when he came back. I went to the Planned Parenthood and it was right there at that old building on 3rd and Broadway, that beautiful building? Because he got wounded and they sent him to Japan, and he kept saying he was coming and he was coming, and by the time he came I had

forgotten how to use the condom [laughs] and got pregnant that same night. Well, I had been nursing my boy [Billy], and I didn't have any menstrual periods all during the time I nursed him till kind of toward the end, at the end I think, and I think it was the first time I had had a menstrual period.

Espino

Well, yes, because for women our reproductive health is so critical. It can influence everything, and that's why I'm just wondering if there was anybody in your recollection that was really strongly--and plus, it was part of what a lot of women were talking about during that period. Betty Freidan wrote the *Feminine Mystique* about motherhood, so I'm just curious if that was something that was part of that organizing component of the Comisión Feminil, educating women about their reproductive health.

Aceves

We might have had workshops on that, I don't recall, because we did. I remember, is her name Caroline Rodriguez? She teaches, I think, at UC Santa Cruz. I remember her having a workshop, but I don't remember if it was on that. But I remember there was a little disgruntled things. But most of the women that I knew and that came to our meetings or to our conferences or whatever, I don't think there was any question about birth control.

Espino

But as far as teaching the larger community, like if you saw a woman come in with five kids and struggling to make ends meet, would she be somebody that the Chicana Service Action Center or that the Comisión thought, "We need to educate her about family planning"? Or was that part of your philosophy or ideology, or was that just a separate, personal issue?

Aceves

No, no, it wasn't separate. It was something that we all believed very much. I don't just remember if we had workshops specifically on that. I know we all talked about it, but I don't remember, I don't recall. It sounds like something we would do, very definitely, but I don't recall it.

Espino

Did you have workshops on other, for the larger community of women that came in; what kind of other workshops did you have for them?

Aceves

Yes, we had workshops. We had meetings. We had them there at the International Institute. We had them at the library in Lincoln Heights. We had a lot of meetings there and discussed issues. I don't remember specifically what they were. They were women's issues, and like I say, some of these other women led the workshops and the discussions. Like it would be Yolanda Nava, it would be like Caroline [Rodriguez], it would be like Esperanza Archie. This other woman, I think she's a social worker, I mean, so there was, like I said, a core of women that were going to college or had gone to college, and they held very structured workshops.

Espino

So they had structured workshops with the women that would come in for service, or just with the Comisión membership?

Aceves

Both. Both. Now, the women that came to the Chicana Center, maybe a few we got to come into the--the ones that came, it was a referral agency, they didn't have time for anything over and above their child care and work, so it was mostly women--at the same time, there was this gal [Frances] Bojorquez, too. She was at Cal State L.A., and I believe she was the president of Cal State L.A., and they had started MECHA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán] over there, and she felt that the MECHA organization was very male-oriented, and they didn't allow the women to really participate. So she still remained the president of, I don't know if it was MECHA or the student-body president, and then she was very active. She was one of the core groups in Comisión. I can think of her last name right now, Bojorquez. She lived around here in Alhambra, and she also ran for councilwoman here in Alhambra. But she got a real good job someplace up north or in the State of Washington, but she came to the memorial service we had for Francisca Flores. I think that was the last time I saw her.

Espino

Okay. So I guess just to repeat one more time, the last time, how did you go about in the beginning that organizing component? Was it just talking to the women who came in, or was it going out in the neighborhoods door-to-door, or was it holding meetings? I mean, how would you try to organize around those other issues that didn't necessarily deal with employment?

Aceves

Well, the organizational part of it was that.[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, yes, both our phones were ringing, so I had to pause it for a second. But anyway, so you were saying about--

Aceves

How the people got to know about it? Mostly a lot of it was word of mouth. The people that came for the service, for referrals, I don't remember any of them becoming active in Comisión, but maybe we put out that newsletter and talked to people, but I think it was mostly word of mouth that we got the groups going, and then people would tell about other people. There was a lot of energy, and it was the right time to do it, and there were issues that women, especially young women that were maybe ten years younger than me, and they were getting educated in formal education in the colleges, and they were struggling with equality, and they wanted equality at the same time they wanted to have boyfriends, and the boyfriends weren't exactly ready for equality. So it was these young women that we seemed to be attracting that came and made such a big part of Comisión.

Espino

Do you think looking back that you were successful in that organizing component?

Aceves

Yes. Yes, I'd say that we were. Now, you realize that a lot of things were going on. I mean, there had been the organizing. Well, even before, like that--what did we have where [Rubén] Salazar was killed? The moratorium. The welfare-rights organization [Chicano Welfare Rights Organization] was very--I remember that meeting, and they were very vocal and they were very

organized already, the welfare rights. So there was already a lot of community organizing, a lot of community organizations, but I must say that we did attract a different group of women that were not active in these grassroots, like the welfare rights or the moratorium or that came around to Euclid Foundation. We started to attract all of these young college girls.

Espino

That's interesting.

Aceves

Yes. There were some of us that had not gone to college, but by and large most of them were, as I recall. I could go through my list.

Espino

Well, maybe we'll talk a little bit more about that, the women that you attracted and maybe why you think they were attracted to Comisión versus some of the other organizations that were out there. So I'm going to stop it now, okay? Thanks.[End of interview]

1.6. Session 6 (February 6, 2009)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino and today is February 6, [2009]. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, last time we talked a lot about Comisión Femenil [Mexicana], and it seems there's a lot more to talk about, the organization, so I just want to do some follow-up questions about certain elements of the organization or certain conflicts that might have arisen while you were working for the Chicana Service Action Center. And one of them is that there was a conflict between the board of Comisión and the staff that worked at the Chicana Service Action Center. Do you remember that there was a conflict, or can you explain it?

Aceves

Well, the Chicana Service Action Center had its board of directors. They were all Comisión members, but it was separate from Comisión. On the board was Gloria Molina, Yolanda Nava, Josie Valdez Banda, Evelyn [Velarde-Benson], and Francisca [Flores], and what's her name, the one that I told you moved up

north, Frances Bojorquez. I think that they were the six board members, the original six board members. Now, when I left they brought in some new board members, so I don't remember any conflict in terms of the program. I did sit at the board. I made my reports, and so did my assistant make my reports, and I can't think of her name. I can see her. I'll download in a while. I can see her.

Aceves

The only thing that happened was that Francisca would take off to San Diego. She had her family. And I had an opportunity to go to Spain, so I called all the board members and asked them--oh, Amelia Camacho was also on the board. So I asked them if it was okay if I took, I don't remember if it was one week or two weeks, and they all said, "Of course. You certainly deserve it," because I was working many, many hours. So when I came back, Francisca was very upset with me, and little by little she kind of, well, she did ace me out, because she gave me the cold shoulder and then I just started looking for a job. I couldn't leave the job, because I had just bought the house. I don't know if I had my two sons Paul and Patrick with me or not, but I had to make sure I had another job before I left that job. But aside from that, I don't know what other conflict there was.

Aceves

After I left, Francisca took over and she worked with my assistant. My assistant I remember telling me that she told Francisca, "Why don't you just run the Chicana Center?" and I think she did for a while, till she got the director that's a director now, and we'll download on her name, too.

Espino

What year was it when you left?

Aceves

It must have been about '71, '72. Yes, I bought the house while I was at the Chicana Center, yes, '71 or '72, and [Tom] Bradley had just won and had become mayor. I had worked on his campaign, and so it was the Reverend Antonio Hernández had been very instrumental in his campaign. He had gotten a job for one of the other women that were also active, so I told him,

"If you were able to get her a job, I'm certainly much more capable than she is."

Espino

It was actually '73, so then you probably left about '73?

Aceves

I guess I must have, because I didn't work that long. I don't even think I worked for a year at the Chicana Service Action Center.

Espino

Really? Okay.

Aceves

Yes. I don't even think that I completed the year. I'll eventually check all the dates and clarify them for you.

Espino

Okay. This conflict that I'm talking about took place in '75, so that's why you don't have a recollection, because it happened after you were gone.

Aceves

Maybe it was just with Comisión, it had nothing to do with the Chicana Center.

Espino

Apparently there was conflict between the vision or the autonomy of the Chicana Center and the board wanting to--this is what has been argued, so I'm just trying to see if you have any recollection about that, or to support or to disprove this argument, and that the board had its own vision of where it wanted the Chicana Service Action Center to go, and so there was a conflict between who was going to really decide, make the ultimate decisions. I don't know if that's also when they decided to incorporate Comisión?

Aceves

Yes, but the Comisión and the Chicana Center were separate, although the same people were active in both. But it was always because we did get funded from the very beginning, even if it was the \$50,000 that we initially got. It was

a separate entity, and like I say, well, Gloria became the first president of Comisión [Feminil] de Los Angeles, and this woman from up north was the president of Comisión Nacional, Anita Ramos, so I believe that she was the first president, and then Gloria was the second president of Comisión Nacional. Then that time that we had that meeting after we had the Chicana Service Action Center, it was Comisión de Los Angeles, which was the biggest chapter. But they were always separate, because Comisión Nacional didn't get any funding. We paid for everything. I don't remember if they became a 501(c)(3), I don't remember. Probably some of the other people would. I mean, I stayed active in Comisión and I went to all their meetings.

Aceves

I went on and worked for Bradley and then from there went to South El Monte for about four months, and then I got my job with the state, but I kept active all the time with Comisión and went to all their meetings. And Francisca was not always at those meetings. As a matter of fact, I'm trying to visualize the meetings that we had, and she wasn't always at those meetings.

Espino

Can you describe a little bit some of your activism after you stopped working at the Chicana Service, like what were your responsibilities and what role did you play in Comisión?

Aceves

Yes. Well, there was MAPA, the Mexican American Political Association. I was active in that. I'd have to think back of the places and things that we were--I'm drawing a blank right now, of the organizations. Then there were other things that came up. I was active in the Eastside Democratic Club. Those were before Comisión, but I remained active in them. I mean, still there were issues, especially with MAPA. I remember when Tony Bueno was running for assemblyman that they asked me if I would coordinate the ones that did--in those times we did the door-to-door campaigning, and I said no, I couldn't. I didn't have the time. I had the three small kids. And I remember Inid Fisher, who got married with Delfino Varela, she says, "Well, I'll help you." And actually she did most of the coordinating. She did all the signs, she did the plan where people would go out, and as people came to the meetings to go

out and do the campaigning, well, I was the one that would speak to them and tell them, "This is what we're going to do. You knock at the door." And I did some of that door-to-door, too.

Aceves

One of the funniest things that ever happened was when Guillermo Martínez-- we would pair off a man and a woman. That was the way it was done. And I remember him knocking at this door, and I'm waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He goes up to the door. This woman opens the door and she has a see-through negligee and she just hugs him. [laughs] And he didn't know what was happening. I started to laugh, and it seems that she was expecting her boyfriend. And I couldn't get back fast enough to the center to tell everybody what had happened. Guillermo since has passed away, but he was a real good person and he used to go to the [First] Unitarian Church, where I brought up my children. I remember the first time I saw him I said he looked just like Benitor Juarez. He was a real intellectual and I really learned a lot from him, and he also worked for Delfino Varela during the tax season, because he didn't want to make more money than he could live on, because he didn't want to pay taxes to the government. So he was a great person. Like I say, I learned a lot from him, and he was always active, too, in the church. He was very instrumental in getting me to go to the International Peace Conference in Vancouver, because the group that he belonged to there at the church, I can't think of the name right now, it was a little group that got together aside from the church, and they paid my way and where I stayed, because he wanted to develop me to speak.

Aceves

Actually also the church, I learned a lot at the church, because they used to call it the communist haven. I don't know if Stephen Fritchman was communist or not, but he certainly practiced what he preached. And I know a lot of people had said that Jesus Christ was the first communist. But I did bring up my children there, because I did want to find a church where people practiced what they preached, and I was very disenchanted with the Catholic people and also with the Protestant people at the boarding school that I met, the leaders. Now, a lot of the house mothers and the teachers were very dedicated to helping us, but like one example I'll tell you, it was just after Pearl

Harbor was bombed. They used to take us down to the Los Felix area to do our shopping on Saturdays, and the two house mothers--I was still in Whitson Hall, because I remember the two house mothers, Miss Jacob, no, not Miss Jacob, I forget, but Miss Edwards and the other one [Miss Jones], I can see her, they had taken us to the Los Felix area. I was standing there, and you know where they have the papers on the corners? And I saw there big in the news, "Remember Pearl Harbor." And I turned around. They were there, and I asked them, "What do they mean by remember Pearl Harbor?" And I remember one of them says, "Well, that's when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor and the war started." And I said, "Well, why didn't we turn the other cheek?" That's what they were teaching me, right? So then I began to lose confidence. I mean, they didn't practice what they preached.

Aceves

So when I came home from boarding school and I went back to going on Sundays to the Catholic church, I didn't like the sermons the priests said. As a matter of fact, the priests were on Beaudry in that Catholic church was a real good buddy of my brother, of Mike Acuña. But I mean, I didn't know that at the time, and we hadn't reunited, although I had seen him in high school. He was probably in the twelfth grade when I started in the tenth grade, and I had seen him crossing our path, but I didn't have the courage to tell him, "I'm your sister." I didn't say anything to anybody, so like I didn't like that. But I kept going. I liked the ritual. I love the Catholic, all the rituals, the Buddhist rituals, the Catholic, but since I was brought up in the Catholic church, I like high mass and I like that. So when I was going to bring up my children and I felt start giving them some religious education, I just found the First Unitarian Church.

Aceves

When I got there, Lorette Ginzler, who was the first director of the Co-Op Nursery at Ramona Gardens where I took my two older boys and my neighbor took her son, I found that she was in charge of the daycare center there. She says, "Well, when you were talking about it I wanted to tell you, but I didn't dare." Why she didn't I don't know. I guess she just felt she shouldn't influence and I should find my way, and I did. So I was very active in the church, and I was, as a matter of fact, part of the Sunday school program for the children all the way from, well, I guess it would be kindergarten all the way through, I

think they went through the ninth grade. I know that the one that got more benefit from that was my oldest son. My middle son--they were very intellectual, and he didn't enjoy it. And the youngest, he said, "I go to school every day. I don't want to go to school on Sundays."

Aceves

But if there were some of the programs, because it all depended on the parents what they wanted to do. There were some parents that would just take them out on field trips every Sunday, and they thought that that was education in itself. He [Patrick, my youngest son] liked that, but he didn't like sitting in a classroom and reading the stories or discussions or anything like that. So I remained active in the church until, I don't know. I don't remember at what point I stopped going to the church. Maybe when I started working and instead of going to the church I started going out with the children every Sunday and spending all day long with them, although we did that after we got out of church. I don't remember exactly when I stopped going to the church. It must have been a long time after, because I used to take my granddaughter ever Christmas Eve. They had a Christmas Eve program.

Aceves

Then I don't know what happened to the church, and there was a small group that remained there and they rented the big church, and I remember the last time I took my granddaughter to the Christmas service, and it wasn't orientated toward children. It was more of an intellectual--she was very upset about it, because a lot of the people that went there were atheists or agnostics, and they had these kinds of discussions and debates. So that was a big part of my life and a big part of my thinking, my development in life itself, my philosophy kind of gelling together, although I think from the very beginning, as far back as I could think, I thought my mission in this world was to leave it a better world than I found it. And now I often wonder. I might have been born to a better world than what I'll leave.

Espino

That's not your fault. [laughter] That's not for you not trying your hardest. So you talked a little bit about the influence of the church on your thinking, this Unitarian church and the Methodist house mothers, and then you mentioned

also Guillermo. Do you think he was like a mentor? Would you describe him like that?

Aceves

I never confided in him in terms of my feelings or my problems or anything. Most of the conversations with him were pretty intellectual and pretty political and philosophical, but since he worked during the tax period, and I worked for Del, what, four or five years, so we'd go out to lunch together and things, but I don't know that I would consider him a mentor, but he would fit into that description. But like I say, I always consider a mentor as somebody that you confide your feelings and your thoughts and all that, and I never did that. I had enough female friends that you did. I guess you just certainly aren't going to talk about sex with another man, you know what I mean? That's the way I was brought up, or that was my belief or where I picked it up. And a lot of people have asked me, "Where did you pick that up from?" I say, "I don't know. Maybe it was osmosis," things that you hear, like the conversations I would have with my cousin [Vicki Villagrana] that passed away December 2007. She was eight years older, and she remembered a lot more about my mother [Francisca Medrano] and my aunt [Regina Medrano Mendoza] than I did, and she would say, "How do you remember that?" Or even my aunt would say that. Well, with my aunt I would tell her, "Well, do you think I couldn't hear when all you ladies were talking?" And although she would send me away, I'd be sitting there next to them, so you picked up. And then I was very obedient. I was really taught to be seen and not heard, and I went along with that. Otherwise I would get punished. I would get spanked or scolded, and I wanted to avoid all of that.

Espino

Is there anybody else who you might have considered influential on you, if it wasn't him?

Aceves

Well, I think actually Connie [Pardo Muñoz]. We were brought up in boarding school together. Although when we were in boarding school she didn't appear to be smarter than me, but as we grew up, as adult women she was and she is much more of a critical thinker than I was or even that I am. At least we're not

as close, or we don't see each other as often as we used to when we came home from boarding school. But then she got married with Frank Muñoz, who under the G.I. Bill was able to go to law school, and he certainly was very political, and I believe that she learned a lot from him and their discussion. So I think that I did learn a lot from them.

Aceves

The other people--I'm trying to think. I know that Jerry [Campos Zapata] was not active in Comisión, but she was active in the community, Jerry Campos and now Zapata, although her first husband's name is Ledesma. So I met her at Heights Co-Op Nursery, and her younger son and my younger son became real, real good friends, and during all the civil rights she was very active. Who did she work for? What was that program? I don't know. They had these programs in the neighborhood, and she was very active in that. I lost my train--you asked me who was influential in my thinking.

Espino

You were talking about Connie and then--

Aceves

Yes. Francisca was also a real thought provoker, and all the women there were pretty thought provokers, I would say. They were very analytical. Now I would say they were very critical, but at the time I don't know that I associated critical thinking with analytical, but they were. I can't really say who really influenced me. Of course, like Jerry will say that Connie and I were inseparable and she never saw a friendship as close as we were, and we were. We were until I left the Chicana Center, and then I kind of went in another direction, although I was very active in Comisión, and she wasn't always active in all the organizations that I was. Frank started the Eastside Democratic Club, so he asked me to be one of the founders and I was. I think you need a certain amount of people to sign in so that you could be recognized by the larger Democratic organization. So he started that and I was active in that.

Aceves

And I remember one of the ladies, Bertha Marshall, who I believe I told you this, that when the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy group came into the area, she

was one of the ladies that was listed. A lot of the people lost their jobs. Bertha didn't, she did not. But one of the fellows that belonged to the Eastside Democratic Club came to the meeting and wanted to oust her because she was a communist, and we kind of ousted him. I remember he had a real estate business in City Terrace. I can see him. I know later on I ran into his daughter, but I didn't say anything.

Espino

So is it the Eastside Democratic Club, or Alhambra?

Aceves

No. The Alhambra Democratic Club right now is current, but there was an Alhambra Democratic Club that Frances Bojorquez started with this other young man, and I can't think of his name. When I worked on 6th and Grand, he was working in an office across the street. They started the Alhambra Democratic Club here and I went to that, but then I dropped out and then I heard about it, and it's a current Alhambra Democratic Club now. So they did start it, and she did run for councilwoman here in Alhambra and she didn't win. But I remember I was already living here. She just lived around the--well, like these all are cul de sacs. She lived around the corner and she ran there, and I worked on her campaign, although there was a little like, how would I say? Once I left the Chicana Center I was very hurt. I was very hurt not because they asked me to leave, but the way it was done, and I remember the same thing happened to Jerry when she was the director of the All Nations Community Center, and I said, "I know what you're feeling, not because they terminated you but the way they did it." I guess it's very hard for an employer to come and say, "We won't need your services anymore," unless you're in the business industry and it's all business and there's no emotional. But the community centers, we all consider each other friends.

Aceves

I know that there was a job that I had, and I don't remember what job it was, that I know the person came and told me that they would have to--that I should be looking for another job. I can't remember what, and I said, "Okay, fine." I didn't take it personally. Maybe they were running out of funds, I don't remember, but that wasn't how it was. So those people that were on the

board, like Frances Bojorquez and some of the other ones, I felt very hurt. And then Francisca brought in--she asked Connie to be on the board, and she asked Corrine [Pardo] to be on the board, and when they had, I don't know if it was a fundraiser or what they had, I was totally out and not even asked, not that I would have gone, but maybe that's why they knew, she's not going to come anyway. So there was that kind of tension or that kind of hurt that took me a long time to get over.

Espino

No one from the board approached you or talked to you about the situation? Because everybody must have known what was going on at the time.

Aceves

Yes. I think that when I came back from Spain, I think that there was some kind of a function, a fancy function, because I remember, and I think the only one that said anything was Amelia [Camacho Libart], that I got a little inkling that something was wrong.

Espino

Do you recall what that was?

Aceves

No, I don't. I just remember that I can see myself in the outfit that I had and me saying something, and her response was something negative that I couldn't quite understand. I think that Francisca was upset because I didn't get in touch with her, but I didn't know where to get in touch with her. I just knew she was in San Diego and if I got the approval of all the board it was okay. I know that Connie then after told me that what happened is that I did so much that they weren't able to handle all the work that I did, and my assistant wasn't able to handle all the work that I did. We were a referral agency, and what I did most of the time was all the women that came, when they first heard about the Chicana Center, we got a lot of publicity. We were on TV and the radio, and I think I said that Francisca then asked me why I wasn't asking anybody else. Well, I thought other people were working and this was my job, but man, if they wanted to be on TV that was fine with me. I had no problem.

Aceves

So a lot of women came and they came a lot, and I took their names down and everything, interviewed them, and that's what I did most of the time was interview them and find out what their needs were and if we could send them to referrals. I know I did a lot of referrals to Dionicio Morales', what is it, the Mexican American [Opportunities] Foundation. I did a lot of referrals there, and I remember kind of, what do you say, clashing with especially the men there, in terms of the women coming to our center before they went over there. I remember petty stuff, which at the time I was able to handle it, and I didn't take it personally. Maybe I was just used to all this machismo and I expected it and was able to handle it. I wasn't as feisty as Francisca was and Evelyn. Well, those two I remember the most. And then when we had put it out in the newsletter that we were going to have these meetings, young women showed up to the meetings, and this was separate. We were meeting for Comisión, and the Chicana Center was separate.

Aceves

But like I tell you that when Francisca came to me she said that she got this funding for the Chicana Center, and we could do what they said, that they needed a referral center, and we could organize the women. We could do both things, and we did both things.

Espino

So you met with Comisión Nacional and then Comisión Nacional de Los Angeles? Was it Comisión or Comisión de Los Angeles?

Aceves

It would be Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional was the big organization that was going to organize all of the women, and I told you that it was Comisión Mexicana Nacional and Francisca very definitely said that we were going to put in the Mexicana so people would remember their history, that the Southwest was once part of Mexico, or it was before 1848. So there was that, and then we were going to do all the little chapters, and the first chapter that we did was Comisión Femenil de Los Angeles, and that's the one that I belonged to.

Espino

So you wouldn't meet with the larger national organization? You just met with the local L.A.?

Aceves

Well, no, I met with both, because if I remember correctly we had a conference, a big conference once a year, and I think we only had it two years that I can recall, that we had it two years in Goleta. And Comisión Femenil de Los Angeles was local, and I believe we met every month. We met here a lot, here in this house a lot, and we were pretty structured in terms of the executive board and the general membership. Well, all of the women already had a lot of experience. Those that were in college were active in their organizations in the colleges, like the one that--is it Caroline Rodriguez? I think she's still at [UC] Santa Cruz University, and then Yolanda [Nava] came from UCLA. The last time I saw them was when Comisión de Los Angeles put their archives at UCLA. Now Comisión Nacional has their archives at UC Santa Barbara, and they went all out. The man that--I notice that this year he didn't send me a Christmas card. I mean, they're on the Internet. But that's where we put our--and that was due a great deal to Sandy Serrano Sewell. She kind of kept Nacional pretty pure if I may say, and she kept a lot of the papers, and the reason she did was because she had the Centro de los Niños down in the Westside. It was on 3rd and Loma, I believe. So she had the room to store that.

Aceves

So then there were other groups that came in even way after I left, and then I wasn't active anymore, but I went to all the meetings and all their big functions. Actually, this is where the book club started. Was it Ana Garcia Ortega or? I don't know which one is--I can't remember which is her maiden and which is her married name, because she uses both of them. So she got disenchanted with Comisión and she left, and soon after she started the book club. It's called Always on Sunday. So I met a lot of the younger women, because like I say, I went to all their functions. When I went to work for the state, soon after that I went to law school, so then I curtailed a lot of activities, as a matter of fact practically all of them, and worked and went to law school while I still had the youngest son here with me.

Aceves

The first law school I went to was--was it Southwest? It was in Culver City. No, it wasn't Southwest, that's a big one. I forget. Anyway, it was in Culver City and I was working for Bradley's office, and my boss, I'll think of her name, she was married to this big basketball player, very famous, but I'll think of her name. So she was going to this law school and she told me, "You've always said that you want to go to law school." I figured when I retire I'll go to law school. And she says, "Why don't you try getting in there?" So I went to that law school in Culver City and I was admitted, and I did pretty good. They had semesters, and I did pretty good the first semester, and I did pretty good the first year. But then after you have to take--they were accredited, so you had to take what they called the baby bar, and I missed it by a couple of points, and a lot of the people that missed it said they had to go talk to the dean and they practically had to beg to let them stay on. So I didn't want to go through that, and I said, "Well, it's too hard anyway."

Aceves

So I went back to work, and one of my co-workers had gone to law school, but he didn't want to be an attorney, because his father was an attorney, so he was working there. So he talked me into going to Glendale Law School, because they were trying to get in minorities. I think all that year that I went to Glendale I had bronchitis, all year long, and I didn't do too well there, so I was going to drop out of there. And so Connie by that time is going to People's College of Law [PCL], so she went and talked them into--well, of course, they had to interview me and all of this. But the day that I was supposed to be interviewed, I think just one person, two persons showed up, because I think what they thought about me, that I wasn't that political, I was a liberal. So anyway, it was through her manipulation that I got there, and I went through the last two or three years. Now, PCL is governed and it's run by the students, so you worked on the administrative end of it, and you worked on the day-to-day of it, too, the cleaning and this, so that was very interesting.

Aceves

And you were pretty much on your own there. So I took the bar several times and I didn't pass it. I think the best time that I did well was the first time. That's because my boss gave me off some time, and after that she wouldn't give me any time off. So I would add vacation time, and it wasn't enough. So I

think it was the nineties when we had a recession, and everybody in the state that had less than five years got a pink slip, so everybody started going looking for jobs, and they were finding them, a lot of them right there in the same state. They just went to different departments. So there was a lot of pressure on us, and at that point I said, "I have to make up my mind what I do. I mean, I can't do it. I can't work under this kind of pressure and then study for the bar." So I thought a lot about it and I said, well, maybe I could mortgage the house, and I don't know at what point I did mortgage it, because I still had the houses that my mother and I owned in City Terrace, and I had no problems borrowing money there. I mean, if I wanted the money to go to law school there was no problem. They loaned me the money.

Espino

I'm going to pause it just for a second.

Espino

Okay, we're back, and you were telling me a little bit about your experience with the People's College of Law. I wanted to just go back to something that you said about your interview. I guess you had an interview with some of the people there, and they didn't think you were political enough, and that they thought maybe you were a liberal. Could you elaborate on that and maybe define your political views at that time, how you viewed yourself and maybe some of the other ideologies that were out there? Because this was in the seventies, is that correct?

Aceves

Yes, yes. It would be in the late seventies, early--well, I graduated from People's College of Law in '81. But the one that started People's College of Law was--can't think of her first name right now, but her last name was Solomon, and I met her at the Unitarian Church. She started this very political college, and it got a lot of I guess all the people in the Left, because in the beginning, the first groups of people that came in with all this what I would consider now socialistic points of view, they came to the college. A lot of them were from back East, and they had all gone to college, and so a lot of them passed the bar and became attorneys. I remember working on this. A lot of them, once I was in the college, like I say, we administered and we did the daily chores that

needed to be done and any billing, so I remember calling a lot of these attorneys that owed the college money, and they were very prosperous and they were very good. But I guess once they became attorneys, a lot of them didn't stick to their values, or at least I didn't think so, if they weren't willing to pay what they owed the college. There were some that came and little by little paid, but as it got to be more, I guess, people that didn't have all the formal education, that they had a harder time. Well, the very bright ones passed the bar the first time. Like Chávez's mother [Marisela], the one that went to UCLA, the one that did my interview that you referred to--

Espino

Oh, Marisela Chávez? Her mother, Isabel Rodriguez.

Aceves

Yes, right. I think she passed the bar the first time, and there were a lot of them that did. But most of them eventually passed the bar, but there are some of us that kept going and going and didn't. I guess I wasn't--I mean, there was a group there when I started the PCL that they were very Marxist. I knew about Marxism through Guillermo and through Delfino, but for me to have studied Marxism I never did. I read some articles and I might have even read some books, but for me to be a scholar in Marxism, which is one of the things that I would like to do before my eyesight gets any worse--so I wasn't. I wouldn't have defined myself as a Marxist. I think that my socialism, it's rooted in my religion, because I really believed in Jesus' teachings, and they kind of go in with socialism. Everybody should share all the wealth and there should not be any poor, so that kind of philosophy has always been with me.

Aceves

Now, I do tend to develop friendships and relationships with people that we would define more to the Left. Now, right now that I'm active in the peace movement, they're all young people in their fifties, and some of them are very dedicated to their beliefs. Some of them are anarchists and some of them are socialist, and they have good discussions, and I listen to them and I learn, I learn from them. I think that my experience that I've had all my life and my observation of people helps me a lot in being analytical in what they're saying. Like right now there's a big discussion of should we change our emphasis from

war to economics? I subscribe to the Friends' Committee on National Legislation, and I subscribe to ACLU, so right now the ones that I'm thinking that appear to be more into my way of thinking are the Friends' Legislation organization, and I get their newsletter. Right now we're changing our posters that we're going to use on Fridays, and I don't think that there's any war over, and I don't think that the average person knows how many wars the U.S. is involved in, and I certainly don't agree with [Barack] Obama in saying that we have to go into Afghanistan.

Aceves

I mean, the poor people and the people are the ones that are the losers in all the wars, and the ones that gain from the war--of course, if you go to military school you have to have a war in order to fulfill your career. It only makes sense to me that generals would want wars, although there have been a couple of generals that have walked out, and certainly [Dwight D.] Eisenhower in his last speech said that if the military took over the United States or if the Pentagon, or something words to that effect, that if the Pentagon took over the United States that we were in big trouble. Well, I think that they have taken over. I think that this globalization--I mean, I think that I've evolved in terms of my political thinking, but I think my basics are still the same, that I still identify with the working poor and as long as there's poverty I think it's a shame that one-third of the world is hungry and homeless when we have more than enough materially that we should be able to share with them.

Aceves

I received a letter from--because I must be on every seniors address in their system, and I received one that blames the immigrants for all the problems that we're having, that they're overloading our health system, they're overloading our educational system, and I want to call Angela Zambrano who the last I heard she was the director of CHIRLA [Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles]. I want to answer them, and I want to bring it to the seniors' meeting, because there are some people at the seniors that I have gotten up and spoken because they do blame everything on the immigrants. And, of course, I think that the majority that they blame here in the Southwest would be the ones that come from Mexico, Central and South America, because they can walk over here, right? So it's just easier for

somebody that needs to earn money to come from Mexico, Central and South America than it is to cross the ocean and go through a lot more rigorous examination getting into the country. But there's a lot of people that I feel that are so shortsighted that they're willing to blame the poorest and the darkest. There's still a lot of color bias.

Aceves

And this is why even lately, when SEIU [Service Employee International Union] formed, they wanted to break away, and I was active in SEIU because that's part of the Civil Service Division of the state employees. They wanted to break away from the California State Employees Association [CSEA], because they weren't addressing all the issues of the poor working people. And, of course, CSEA does not want to--they say that the seniors, the retirees, they don't have a union to back them up in terms of going to the legislature, and now money talks unfortunately. So now everybody has incorporated. The retirees are incorporated, the colleges, the universities are incorporated, SEIU is incorporated. There's, I think, five of us, and we still pay dues to CSEA. So we're going to have the next governing council here at the Bonaventure in September and so we'll see where we're going from there.

Aceves

And since then, because when we did separate, when CSEA broke away into all these little groups that would be their interest groups, they told us, "Well, now we have to get together with all the other retirees." Ann Nelson belongs. She also was a state worker, but the Department of Rehab and the Children's Services Department belong to AFCSME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees]. So she belonged to AFCSME, so I started to go to their meetings, and they meet every other month at the church on Berendo and Wilshire. I can't think of the name right now. It's very active. And then I went to the RPEA, which is the Retired Public Employees Association, because I did, I joined up for the [California] Alliance of Retired Americans [CARA], so I just did what they told us to do.

Aceves

But then as a CSEA chapter 9, we also joined what they call CARA, the California Alliance for Retired Americans, so as a group, as a chapter we

belong to them. So all of that going back to telling you that I think that I will always identify myself with the working poor, not with the people that are starving or homeless, although I've known people. As a matter of fact, there was a woman, a young woman that used to go to the Unitarian Church, she had two little girls and she was going to school and really working her way through school and working, and I knew how frugally she lived. But the last time I went she invited me, she was having something. She had bought a home in Santa Monica, beautiful, one of those beautiful homes near the pier, the old part of Santa Monica. I haven't been there for years, and maybe that was the last time I went. So I saw a lot of people go from very working poor to middle class and having a good paying job and a job that they enjoyed doing, so I don't think that I--although I always went by Skid Row when I was little. I liked going through Skid Row, because there was such terrific music coming out of every bar there was, singers and musicians, so it was for me--of course, I didn't go by myself. We usually went through there, because I know my father liked going through there, too, so every opportunity where we had to go--like we had to go pick up my mother. She went to night school over here on Bunker Hill. What was the name of that school?

Aceves

Anyway, then after the Board of Education was there, now they're building another big real fancy school there. She went to school there, and so we went to pick her up. How she got there I don't remember, but we would walk over there and pick her up and walk back in that Central Junior High School. So we would walk all the way back there to 7th and Gladys.

Espino

What was she taking?

Aceves

English.

Espino

Did she ever learn?

Aceves

I think that she spoke English when I wasn't around, when she had to, but she depended on me all the time. And, of course, my father was a perfect bilingual person. As a matter of fact, everybody that was from the Southwest, they all seemed to be bilingual, at least by my criteria. Of course, I spoke English with a real thick accent, so people that had thick accents I understood them very well. Now I have a hard time.

Espino

You said something about, I mean, just going back a little bit to what you started talking about as far as being influential on you, you mentioned your work with the peace movement. I was wondering if you had any involvement or if you can talk a little bit about your feelings regarding Vietnam and the Chicano Moratorium, if you have any experiences that you might be able to share.

Aceves

Oh, yes. We marched against Vietnam for ten years. That's how long it took us. And I marched with Martin Luther King. There was a group that formed from South Central. I read in the paper where this lady that organized it had passed away years ago, so we went down there. Then there was this minister also that had a big church on, is it Olympic at Stanford? It was a big church when I was there, and it was a big church during the Civil Rights Movement. Yes, I was very antiwar. Here I had three sons, and I had seen all the people that had gone to the service. As a matter of fact, last week or the weeks go by so fast, I went to lunch with my two cousins [Nicke Villagrana Cardenas and Petra Villagrana Limon], and we were talking about the old neighborhood. They were brought up here in East L.A. And she [Petra] mentioned quite a number of people that she went to high school with that had been killed in the Second World War. Now, her husband [John Limon] didn't. He was a paratrooper and he came home, although his family moved to Mexico so that the sons wouldn't go to the war. But John [Limon] came back and joined the paratroopers, and he came out of it alive. But my cousin Petra [Villagrana Limon] was talking about so many, and they did. So many of the people during World War II, the ones that weren't drafted I guess joined, but I know that most of them were drafted.

Aceves

Like my mother-in-law [Martina Aceves], she had the seven sons [Miguel, Preciliano Jr., Eldefonso, Guillermo, Salvador, Enrique, Luis], and I know that the two oldest ones, or maybe the second and the third one, I know that they went into the service, so then that left my ex-husband [Willie] as the head of the household, and that's when he went to work. He dropped out of school and went to work, not that they didn't work from the time that they could hold a, what do you call those boxes that they polish shoes, a shoebox and sell papers, because all the kids in the neighborhood either did both or did one and brought money in, even if it was pennies. But they all did.

Aceves

Then during the war there was a scarcity of workers, and they would work at Cliftons, and they were all in junior high school. All the junior high school kids got jobs. I don't know if they had to lie about their age, or they just were--I know that I tried to get a working permit, and I know I lied about my age. And I know when I went to the employment offices, they said that they could get me a job as a waitress. Well, at the time I didn't want a job as a waitress. I wanted a job in an office. But I did go to work with my mother in the garment shop when I was about thirteen for a summer.

Espino

I think you were going to talk a little bit also about Vietnam. Did you participate in any of the moratoria meetings or organizational meetings, or did you attend the Chicano Moratorium?

Aceves

The Chicano Moratorium, by that time I was either on the board or I was working for Euclid Foundation. As a matter of fact, I think I was working, because I left Del's job, which was the Mexican American Immigration--what was the last thing that he called it? I don't know. Anyway, it's still there and his name is still there. I felt like dropping by and saying is the name there as an identification, or is he still living? So I left his job and I went to Washington, D.C., for three months for economic-development training. Then I came back and I had a job at TELACU, The East Los Angeles Community Union, which was sponsored by the United Auto Workers, the UAW, and Esteban Torres was a director there. So I got a job there and worked there for a few months, and

then I guess I went to work for Euclid Foundation, and that's when the moratorium was formed. Actually, if I remember correctly, it was Rosalio Muñoz who started it. At least I can see him. And the meetings that we had there were from all the community ,the welfare rights, what was that group that Montezuma [Esparza] belonged to?

Espino

Brown Berets.

Aceves

The Brown Berets. There was a group of young men that had been released from prison, and there was this other group that had La Raza Newspaper.

Espino

That was Sin Fronteras. Newspaper was put out by the Committee to Free Los Tres. Do you remember that organization at all?

Aceves

Vaguely. But the one that started La Raza was Joe [Razo]. He lives here in Alhambra. I ran into him the other day at the Yonemoto Clinic. Now, I know he's younger than I am, I don't know how much younger. So the auditorium would get packed--

Espino

Of the Euclid Foundation?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Where was this exactly?

Aceves

This was on Whittier and Euclid.

Espino

The Euclid Foundation had its own building?

Aceves

It was, yes, sponsored by the Presbyterian Church. Although when our program got funded by the Ford Foundation through the Southwest Council of La Raza, at the beginning it was the Southwest Council of La Raza, and later it became the National Council of La Raza. So I know that we were having, I don't remember if it was a retreat or a conference up in New Mexico, and I came home early and a lot of the people stayed over there, when I got a call from Joe, the one that was the editor, because they were using my phone as an information center when Dr. [Ernesto] Galarza told them that they shouldn't do that, that they should have another phone. I guess by that time we were being watched, and those people that were more into and knew more about it than some of us who were still a little naive.

Aceves

So Joe called and he said, "You tell everybody from--," it was the Southwest Council of La Raza. He knew we were up there, because he was real close to the Reverend Antonio Hernández, and he says, "You tell them to get down here, that Ruben Salazar has been killed at the moratorium." So I called the phone number I knew, and because it was up in the mountains we didn't have any phone number, but some of the people had stayed below in Albuquerque, so I had a phone number, and I remember calling him and telling him. So in the morning he went up and told them, and they all came. They all came down, which was the director of the Southwest Council de La Raza and just a lot of people came down, and we had a meeting at [Church of] All Nations, a big meeting. It was going very slowly, I don't know. I mean, I got impatient, and I got up and said something, and that kind of turned the mood over. And the director of the Southwest Council de La Raza always used to talk about it. That's why I remember it. I wasn't even aware that was what had happened.

Aceves

And the whole community was there, and that was a big organizational meeting. Rosalio Muñoz is a lot younger than I am, but he--what's the name of that young woman? She's a sister of one of the councilman that ran in the Los Angeles council. Well, anyway, I am on overload.

Espino

Yes, you have a lot going on right now, a lot. But so you did not attend the moratorium march itself?

Aceves

No, I didn't attend it. I heard all about it.

Espino

Why wouldn't you go, do you remember?

Aceves

Because I was at that meeting up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I had gone to give the report on the organizations that they had or the community centers that they had. Now, one of the other ones was a voter registration, the one that Willie Velásquez--I was at the meetings. He was one of the Texas representatives, and he was very good. There were a lot of people that were very good. Some of the other people--they all seemed to come from unions, and they were men. They were into power, and I guess that's how you got things done, if you had the power. But anyway, it was still the Southwest Council of La Raza. They all came down, and that's when we had that big meeting.

Aceves

But I know, like, for instance, the Reverend [Antonio Hernández] said that he had taken his two daughters to the moratorium and he had to get them out of there, because all the gas that they had thrown. I heard a lot, so much about it. And we met after at the park, at Salazar Park, so there was a lot of meetings, a lot of momentum that went on after that. The one from--was it [Rodolfo] Corky Gonzales that came from New Mexico? I get a little confused, because they were all part of the Southwest Council of La Raza, but some of them were certainly much more militant I would say than others, and there was always that little conflict.

Espino

Can you maybe elaborate a little bit about the different ideologies at the time? Like what would you define as militant? What kind of attitudes and beliefs?

Aceves

Well, for instance--and why does the name always escape, the ones that--

Espino

Oh, Brown Berets?

Aceves

The Brown Berets, yes. See, I guess there was a lot of Marxism and a lot of ideology on that, I guess mostly that I heard. I didn't hear so much about socialism as I heard about Marxism. Oh, Joe Razo was the one that I tell you, that just came to me. So the Brown Berets were infiltrated by the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department]. As a matter of fact, MAPA was also infiltrated by the LAPD. I guess there's always those powers that be that want the status quo, and we were fighting for more equal representation, more equal jobs, more equal housing, more equal education, and we wanted it now and fast, and being that all the powers that be had not done any of these things for us, the same very issues that we have now, but we were addressing them.

Aceves

One Christmas Eve they were having--Católicos Por La Raza was also another group of young men. At least as I remember them they were young men. And one Christmas Eve they were going to demonstrate against the church that they just had built--is it on Wilshire? And I'll think of the name there. We were all to go in, and I don't remember what we were going to do. So we all got there to the church. The services had already started. Midnight Mass had already started. So we all started to walk there. Before you get into the church there's like a big, large patio. And for some reason or another I started to hold back. I started to hold back and not walk as fast as the other people were walking, and when the first people opened the door they were--what is that? I had it on the tip of my tongue. They were all grazed with that stuff that hurts your eyes?

Espino

Tear gas or mace?

Aceves

It was something. I'm sure that Joe Razo would remember. Maybe I'll call him up and get some of that.

Espino

Or pepper spray or something?

Aceves

Yes, and I remember that this man, who we were real good buddies, he started to yell and scream, and I remember running and going to the gas station that was right next door and getting buckets of water and throwing it at people, that water. Then I remember going over there and Joe Razo, who's a little guy, he's not very tall and he's slender, they had him handcuffed in the back and somebody else. I don't know if it was Richard Martínez. They had about three young men and they were handcuffed, and the police were just hitting them and just hitting them on the back. There were the ex-cons that also were part of our organization, and I'm sitting at the bus stop and one of these ex-cons that were all in black, I looked up at him and I wondered why he wasn't--he was part of the group--why he wasn't with those other men. That's when I began to get a little--well, I questioned it in my mind, because there was--what was their name? Because my friend's, one of the leaders, I remember him at a meeting, Moe Garay, that he was one of the coordinators of those.

Aceves

There was a Pinto Group and then there was this other group that Moe Garay--but they were all ex-cons. I remember that we were at a meeting, and he got up all mad and he was leaving, and I think I told you I put my foot out and I said, "You're not leaving till we resolve this." After, the other fellows that were there, after the meeting they said, "You never should have done that. You really compromised us, if he would have done something to you." I said, "He wasn't going to do anything to me." As it happened, he was a real good friend of a good friend of mine, Grace Martínez. He was a brother of Grace Martínez, who has since passed away. Now, she was a little older than me, and he ended up being killed real Mafia style. He wrote me a letter, and I didn't know why he wrote me the letter or what he expected me to do with that letter, and I don't even know if I still have it. I may. It's not something that I would have

given to anybody, but once in a while I need to get rid of papers, so I don't know whether I kept it or not. I'll eventually find out whether I did or didn't.

Espino

Do you think he was in cahoots with the police department, Moe Garay?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

You think he was?

Aceves

Yes. Why would they have killed him Mafia style?

Espino

Well, I didn't understand. You mean the police? Oh, somebody you don't know--

Aceves

We don't know who did. I mean, Grace was the one that told me that when they found him in her part of town, and she lived in Sherman Oaks, I think, and she's the one that told me.

Espino

So you were part of the Católicos Por La Raza, or you went to this one demonstration but you weren't--

Aceves

No. I was then working for Euclid Foundation, and we facilitated them, everything. We coordinated them. Actually, we coordinated all the groups. The Reverend Antonio Hernández was--actually, you know, those people, I don't know if I could get a hold of them. They were a little older than me, and I remember one of the women was very for the Católicos Por La Raza. Maybe Joe Razo, I don't know, because they were part of the Presbyterian Church, and actually that church, once Tony, the reverend, left Cleland House and he went to be the director, then he got a job, because he was a chaplain. Then he

got a job as a chaplain--I had forgotten about that one. Our first little office was at part of the Presbyterian church on Wilshire and--I can see it. I don't know if the building is still there. There were a couple of ministers that were very pro-community, pro-people, and so--was his name Kohler? I don't know. His son was very active in the United Auto Workers, and I met his son. I don't know if he's still even around. But anyway, he let us have a little office where we did--that was our first office as, I guess at the time we were the Mexican American Community or something. I'll find it. And then we changed our name when the IRS came after us, we changed our name to Euclid Foundation.

Espino

Okay. I have one name here I don't know. It was called the Congress of Mexican American Unity. Do you recall that?

Aceves

Yes. That was the one that had all the organizations that I tell you that brought in the Brown Berets, the welfare rights, Católicos Por La Raza and the Pintos.

Espino

Part of the Euclid Foundation?

Aceves

Yes, yes. No, the Congress, the Congress of Mexican American Unity.

Espino

Was even separate from the Euclid Foundation?

Aceves

Well, the Euclid Foundation was assisting them in organizing. We were the paid staff.

Espino

Okay, I see.

Aceves

We were on staff. There were only three of us. There was Tony, Connie, and myself, oh, and she was our bookkeeper, [Nati] Mesa. So that's the only ones.

So Tony got a job with the Veterans Hospital and he got paid there so that we could have the rest of the money to pay the rest of us. I remember that we got some money for this young man that wanted to start a rubbish company. We got him money to get his truck, and they burned it up, the ones that had control. I'll think of their name. And I remember the one that had control-- they still have the rubbish around here--called me up, and I wouldn't back down in terms of him having competition, and that's when they burned that truck. I don't know how much thousands of money it had cost us.

Aceves

So then the Presbyterian Church also owned the Euclid Foundation, and we had our big meetings, community meetings there, too. But at one point the IRS came after us and said that we were doing political work and we weren't entitled to not paying taxes, because they pointed at the Brown Berets. And I said no, that we were not. And I remember Tony Bueno, who was an attorney, and the director of the Southwest Council of La Raza and myself met with the IRS, but I was the only one that stood up to them. So I told them, "No, that's not right. We were not funding them for anything political." We were paying the rent and we were paying their phone for some kind of community work. We were not doing it. And I was able to prove and convince them that we were not funding anything that would have to do with anything political. Now, I don't remember exactly what, but I know that we were paying for their phone and their rent. Oh, we were giving them money for their phone and their rent, and they had to give us a receipt, because Nati Mesa, she was a real strict bookkeeper. She had learned bookkeeping in Mexico. She was very, very good. I mean, she wanted a receipt for everything, and I mean, she kept those books good, and I know that we kept good books. She was also Dionicio Morales' bookkeeper for the Mexican American [Opportunity] Foundation [MAOF], and she came from there. I guess she met Tony [Hernandez] through Dionicio. So she came to work for us, and like I say, she was an excellent bookkeeper, and she wouldn't--I mean, when people came in with this and that, she wouldn't give them money until she got a receipt from them, and a lot of times we didn't have the money.

Aceves

So then a couple of the fellows from TELACU came to work for us, for Euclid Foundation, because one of them, Tony, I forget. His father was very active in the community, too. I can't think of his name. But for some reason or another, I don't know if they shut down that Department of Economic Development, because I know after Avila, who was a director, he passed the bar and he went and set up his own business, and then Claude Martínez became our director for the economic development. There was no money then, so all we would be able to do would be able to do the applications for the banking institution, but we didn't help them out in getting the loans, these people that came and wanted loans to start their businesses. This was at TELACU, where I worked when I came back from D.C. That was the job that they got for me. I don't remember exactly what happened that then we went to work for Euclid Foundation, because that department maybe had got defunded. I could ask Claude. I'm sure that he remembers.

Espino

Well, maybe we'll talk a little bit more about that next time. It sounds like your voice is getting a little raspy and you're looking tired, and I'm--okay. So thanks, Lilia. I'm curious about the Euclid Foundation and the Congress of Mexican American Unity and what their roles were, so we can talk about that next time.[End of interview]

1.7. Session 7 (February 13, 2009)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino and today is February 13, [2009], Friday the thirteenth, but we're going to have good luck today, not bad. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, the last few times that we talked you mentioned a really important organization that you worked for in the seventies, in 1970, but you couldn't remember the exact name of it, and we finally confirmed that it was the Congress of Mexican American Unity. I just wanted you to please tell me a little bit about how you got involved with that organization, who started it and possibly where--because you had mentioned that some of the funding came from the Ford Foundation, some of the funding sources, and then we'll go on from there.

Aceves

Okay. Well, I believe that it was started by the Southwest Council de La Raza. They came to different parts of the Southwest to start organizing the people, and one of the ones that was the mentor, or maybe he was one of the organizers also, was Dr. Ernesto Galarza. He knew the Reverend Antonio Hernández and so he got in touch with him and told him that they were trying to start this organization and start organizing the people. At the time, he was a reverend but he was director of Cleland House in East L.A., so he said yes. I don't know what happened, but he left the job with Clellan House and became the full-time director of the Congress of Mexican American Unity.

Aceves

Now, at the same time the UAW [United Auto Workers] had opened an organization called The East Los Angeles Community Union, TELACU, which I already forgot what it stood for, TELACU just sounds so great. And the person that was director of that organization was also a union member, and that was Esteban Torres, who not too long ago was a congressman. So there actually shouldn't have been two organizations in the same area. The Southwest Council de La Raza had gotten some funding from the Ford Foundation for three things, economic development, housing, and education. Those were the three issues that the fund was for. So TELACU was right here. The first building that they had, I believe it was on Pomona and Atlantic. No, that's where the economic development office was. The main office was nearby in East L.A., and then we were on Euclid and Whittier. That was where we started out with the offices, so they were very close, but we decided that we would work together and we could work together, and we did. We did work together. But you usually don't fund two programs so close together. Anyway, they didn't feel--it might have been duplicated. But there was enough work for us to do that you didn't duplicate, there was so much work to do. So the Congress of Mexican American Unity was the umbrella for all of these other organizations that we brought together, so that was how that started.

Espino

So you're saying that you had two organizations both funded by the Ford Foundation, both started with the help of the Southwest--

Aceves

At the time it was the Southwest Council de La Raza. Later on it became the National Council of La Raza, which is the one that exists now.

Espino

Both with the same goals of housing, economic development, and education.

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

But did you differ in any way from TELACU, the Congress?

Aceves

Well, TELACU, they did the same services, too, but they also did organizing, because they got money from UAW. UAW was the one that originally set up TELACU. I believe that that's what it was. So my understanding is that originally UAW was the one that set them up, and then they got funding from the Ford Foundation, and probably UAW was instrumental in that, too, because you did have some very socially conscious people at UAW at the time.

Espino

Do you recall that there were any type of--I know the War on Poverty was started earlier in '64, but some of the monies were still trickling down into the seventies from different economic opportunity programs. Do you know if there were any government funding sources that your organization, the Congress, used, or that TELACU used?

Aceves

I don't know about TELACU. Esteban, I just ran into him at Martin Ortiz's memorial service, so he's still around and there's a lot of people that are still around. So I don't know about the UAW. We didn't. The only source that we had was from Ford Foundation. Now, the Presbyterian Church, they funded Cleland House. That was a community center. But I don't believe that they ever funded us. Then there was a group of Presbyterians that also organized Raza, but they were a Presbyterian group, and they were very close to Tony [Reverend Antonio Hernández]. All of those people were very close to Tony, and he helped them with organizing that group, because that group also

believed that the church was not addressing the issues pertinent to the Mexican American community, although I don't know how many other community centers that they funded, that the Presbyterian Church funded.

Aceves

I believe that--I don't know if he would be living. I believe his last name was [Reverend] Kohler, and his son--now, Reverend Kohler was very close to Tony. They were very good friends, and his son was very active in UAW, so I'm assuming that he's probably close to his eighties now. Well, we all are.
[laughs]

Espino

Okay. So you're saying he might have some information?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

Okay. And then what role did you play in the Congress of Mexican American Unity? What were your responsibilities?

Aceves

Well, mostly like an organizer, like administrative. I contacted everybody. Now, we had Nati Mesa, who was the bookkeeper, I mean the accountant, and she had come from Dionicio Morales' organization as an accountant there, very competent. So she was our accountant and Connie Menard Cleland was also an assistant, and she had been Tony's secretary at Cleland House. So what we did, our first office was at Presbyterian offices on Wilshire, I forget what the cross street is, close to Vermont, but they're still there, I believe. That was our first little office that we had, and from there we tried to--well, economic development then, I remember that people would come and say that they wanted to start a business, and, well, of course TELACU, that's what they did. They did business packages, so we'd try and get them funding. The only thing that I remember that's real clear in my mind is the time that we funded this young man that wanted to start a rubbish company, and we gave him money to buy a rubbish truck. There was the rubbish company in the area that didn't want any competition, and I remember having a lengthy

conversation with them that got pretty belligerent, and later on that young man's truck was burnt. So you can't prove anything, but we suspected--and they're still around. I mean, they're not in this area, but I still see their trucks, so if I see them I'm going to write it down next time.

Aceves

So we funded the Brown Berets. We funded for the rent and the telephone, and they were out doing some kind of organizing also, but those are about the only things that I remember at this time. I don't know if I have notes yet that would make me remember some more.

Espino

Do you have any recollection of the process of people coming in to ask for money? Was it a verbal request? Like, for example, when the Brown Berets wanted funding from your organization was it through a written proposal or a verbal?

Aceves

Well, most of the people didn't know how to write proposals. Nobody taught us anything, so we helped them out. At the beginning I really don't remember. Now, I remember now with the Chicana Center, because by that time I needed to write a proposal, so we must have written proposals. I don't recall. I just recall the one for the Chicana Center, because the outline that Francisca [Flores] had, and I remember the young man that was our contact between the Department of Labor and the Chicana Center brought me a sample of a proposal, and I don't think I had ever written a formal proposal to a government agency. The Ford Foundation, maybe they doctored them up when they got the information. I have no idea. But I know that the one that we submitted to the Department of Labor for the Chicana Center for the first \$50,000 was one that I followed the outline of a sample that they gave me of some other organization.

Espino

So they were also trying to help you. Was this person, do you remember if he was Latino?

Aceves

Yes, yes.

Espino

He was the in-between between the government, the Department of Labor and your--

Aceves

He was the Department of Labor's employee or staff person.

Espino

So then just getting back to the Congress of Mexican American Unity, you said that it was an umbrella group for a lot of other--or that it funded other organizations?

Aceves

No, just people that came together. Like it didn't fund the welfare rights, and I don't know, maybe for the [Chicano] Moratorium, I guess Rosalio [Muñoz] would remember if there was any funding or if it was all volunteer. But let me go back. I did tell you that I served on the poverty board of directors--did I tell you that--in 1964 when it was first started.

Espino

Okay, no. You might have mentioned it, but I'm not sure that we were talking about the actual--so that was in 1964.

Aceves

Right. And I had just gotten divorced, and some of the people knew. They knew I wasn't working and so they needed to appoint somebody that represented the people in poverty. So what they did, I think I did tell you that they did a phone-in campaign to [Ernest E.] Debs' representative, who was active in the community, who was also Mexican American. I can't think of his name right now. So they had to appoint somebody for six months before there was an election, so I was on the board, and there was a representative of the city, a representative of the county, there were a couple of us. I don't know how many represented the poverty community. I think there were five of us on the board of directors that people came and submitted the proposals and all that. And I remember thinking, sitting there with all these representatives,

and I knew I was smarter than they were. [laughter] I mean, it did a lot for my self-confidence. Well, at least it didn't seem--now I can use these words, but at the time I would just say inside of myself, "Can't they think? I mean, where are they coming from?" which I knew that I was going to make it through college.

Aceves

So I had that experience there with people submitting proposals, and later on it was very interesting, because later on when they formed the Greater Los Angeles, GLACA it was, the Greater Los Angeles [Community Assn.], I forget what the other ones stand for, then I represented the city when I was working for [Tom] Bradley, so that was very interesting that when it first started I represented the poverty community, and when I was working for the city, which would have been, what, six years later, I was representing the city. And now I believe that they set up that organization so they figured, "Let the poor people fight over the money. They can do it and we don't have to have that headache." Now I think that, because we did. We were very conscientious, and, of course, the directors of the anti-poverty agency were. Who was the first one? He was a Mexican American, too. He was very, very good.

Aceves

And then later on when he left, oh, what's the name? A friend of mine also [Ralph Fertig].[Interruption]

Espino

Okay. You started to talk about your experience with the anti-poverty board, which we're going to find out the exact name of that later on. But I wanted to know if you could describe a little bit of the ethnic makeup of the board, where other people came from that weren't part of the government agencies, but who were part of maybe other community representatives like yourself?

Aceves

Yes. It was very well represented in spite of the--well, at the time it was mostly Mexican, Mexican American, and at the time it was black, it was an African American, and it was very well represented in that regard. So there were a lot of programs that were funded from them, and some were very good. So it was

like usual when there's not enough money and a lot of need, then there's a lot of interacting, a lot of inter-fighting, a lot of competition, and at times it got pretty rough. It got pretty rough. But a lot of good programs were started at the time. I know that Jerry [Ledesma] worked in one of them under the CSO, the Community Service Organization, which was one of the first organizations in the area also. So what was the name of that? There was a big one, an organization that had offices in all the areas, in all the low-income areas.

Espino

You mean including like South Central?

Aceves

Yes. See, it took in the county. It took in all of Los Angeles County, so all the areas were represented.

Espino

Do you think that would be like the youth--was it a government agency or a community agency?

Aceves

No, it was a government agency. It was funded by the anti-poverty funds, and those funds went into the governments, into the county and into the cities, I imagine into the states. I don't remember that. And then they were the ones that formed--well, here in Los Angeles. I don't know how they handled them in other parts of the country, but here in Los Angeles the city set up that city-county board of directors with community representatives, well, with representatives representing the poverty areas, which I represented I imagine it was East L.A. I don't remember who else. There were African Americans there also on the board. The only thing I don't remember if there were Asians. I don't remember that. I mean, I can see the African Americans because we stood together pretty close, but I don't remember how well the Asian community was represented. Now, I know that they got funds, but on the original board of directors. And like I say, later on I represented the city when I worked for Bradley, so they had represented--and I don't remember then either.

Aceves

Now, I remember Porfirio Miranda was on the board. He used to teach at UCLA. He was a professor at UCLA, and also he had been a Boy Scout in Reverend Tony Hernández--Tony was a Boy Scout master in the University of Chicago where he went, and that's where Porfirio Miranda was from. So when Tony found out that he was here at UCLA, he brought him on the board of Euclid Foundation and Porfirio and I became very good friends. And I know he was on the GLACA board, and he was a good friend of the director Ralph Fertig, and right now I can't think of his name, but I'll download because he's still an active attorney. As a matter of fact, I went to PCL [People's College of Law] with his son [David Fertig]. So to answer your question, yes, it was very well represented by especially the two ethnic groups in the city and the county, and I don't remember about the board, who sat on the board. But that information should be easy to get. But I do know that Asian communities did come and submitted proposals.

Espino

Do you remember any of those proposals? Any specifics of any proposals that were submitted in 1964?

Espino

Well, yes. I can't think of this. I know that one was CSO that submitted--I know Jerry worked in one of them. I'll download in a while some of the programs that were funded with anti-poverty funds.

Espino

Because that was separate than what you did later on with the Euclid Foundation. This was before the Euclid Foundation.

Aceves

Yes, this was before the Euclid Foundation. But I regress because that's where I had a little experience in proposals, and that's where I got a little experience now as I'm remembering.

Espino

Do you remember any issues that maybe you can talk a little bit about what issues people agreed on and worked together on, and then maybe some of

the issues that maybe like you said that were contentious with the different groups?

Aceves

Well, I don't think that there was any dispute on the need and the issues. I think we all agreed that housing, employment, which was economic development, and education were--health was also a big issue all the time. I think that the disputes came in dividing the money, where people felt that their programs needed to be funded, and there wasn't enough money that people could get funded that would take them out of the poverty or would really help the program. That was one of the things that I noticed right away, and the competition became, well, especially with GLACA or that organization, but even anyplace you went and you funded, there was always that competition, and there was not enough money for anybody to say, "Let's share this." You could talk about it and you could say, "This is what we should do," but when it came down to really acting on it, for that person that was submitting the proposal and that wanted that money for their program, that person couldn't have the vision of sharing, because there wasn't that much money. There really wasn't. It might appear like a lot of money, but for the needs of the community there wasn't.

Aceves

So that was where all the friction was, in the division of the money and the scarcity of the money, and maybe we were set up. Maybe these anti-poverty funds--I mean, Head Start started from that, and that was very successful for many years, and I know the people that went to work for Head Start. It was a successful program, and I think that it did a lot of good. I know that the Latin--there was this group in the San Fernando Valley, the Latin American--what was it? Irene Tovar might be about ten years younger than I am, because when we started the Mexican American Education Committee she was real young, a young woman. We were all married and had kids, and I don't know if she was still in school or in college. But I know that she was the director of the Head Start program when I was working for the state, and I remember she was having something at her home and I couldn't make it because I was studying for the bar or something, so this had to be in the eighties.

Aceves

But I know somebody called her up not too long ago and she had had an automobile accident, and she was at home, but she said as soon as she got better she wanted to get together. I don't know who called her up but they told me, and she was real excited to hear from that person. Because the San Fernando Valley always seemed to be kind of separate from East L.A. Well, actually, each community didn't go too much into another community, there was so much to do in the area, unless it was an organization like MAPA [Mexican American Political Association] or something that was bringing the whole state together or the whole nation together, like MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense Fund] and MAPA and eventually the National Council of La Raza, because it just began with the Southwest. But even in the areas that you got funded there was so much work there that you used up all your energy there. You didn't go into other areas.

Aceves

Oh, there was Model Cities [Program]. Yes, Model Cities was part of the anti-poverty program. They had meetings at Lincoln Heights, and I remember going to those a lot. I think they were pretty successful, too. I can't remember right now exactly, but I remember going to their meetings, because everybody that received poverty funds had to have community meetings to let the people know where the funds were going, and Model Cities was one of the ones that had--I know that one in Lincoln Heights. I don't know what other groups that they had.

Espino

Do you think that that's the organization you were talking about that had different offices throughout Los Angeles? Was it Model Cities?

Aceves

No, I'm thinking of this other one. But I'll download. And I know that Jerry worked in one of them under Tony Rios, who had one of the first ones.

Espino

The first Model Cities?

Aceves

No, no, the first one, this other organization that I'm telling you.

Espino

Okay, because he was also part of CSO, correct?

Aceves

Yes, yes, he was.

Espino

Tony Rios. Yes, it's interesting how everything is kind of linked together through individuals.

Aceves

Yes, we were. It was a large group. There was a lot of group activity, and we were a large group of people. As a matter of fact, yesterday when we were coming back from Moreno Valley, that's where the funeral was or the viewing of the body, my oldest son [Billy] was saying that he was talking to somebody and that he told them that he knew [Edward] Roybal, and he says, "Yeah, he was at my house. My mother used to have fundraisers and he was there, and I remember him." I remember having meetings at my house, and I guess I did have fundraisers. So I was very impressed, because he says, "I was little. I remember shaking his hand." I said, "Well, that was when he was running for councilman," and I know I was much more active when he ran for supervisor against [Ernest E.] Debs. And Debs won and we had a recount, because we felt that Roybal had won, and we couldn't afford the second counting, so Debs got there.

Aceves

But like I was telling Billy [Aceves], he was first a city councilman, but I don't think I was even married then, because I remember we used to go to the Carioca Restaurant, the one that's one 1st and Soto, that we used to hang around there.

Espino

With your girlfriends?

Aceves

Yes. And actually, CSO had a lot of young men that were active in CSO, so that's why we went to all the dances and all that. We weren't that politically aware at that time, although the young men were more so at that particular time and those particular young men that we hung around. What happened is that one of my friends that went to Belmont High School moved to Whittier and Euclid there. She lived on Euclid and there was, I don't know if it was a Y[MCA] or something right around the corner, and CSO was around--I mean, now it's a little hazy. But they had dances and we'd go. That's how we started coming over here from Belmont.

Espino

So getting back a little bit, just one last question about the anti-poverty board, and the question is, do you remember that you were concerned about women's issues being addressed, like you would be with MAPA later on in the seventies when Comisión [Femenil de Los Angeles] was organized? Do you remember thinking that women's needs aren't being examined here? I mean, you said something about health and education. Do you remember having that feeling or anybody bringing that up in the meetings?

Aceves

Well, it wasn't till the National Council of La Raza was formed that I was on staff and we had to go give reports I guess maybe once a year. They had their meetings once or twice a year at different parts of the country, wherever they had a program, and I remember thinking all the board members were males. And when they wanted to get rid of Porfirio [Miranda], because he gave them such a hard time--he was on the board of directors--so he made a motion that half of the board had to be female and somehow or other it passed, and so that's how I got on the board of the National Council of La Raza, and then they referred to me as a Porfirio Miranda female. [laughs] Because I would question everything.

Aceves

And then I remember we were having a council meeting in Mexico City. I didn't leave that hotel one day. I was in the hotel because we were trying to get the first president of the board, and that was Marta Sotomayor, and at the time she was already a professor at the University of Texas. But I had known

her when, originally I think it was from San Diego, and so, I mean, we did so much politicking that time, and we did get her and she was the first president, the first female president of the National Council of La Raza. It was always in the back of my mind, but it wasn't actually till--like, for instance, in that situation I don't know that we were--and I know that when MAPA started, Francisca and Grace Davis, and what was the other one? There were about four of the women that were very--Valverde [Evelyn] I thought about her name the other day. I mean, they were always pushing the women's issue, and like Connie [Pardo Muñoz] and I and the other ones, we were kind of in background. I didn't feel that assertive to do it, and we had the kids were little so I didn't want to get too much responsibility. And I kind of think we didn't feel that we were that capable either, or at least I didn't. So I always had somebody that was kind of promoting me and assisting me.

Espino

And sometimes the people that were promoting you, were they both male and female?

Aceves

Well, like Porfirio, he promoted me. I know when we were trying to get Tony Bueno as an assemblyman that Inid Fisher Varela, at the time she was--and when she wanted me to be the coordinator of the voter registration. She did all the work, I just kind of had the meetings, but she was another one. And Francisca [Flores] did, when she came and insisted that I be the director of the Chicana Center. And then when the people in the community unbeknownst to me promoted me to be appointed, when they put pressure on Debs', what do they call him? Anyway, his representative in the council. The supervisors had representatives in certain areas, because they cover such a large area. So there was always somebody, I feel that it was. They were promoting--I felt a lot of support in that respect. Once I was divorced then I think that I became much more assertive.

Espino

Okay. So that's interesting, because it seems like as you got older and had more experience, then certain issues became more important, more relevant to you. Do you think that's true?

Aceves

Oh, yes, definitely. And then there was the Feminist Movement. Oh, and in Mexico City [International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City, 1975], I met [Betty] Freidan and [Gloria] Steinem. I met them both. I remember with Betty Freidan at one of the sessions that I got into it. I don't remember what it was, but we kind of clashed a little bit on an issue--

Espino

Really.

Aceves

It was probably, like I say at the time, it was all Mexican American. I remember when I was working for the Department of Fair Employment and Housing, but I was already in the last three years of my job that people from Central and South America would come to file complaints, and invariably they'd make like remarks like [speaks Spanish], because when they were discriminated or told something derogatory they were referred to as Mexicans, and I'm sure they were proud of being Central and South Americans. But like I say, at the time everybody was Mexican American here. I mean, when I was little, the only one that I knew that wasn't from Mexico was this lady from Panama that used to sew in the neighborhood, but aside from that, everybody came from Mexico, at least in the area. It was the first generation. Well, we were second generation. And first-generation Japanese, so, yes, at the time it was, and I might have brought up an issue. I don't remember what it was. And I had read her book [The Feminine Mystique] already, so I don't know why I dared. I usually didn't, but she must have said something that really made me come up and bring it to her attention or something. I remember we had a little conflict. I don't remember what it is now.

Espino

But you had a verbal exchange that was tense. Was she speaking to a group?

Aceves

Yes. She and Gloria Steinem were speaking at the time. And outside of the conference there were a lot of groups that got together early in the morning and different, so you had to really make them. Like, for instance, I met, and I

think her name was Lilia, the first Russian astronaut [Valentina Vladimirovna Tereshkova]. I got up real early to go to that meeting. I don't know what time it was, but I know it was very early, and we were all going by bus, but I knew my way around Mexico City, because I had been there in 1960 for six weeks. So you had to go and get the bus, and it was a lot easier, because even then it was hard to get a taxi. So I remember I was very pleased to meet her. They were on the stage and we were in the auditorium, so there was no interchange in that respect.

Aceves

I also sat next to the wife of, what was the name of that president from Chile, [Salvador] Allende? Yes, I sat next to her [Hortensia Bussi de Allende] at one of the early workshops, and she invited me to a meeting, so to this day--at the time she was Irene Mendez. I mean, she's now Bañales. She invited me to this meeting in a different part of the city, and it was a socialist meeting, and Irene says that I told them all, "None of you speak English here. Just stick to Spanish." [laughs]

Espino

You went?

Aceves

Yes, I went. I was very impressed with her, very impressed with her and her story. I remember this particular one that I could almost see it. She says that they just threw the people in this room, one on top of the other, and I don't know how long they had them there. Well, you can imagine doing all their needs and without eating and without drinking anything. She went through a lot, and I was very, very impressed with her. And I remember this group of attorneys. They were very young and very vocal, very assertive, very what I would say middle class, upper middle class. And I remember this one attorney telling me, "No le hace que tan fregado está el hombre, la mujer va estar más fregada."

Espino

It was a woman attorney?

Aceves

Yes. And she gave a description of poor working farmers and how they were real bad off but the wife was worse off, so I learned a lot, although I've always been very conscious of the class in Mexico. I mean, I had never been exposed to--well, how can you if all your life you're with the working poor, and you feel that the discrimination against you is from Caucasians? You know that they think they're better than you. I mean, that was just a fact that you just knew. But I had never been exposed to class discrimination, and that was very interesting. It didn't bother me. It didn't bother me except the one time when I was working for Euclid Foundation, one of the board members presented a proposal to do some import and export, and so we went to Mexico City and we met with this man, and I was the speaker because I spoke the best Spanish of anybody. So his daughter came in and it looked like she had been playing tennis, because she was with her racquet or something, and since I was speaking she just butted in and she was very rude. She cut me off. Then somebody, I don't know who, got up and finished the presentation, and I remember after, both this other young man and Tony [Reverend Antonio Hernández] thanking me for being--how did they say--for having a lot of class and not responding back to her. So they saw that I got angry, but actually they moved in right away and that was good. And I understood exactly why she was doing it, but that's where I started to notice not only the race discrimination but the class discrimination.

Espino

So that's really interesting, because that's a whole other topic, that conference. How many days was this?

Aceves

Oh, it was I think about a week.

Espino

A whole week?

Aceves

Yes.[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, we were talking about how that was in 1975, that international--

Aceves

Yes, the International Women's [Year] Conference [in Mexico City, 1975]. Now, I didn't go to the first one. No, that was the first one. That was the only one I went to, and Comisión members went to the ones in, where was it, Sweden? I don't know. They brought back terrific films. They just did a great job of communicating where they went. Then twenty years later they formed a group and said, "Let's go to this one. It's twenty years later and it's in China." Well, I think I was the only one that ended up going. No, no, Gracia Molina de Pick had a workshop there and she went, and Connie Pardo Muñoz went, too. But I went with a Bahai group, I ended up going with a Bahai group, so that was also very interesting. But I think I did learn a lot more in the first one.

Aceves

I mean, they had so much information there. Like I learned one of the very interesting things for me that I picked up was that virginity was not an issue until the thirteenth century, when capitalism came in, and then the men wanted to make sure that their heirs inherited whatever they had gathered or they had acquired, and then the chastity belt came in and things. They had so much information, and I guess I was a faster reader in those days. [laughs] And then there were a lot of workshops on these issues, showing you historically how little by little they kept repressing and repressing the woman, but prior to that, I mean, if they were going to make a big issue of virginity then that was--I don't know. I'm saying that right now. I don't know that I thought about it then. But they had so much information, I mean, you learned so much.

Espino

At the Beijing conference?

Aceves

No, no, this is the Mexico City, yes, the very first one. It was amazing how many women arrived there and from all over the world, and the presentations. Like I say, I was so impressed with Allende. I was very impressed with the Russian astronaut. I still think that her name was Lilia; I kind of think it was. Just everything. They had trips to go outside, and one of the trips that they organized was to go to this prison, to this ideal prison. It was a whole-day trip, and there they have the women that are put in prison,

they could have their children with them up to the age of two years old. They had a wonderful daycare center for them, but they wouldn't come out and talk to us. The lady that was in charge of that trip explained that most of the women that got jail sentences were because they were accomplices to their partner. That was the main charge of the women, and that was an ideal [prison model]. The man that was in charge of it was a beautiful person, so it was an ideal prison. They only have six years. As he explained, "I only have six years to show that this model works," and he was working day and night according to--they had beautiful plays. The prisoners put on a beautiful play for us, and going from Mexico City to where the prison was we stopped at different places and they had plays there. Not the prisoners; the prisoners just had the play at the prison. But that was a wonderful experience. You just were like a dry sponge just taking it all in.

Espino

Did Comisión have a role to play in the organizing of that conference, or they just were attendees?

Aceves

There was a group that went. I know Anna Nieto Gomez went with that particular group. Connie went with that group, and I think that they might have been part of the Chicana [Service Action] Center, or they might have been--I don't remember, but I know that whole group went. I ended up going with who to that group? I don't remember. I know that I had my own place. I wasn't sharing the place with anybody that I knew, but I don't recall. I know Grace Martinez went, but I don't remember what group I went with. Now, with the China group I did know, but I don't remember in '75 who I went. I know that Grace Martinez went and I went--I don't recall at this moment.

Espino

So just getting back a little bit, I'm a little bit curious about Betty Freidan and your impressions of her book when you first read it, even before you met her at the conference. You said you had read her book. Why did you read that? Did somebody suggest it to you, or was it just something you heard about?

Aceves

I probably heard about--well, I'd been listening to KPFK since probably when I started to go to the Unitarian Church. Actually, when I started to work for Del, or was that before or after? Let me see. I guess Billy would remember. Maybe the sixties. I could check it out, when I started, because I started to go to the First Unitarian Church, because I think I told you that I wanted to bring up my children in a church that practiced what they preached. Although during the Civil Rights Movement I met a lot of nuns and priests that were practicing what they preached, and I think some of them even left the church for that particular reason. Most of them had degrees in social work to begin with, the ones that I recall.

Aceves

Anyway, so was I living in City Terrace, I think, when I met--what was her name? Because Del was openly a Communist Party card carrier. He didn't conceal it in any way. Dorothy Healy, and she was a good friend of his, and she had a program on KPFK and I started to listen to it then. So I don't know where I picked it up, I don't remember. But I remember reading her book and agreeing with everything that she said, just through my experience and observing other women and certainly observing the working poor women and how they got treated and where they worked, the laundry workers. I had firsthand experience, so I could see. But at that time the men were also treated pretty shabbily, pretty bad. Well, you figure it was the depression, and I can understand a lot of things now that at the time I was kind of curious, why were these men beating up their wives and their children? I mean, literally beating them up. When they didn't have any money, why did they use the money they had on getting drunk? These were questions that I thought of but didn't dare vocalize, but I can understand that now.

Aceves

And then probably being at Francis de Pauw, it probably made me without even acknowledging it, more toward a feminist point of view, although you can't verbalize it or put it in a category.

Espino

Well, maybe you can talk about the influence that the book itself had on you, or if it had any in shaping your future activism?

Aceves

No, no, I don't think so, no. That came way later, so when I met her in '75 I recognized who she was. I don't think I'd given her book away.

Espino

Well, it was first published in 1963, but you could have heard about it much later.

Aceves

Oh, okay, yes, because I did know who she was. I knew who she was and who Steinem was, very definitely. So I think that one of the things that I was challenging is that they were just promoting the Anglo woman's point of view, because Comisión, we had that issue with them, too.

Espino

Right. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Aceves

Well, yes. As a matter of fact, we went and spoke before, was it the county supervisors? No, they had a woman's--I don't know who had set it up, if the county set it up. I know Gloria would remember. Anyway, I think they had a woman's something that the county had, and I remember Gloria Molina, Yolanda Nava, somebody else and myself, we went and spoke on behalf of the Chicanas, that their issues were not being addressed. Well, by the time Comisión was organized, that was our issue, that the Feminist Movement was not addressing the issues of the Chicana, which were child care and employment. Especially one of the things was child care. We had to work. The women had to work, because there were so many single mothers they had to work, but they had to have good child care, which the Feminist Movement was not addressing that issue at all. The Co-Op Nurseries were for non-working mothers, and they certainly were very helpful, and a lot of the women that I went to that were in the Co-Op movement, they were going to school and most of them did get their degrees, I guess with the point of view that as soon as their children were old enough they would go to work.

Espino

They had a husband who was the primary breadwinner to rely on?

Aceves

Yes. And you had in our community a lot more single mothers, so I remember that was a big issue, that we needed good child care and good employment. Like I said, I think that Francisca became so, I don't want to say obsessed, but believed that that was the only way that we were going to get the women out of poverty was to get them good jobs, and there should be job training, good paying job training. It didn't have to be professionals, but something that they could do that would bring them a livable wage.

Espino

And the white-women's organizations that you encountered, they weren't stressing that?

Aceves

No, the Feminist Movement was not stressing the issues of the working poor.

Espino

Do you recall what were their primary issues? Kind of looking back, what stands out to you as some of their primary issues that you remember?

Aceves

Well, I don't remember when EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] started, or when the Fair Employment and Housing, which wasn't Fair Employment and Housing there, it was FEPC, Fair Employment Practices Commission, and when they started, I think they started in '64, the original state discrimination, it was mostly professional jobs that women were capable that were passed by, were not selected and they were better prepared. That helped the minorities in general, but I don't think that gender was an issue when the Fair Employment Practices Commission started. I think it was race--there were just four of them, probably race, national origin, ancestry, and color. I don't remember exactly. I mean, when I left the job there was already eleven and twelve and some other categories that you had to--including when you had a baby, and they had to at least allow you six weeks if the doctor said you needed six weeks, and your job had to be--they couldn't terminate you because you went out on maternity leave. I think that

was one of the last ones that went into law, but by that time it's the Fair Employment and Housing Act.

Aceves

So let me see. Yes, they weren't addressing that, and I think most of it was employment and child care that they weren't addressing. I know that we spoke, that we went to conferences that some of the feminist organizations had and challenged them on issues that they weren't addressing.

Espino

Did they respond to you in any way?

Aceves

Yes, there was a lot of discussion. There was discussion in terms of the issues, and I think that it always boiled down to, "Well, it's up to you to organize on those issues," if I recall.

Espino

Kind of putting it back in your court.

Aceves

Right, if I remember correctly.

Espino

You don't remember any heated debate or discussion with any of the white-women's movements or organizations?

Aceves

All the discussions were always very heated and very emotional. Yes. There was a lot of--I mean, the issues were all, and the discussions were all done with a lot of passion. Maybe passion is a better word. And whatever anybody brought up, it was because they really believed in it. They were working on that issue, and that's where their heart and their energy was. No, they were very lively meetings and conferences, and everything was done with a great deal of passionate energy.

Espino

And you don't recall any common ground that was ever reached? Or any consensus?

Aceves

Well, there must have been, there must have been. But I think that Comisión being the first Chicana Feminist Movement, I think that we did pretty much work on our own. We just did. I mean, there was common ground, but let's say that we were dealing with bread-and-butter issues, whereas the Feminist Movement was dealing with broader issues. Anyway, that's how it appeared to me, that you have to take care of--anyway, in this society you have to make a decent salary for you to be able to feed and clothe your children. Needless to say that to go into an educational--I mean, having East L.A. College was terrific. Roybal worked a lot on getting Cal State L.A. built where it is built. He really worked hard on that, and he felt that if we had a college in our area more people would go there, and it's true. I mean, even though at the time, I think when I went to East L.A. College, I think that the units were six dollars each, but still, if you took a full load that was a lot of money.

Aceves

I remember one of the jobs that I got when I was first divorced was at a carnival that came right there across the street from Stevens on Eastern and where the 5 Freeway is. They were there, and I went to work there as a cashier and that was very interesting. I don't remember how much they paid me, but I know that the man in charge was always very impressed, because my accounting was perfect. And I was going to East L.A. College. East L.A. College got me the job. I also did editing for Dr. [Helen Miller] Bailey. I don't know if you've heard of her. She was a teacher at East L.A. College and she wrote a book, and I don't remember how much she paid me for editing her book. It was not really editing, it was correcting it, actually.

Espino

Like proofreading?

Aceves

Yes. I mean, I liked that. She was always apologizing how little she paid me, but it was at the time before I really had to get a job. I tried as long as I could

not to work. Once I was divorced and the agreement was fifty dollars a week, then that didn't last too long. I had to go out and look for a job.

Espino

Well, I think we're going to stop here, and next time I'd like to maybe start off with a little discussion of the terminology and how it changed, just, for example, from Mexican American to Chicano and Chicana and how you felt about those changes, and what other changes you saw moving out of the sixties and into the seventies, because it seems like they were two different decades. A lot of things happened in the sixties, but then in the seventies even more changes occurred, with the civil rights. And we'll talk about that next time.

Aceves

All right.[End of interview]

1.8. Session 8 (February 26, 2009)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino, and today is February 26, 2009. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home.[Interruption]

Espino

This is the 26th and I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, we're up in the seventies now, but I just wanted to ask you about your feelings regarding the terminology that was used to describe Mexican people. It changed in the sixties and seventies and in some of your answers you've mentioned that, "Well, at that time it was Mexican." Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Aceves

Sure. I mean, it first started when we started MAPA, the Mexican American Political Association. They went round and round over that name, and I just remember that they finally decided on Mexican American. I don't know what other thing that they had come up with. Mexicans of American descent was one that they used to throw out a lot, and maybe I'll remember others, but that one I remember, Mexicans of American descent or Americans of Mexican

descent. They finally ended up with Mexican American Political Association. Then came the Chicano Movement and, of course, there was a real split. It was either age or class. I mean, people say that there's no class distinction in the United States, but there certainly is. As people are going up the ladder and becoming middle class, they constantly will say, "Well, if I made it they can make it." So there is, as far as my observations have been, especially in my generation or maybe the people that are two or three years older than me. They feel Chicana is for people that don't have education or that they were in a lower class.

Aceves

They might have been in a lower economic class, but then all the college kids started to adopt that Chicano. Actually, it was mostly Chicano at the time, and the college kids accepted it, and that's what they wanted to be identified as, was my observation. We had Frances Bojorquez, who was at the time--I think that she was either the president of Cal State or she was the president of MECHA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlán], most likely of Cal State, because I know she didn't approve of the way the MECHA young men treated their women. So it was very acceptable, and then we began to pick up and say that it was more political, that if you were a Chicano or a Chicana, that was your political name. I do believe that Gracia Molina de Pick did write an article on that. She taught at UC San Diego, and she wrote a lot of papers. So it became a political name or identification for those of us that were political.

Aceves

Now, there were a lot of organizations that weren't as political as we, like the Mexican Chamber of Commerce. I know that Raúl Chávez, who when I lived on 7th Street or on Gladys they lived downstairs and my mother and I lived upstairs, and his wife took care of me until she had a nervous breakdown, and then they moved out. But he was very active and he supported me on everything. If he saw that I would say something, he would support me, but I didn't do the same for him, because we were in totally different--he was much more conservative than me. But he was very, very fair, because I know that during that time he worked as a bondsman, and he put up a lot of bonds for a lot of young people that were getting thrown in jail during the civil rights. So there were contradictions.

Aceves

I mean, people could see the unfairness and everybody had suffered the blatant discrimination, the older you are, unless you're very protected. Like in my neighborhood I guess the first ten years of my life, well, you come across it much more so. But as you get into a middle-class neighborhood or more middle-class people, like when I went to Belmont High School there were a lot of my friends that their parents were, by the looks, the homes that they had in Silver Lake and in Echo Park, they were much more elaborate than the little three-room houses that some of us lived in. And sometimes they would say that their parents would say not to hang around with us, but they liked us and they did.

Aceves

But going to the time that Chicano and Chicana became very popular and a political statement, there were--I remember this group of women that I also joined. They asked me to join the Hispanic Women's Council, and I know Porfirio Miranda used to make a lot of fun of me. "Oh, now it's Hispanic." [laughs] Because it indicated that you had something to do with Spain and you didn't have something to do with Mexico or even the Southwest, which was what we were identifying ourselves with, which is the reason Francisca [Flores] said we had to be the Comisión Femenil Mexicana [Nacional]. That was so that we could identify that this used to be Mexico, the Southwest used to be Mexico. When a lot of young women started to join the group and they were Central or South Americans or even Caribbean or Puerto Riquenos or Cuban, they wanted that taken off. So I would go when they would tell me that they were going to discuss that, I would go to the meetings and explain and they would leave it on, but eventually somebody didn't notify me and they just took it out so that it would encompass those. But it wasn't in terms of encompassing a certain group of people, but to retaining our history. We were very strong that if you don't know your history, you're going to repeat the same mistakes.

Aceves

So there was a lot of controversy, a lot of controversy between our identification. As I tell you, the Mexican American was a big issue, and then Chicana and Chicano, I know a lot of people just felt that you were lower class

if you were a Chicana or Chicano. And the college kids, they thought that it was a political statement, and they also felt that the people that considered themselves Mexicans that were active were also much more conservative than the college kids wanted to be. Well, MECHA was one of the college organizations that was really out there, but they were learning. I mean, as far as I heard. I think I went to one meeting when Frances Bojorquez invited me to Cal State, but I was never there. But I heard about some of the young women that would say how sexist the young men were.

Espino

So then you witnessed different uses, or different identifications, because when you were a kid growing up, how would you refer to yourself?

Aceves

Mexican.

Espino

Just Mexican.

Aceves

Just Mexican. There was no such thing--I mean, you were a Mexican. And everybody spoke Spanish, even if some people spoke better Spanish than others did, but you still spoke Spanish. Everybody in the neighborhood spoke Spanish, the same as the Japanese. All the Japanese kids spoke Japanese.[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, Lilia, you were mentioning how when you were growing up it was just Mexican. I guess I wanted to ask you also, did you feel like you were not American? Or did calling yourself Mexican have anything to do with how you felt about yourself living in the United States?

Aceves

No. I always felt that I was from here. Well, they used to refer to us when we were little, it was los pochos, and the people from California. In fact, Dr. [Ernesto] Galarza wrote a book "El Pocho," and he writes about him coming from Mexico over here and hiding underneath the seats in the train. They did

used to call us pocho, especially if you made a grammatical error in Spanish. Then I remember my mother or somebody, an adult would say, [Spanish words] like, "Forgive her, she's from here. She's not educated." But I felt very-- I was probably a little more confident and assertive than the average kid on the block. However, I had a real, real complex of my mother and my father not being married, that. And where people used to take care of me, they used to talk about it. I guess they thought I wouldn't understand or I couldn't hear or something, so that was--and my mother didn't help, because she was very proud. She didn't care. She used to say, "At least I know what it is to be a mother, and all I need is one kid to know that." And because she was economically independent, I think that had a lot to do with it, because she helped all her family and her friends. I think I said before it was the depression. Everybody passed by and stayed at the house till they got settled or somebody got a job, or everybody in the family got a job, because they would take out the kids, especially the girls were out once they graduated from junior high, and put them to work.

Aceves

But, no, I felt--I remember this lady that did become my mother's comadre. They lived next door, and I remember Luz went to Mexico, and she left my mother in charge of the home and her daughter. Her daughter was pregnant and she was already married, and I remember she used to always say, "Lilia es más Mexicana que las Mexicanas," and she was born in Mexico. So that I was always very proud to be a Mexican. Like I said, I had what I felt very ashamed of, because the neighborhood and society made it so, like something was wrong with you if you were a bastard child.

Espino

So when did Mexican American become a terminology that you used?

Aceves

I think it was when MAPA was instituted, and they had all those arguments. I don't remember if they even had what race--I think they only had--I don't remember when you made applications, but I remember writing in "Mexican," because I didn't fit in any of--I don't remember if they had Caucasian or white. I know they had black, African American, and I always thought that they had

translated negros to black, which was okay, but I couldn't understand why they called them Negroes. I said, well, I guess when they came over they called them negros and they just thought that was their race, Negroes. [laughs] But I knew the difference. So when they started to call them black, that made more sense to me. And, of course, the insult was the name nigger.

Aceves

And then during the war the Japanese were very discriminated against, and even after, because I remember somebody bringing me a little handkerchief with the red sun, maybe it's the Japanese flag or something. And I put it in a cocktail table in front of the couch. It had a table and it had glass, and I thought it looked real pretty and I put it there, and I remember this fellow, that he was the son of my mother's friend. His name was Pepe; I guess his name was José. Anyway, we called him Pepe. He was a Marine and he had just come home from the service, and when he saw that he got real upset with me, and I didn't understand why he was upset. I thought it looked real pretty. And, of course, I never discriminated.

Aceves

I mean, he lived across the street from Belmont High School, so I'm not too sure exactly if that's the area where he was brought up, because there were a lot of Mexicans around Temple, but farther beyond that I don't remember that there were. There were Filipinos and Mexicans in that area, because that's where my father and my grandmother and my two sisters and brother lived, right there between Temple and what would be 2nd Street, I think, on Fremont.

Espino

So everybody basically, unless you were white, had a name associated to you. If you were African American, you were black. If you were Japanese, I know there were some racial slurs towards them.

Aceves

Yes, I think they called them Japs. Then there were the Filipinos on Temple Street. Chinatown was there, too. But in our area it was mostly Japanese. I

don't even remember any Chinese in the area. And they were all in the produce area there.

Espino

So then you're saying that it was around the time that MAPA was created in 1960 that Mexican Americans started to be more--it wasn't before that, with [Edward] Roybal's campaign?

Aceves

You know, I don't remember if there was something before. I know it was pretty established for me in my mind and my recollection that it became Mexican American then, but there was no doubt who we were wherever you went. People knew you were a Mexican. You didn't even have to say it. There's a difference, the people that were brought up in Boyle Heights with the Jewish community. I mean, it doesn't seem to be that far, right, from Boyle Heights to 7th Street, but it was a big difference, and there was a big difference with the people that were brought up in East L.A. here. Like my mother used to--Maravilla, that's what they used to call Belvedere, Maravilla, and my mother used to tease my aunt and my cousins by saying "the Mexican Beverly Hills." And our points of view were also very different. It appeared to me that my cousins and their friends were much more, how would I say, I guess brought up much more in a strict Mexican culture than those of us that were downtown. That's the way it appeared to me, although my oldest cousin Nicki Villagrana-Cardenas, who passed away in December 2007--it just seems like a year ago. She went to the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service], and that was really, for somebody from Belvedere to go into the WAVES, wow.

Aceves

But there was a difference from the people, even when they came, the people from Roosevelt [High School], some of the people from Roosevelt would come to Belmont, there was kind of like--like I say, we were more worldly, I would say. That was my impression. And the people from Belvedere were much more--their families were stricter. Even the people from Roosevelt, they were a little more open--what's the word? I guess worldly. I mean, we had more freedom.

Espino

Cosmopolitan?

Aceves

I guess that's the correct word, although I didn't know anybody in Belmont that went into the service, any females. I'm sure there were, but I didn't know any, none of the people I went with. And our parents certainly tried to keep us being strict, but it was just out there. There just seemed to be more freedom downtown.

Espino

What about your relationship with the immigrant community or recently arrived people from Mexico? Did you see a difference in the way that people who were considered *pochos* related to people who were considered nationals, Mexican nationals?

Aceves

When I was little?

Espino

Yes, or even as you grew up, because even today you still have people recently arriving from Mexico, and there's always a relationship. Sometimes it's one of camaraderie and sometimes it's one of tension.

Aceves

Right. No, when I was little, we were the second generation, but everybody in the neighborhood that was there had come from Mexico, except this lady that used to sew. She was from Panama. But in terms of the Mexicans; I mean, even the Japanese were first generation. The kids, we were all born here. But there was no distinction. If they just arrived, and there were a lot of people coming in from Texas. It was during the depression and a lot of people were coming in. I think everybody had some family friend that was coming in from Texas, from New Mexico, from Arizona, so there was no distinction.[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, so you were saying there's no distinction.

Aceves

Yes, not that I could see or observe. I remember in high school, I don't know if I told you this story, but there was this--well, we were in high school. She had to be between fifteen and seventeen, right. And she said she was Spanish, and, of course, I resented that, because I felt anybody that said they were Spanish, that was because they were putting down the Mexicans, and so I was ready to beat her up, when I found out that she really was from Spain. She had come from Spain into New York, and then her family had come to California. But that's about the only one that I remember that was from Europe, as far as I knew. Everybody else was from the Southwest or from Mexico, and like I say, very few from Central and South America, just this one lady that I remember from Panama. But so there was no distinction there in terms of being Mexican.

Aceves

There was more when I went to high school. We were only 20 percent of us were Mexicans at Belmont High School during the time, and a lot of the young women would go around with a Mexican student or a co-student, and their parents would object to it. Of course, that was, too, also during the Pachuco era. Well, it started pretty early, and it was kind of already ending by that time. But still we had that bad reputation that the Mexicans were Pachucos and Pachucas. That was also an insult. If our parents wanted to put us down, that's what--"Ya andas como las pachucas, ya ni hablas bien." So it was that, although economically we appeared to be all the same, but they did feel that the Pachucos were gang-related, so that was growing up.

Espino

So you don't remember your neighborhood or your community being divided by the recent immigrants, the native born? It was more between like the Pachuco youth and the other youth who didn't dress that style?

Aceves

Well, but even then, I mean, see, I was in boarding school all during the Pachuco era, so I didn't get it firsthand. I know that a lot of the boys would hide from their parents to wear the zoot--not, they didn't have money for the

suit, but the pants. I even remember this Chávez family that took care of me, later on, even when--was I in boarding school? I don't remember. But they were living on Dalton and Jefferson, and I remember Salvadore, when he would see his father coming he would squat down so his father wouldn't see his pants--and they were out there in that area. But that was a style and everybody wanted to wear it. There were a lot of good jokes about it. I remember one, that this fellow comes up and he has a zoot suit, but he has a regular suit, and one of the persons says, "Gee, what a long ," in Spanish, "what a short coat you have." And he says, "It's not a coat, it's a jacket." And he says, "Oh, what a long jacket you have." And there were just a lot of jokes that we were ridiculous in terms of--I mean, I had no problems wearing a pompadour, because I have so much hair I didn't even have to put the rats on it. Everybody did.

Espino

What were they called?

Aceves

Pompadours?

Espino

No, the thing that you would put inside.

Aceves

Rats.

Espino

Rats? R-a-t?

Aceves

Yes. They looked like hair but they weren't hair, probably mesh or something, so I never had to wear them. I would see the other girls wearing them. But in boarding school when we went to the Los Feliz Methodist Church, the little girls went to the Baptist church right around the corner on Fountain and Kenmore, I think, and we walked to it. And later on when we became a little older, then we went to the Los Feliz Methodist Church, which was on Los Feliz and probably Sunset. I think it's still there, I don't know. And I remember Miss

Straley telling Aldrige, the superintendent, that she wasn't going to go back there anymore because she felt that they discriminated against us. And I remember one time being, I don't know if it was a prayer meeting or what kind of meeting we were having, and there were some boys looking through the windows and we were giggling and all of that, and I guess Aldrige got exasperated and she said some derogatory remarks. Well, that quieted us.

Espino

Do you remember what she said?

Aceves

It was something about Mexicans, I don't remember exactly. It was the one and only time I ever heard her say anything like that, but I guess she felt so insulted she wanted to insult--it probably was a prayer meeting. Otherwise I don't remember. I can see us there. But in a way, then in going to high school I remember I had these great friends, the Lucero brothers, and they're very, very dark. I remember when we would all start planning to go to the Palladium, and somebody would invariably say, "Don't invite the Lucero brothers, because we won't be able to get in." And I would get upset. I really liked them, and they were my good friends. As a matter of fact, when I used to go visit them, the father used to call me la Mexicana, because I spoke such good Spanish as compared to the rest of the kids.

Espino

Oh, that's interesting. Did that offend you, or were you proud?

Aceves

No, yes. But it was there and some people accepted it and some of us didn't. Of course, the ones that didn't accept it were the ones that were a lot lighter and hueros and like that. They also got discriminated against, but I guess they felt that--I really don't know, in terms of where they were coming from or what. Maybe it was a pecking order, I don't remember. But like I say, the only thing that I was--I was very proud of being a Mexican. I never wanted to be a boy. I was very proud of being a female. The only thing I wasn't proud of was that my parents weren't married. That was the only thing. Anybody could make a crack like that, and I would go into a little shell.

Espino

That was a painful part of your upbringing.

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

So then as you get into the 1960s and there's all this intellectual discussion about those terms, you said that the Mexican American Political Association [MAPA] went round and round.

Aceves

Yes. I remember it was a big discussion, I mean hot.

Espino

Heated?

Aceves

Yes. I don't know if I was at the actual meetings. I mean, I didn't go to the committee meetings, I went to the regular meetings, general membership meetings. The one I was thinking of, he seemed a lot younger, and I don't know if he still teaches at Cal State L.A., I think it was Lou Negrete. He was one of the younger people that was one of the MAPA organizers. He was from San Francisco, along with Bert Corona. Oh, speaking of that, I'm glad I remembered. I went to a memorial service of Stephen Hollopeter last Saturday, and I forgot her name, [Soledad] "Chole" [Alatorre], who was the organizer--

Espino

Alatorre?

Aceves

Is it Alatorre, with Bert Corona?

Espino

Soledad? I was looking for her. You saw her?

Aceves

Yes, she was there. Yes, she was there at the memorial service and she spoke on behalf of--because Stephen Hollopeter was one of the La Casa. So she still has Hermanidad.

Espino

Can I just stop it for a second?[Interruption]

Aceves

And how we felt.

Espino

Right, about MAPA, the use of the name, the use of Mexican American over something else. Do you remember any names or any discussions or maybe opinions of different people, prominent people that discussed the Mexican American, the terminology?

Aceves

No. Once Mexican American was established, it appeared to be pretty accepted. However, there was always a group that called themselves Hispanic.

Espino

Even within MAPA?

Aceves

No, not within MAPA, outside of MAPA, like the Mexican Chamber of Commerce and the people that came from that area. There's--what is her name? I met her through the Hispanic Women's Council, but she was in the Mexican Chamber of Commerce. She's either my age or a little older, and I run into her, because every year this group of women have the Mexican Woman of the Year and I see her there whenever I go. I didn't go this past Christmas, but I went the year before and I try to go every year, because there's a group of people that I knew, and that's the only time that I see them, like her. And she belonged with that group. Also the one that started the Hispanic Women's Council was Cecilia Sandoval, and she's about my age, maybe a little--if she's younger, not much younger. So there was this group that the parents were

much more, how would I say, they were business people. They were working people, but as we would say, they were successful. They made enough money to buy a home and to have all the things that are demanded of us actually, so those luxuries that we're brainwashed to want. So if you went into any of these homes with nice furniture--although everybody, even the working poor had their homes very nice. At least they seemed nice to me in terms of the furniture and how they had them fixed.

Aceves

But you could see the difference when you went into these homes, like these friends that I tell you that lived in Silver Lake and in Echo Park, their homes were a lot different than the little homes that we had, that most of the people I was very close to had. So like I say, in my neighborhood I didn't see any distinction between the people that were coming in. Francis de Pauw, during the war when they couldn't find enough missionaries to be teachers, the year I left de Pauw that's how I was able to talk my mother into letting me come home, they were sending the girls to public school. So then a lot of their students began to come from Mexicali and from Mexico, and because they were going to public school that was their home, but the schooling was in public school. So I would go back, I went back while some of the teachers, while the school was still there, and then I kept in touch with a lot of the teachers. There was a missionary home here in Pasadena and then they moved to La Jolla, a beautiful home over there, and that was the last time I saw them. And for many years some of the older of us kept us together, and we still talk about it.

Aceves

And even in boarding school we all called ourselves Mexicans. I don't remember calling ourselves Mexican American. That was till I was a grownup. And then with the civil rights and all that there was a lot of fast changes. Well, I was always with the working poor. I mean, that was my roots and that was who I identified myself, who I still identify with, so there was no distinction there. And, of course, we all wanted a nice home and a nice car and to be able to finish school and things of that type.

Espino

Okay. So then during the sixties it was primarily Mexican American, and then the term Chicano and Chicana emerged.

Aceves

Right.

Espino

Do you think that it was difficult for Comisión to--why didn't Comisión call themselves Comisión Chicana or Comisión Femenil Chicana instead of Mexicana? Was that a discussion, whether either or?

Aceves

No, no. I mean, Francisca [Flores] presented us with that proposal and we all agreed on it. The Chicano movement had not really gotten hold yet. It took over, or it might have been going simultaneously, but we weren't aware of it. Now, I met Francisca through MAPA, through Del [Delfino Varela] and through all of these intellectuals, so to speak, and also that were very politically to the left, so there was a whole group. There were a lot of groups. What was the name of that group? There's this man, I'm friends with his kids, Terrazas Mauricio, but he's in his first stage of Alzheimer's and still looks real good, but they belonged to all of these Left groups that were very mixed. They had all kinds of ethnic groups. I went to some of their meetings or some of their parties, because Del had them at his home, and I met a lot of the people. Then when I went to the Unitarian church, the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles, there were a lot of people, a mixed group there.

Aceves

But there were a lot of Mexicans in those groups, like Guillermo Martínez was very much a part of that group, Delfino, and they considered themselves Marxists, and they had discussions that were very interesting. I learned a lot from them. But in our particular group, going back to Comisión, that's what Francisca presented, and Chicanos and Chicanas, either they were still identified with the college group or they had not really become--they hadn't made their mark yet.

Espino

So then when the Chicana Service Action Center became an idea, they had already made their mark? Is that what you're saying, that they'd made their mark, because that's why it was called not the Mexican Women's Service Center, it was Chicana? Was there discussion about that, do you remember?

Aceves

No, I don't remember who--I remember that the reason, when you said CSAC, if you said it out loud it was supposed to be something, "si es asi," or something like that. About the only one that I think that might remember would be Frances Bojorquez. Now this, what's her name, the one that lives in the Bay Area, Josie, she was also very active, and Francisca asked her to be on the first board of the Chicana Center. I haven't seen her. I understand that she used to go to some of the Comisión meetings till not too long ago, so I haven't kept up with Comisión. I mean my book club, they're all an offshoot of Comisión, but they're all younger women.

Espino

So you don't remember discussion between the women regarding the name of the service center that was going to open up?

Aceves

No. No, I don't. Actually, the Chicana Center was supposed to be a front to organize. We were going to do whatever the proposal said we were going to do. We only had a \$50,000 grant, and we were going to be a referral service, but it would give us an opportunity to organize the women, and does.[Interruption]

Espino

Okay, getting back to Comisión and the Chicana Service Action Center.

Aceves

Well, see, Francisca, my understanding is that she got tuberculosis at a very young age and spent a lot of time in a sanitarium. In those days they would send them out to sanitariums. She did a lot of reading; I think she had that kind of time. I don't recall her ever working. I think that she was probably on some kind of disability, and so she was a writer. I remember her coming, it was her, Del, Gonzalo Molina who else was it? There's about five of them, Jose

Castorena, about five that she worked with in terms of Regeneración. First she worked with Delfino with the Carta Editorial. They had that newsletter that went out, and she would come to the office and they would work on that. Then they expanded and they got Regeneración, and then they would come to my house and have the meetings there. So she was a reader and she had the time also, because everybody else was working, if that's my right recollection.

Aceves

Now, her nephew is writing or wrote her biography, and I know that Sandy Serrano Sewell kept in touch with him, because we went to the--does he teach at UCLA or Cal State Santa Barbara? I think he's a professor in one of the universities, and they were very close. Francisca never had children. So when I went to Francisca's services he was there, and I think he and Sandy Serrano Sewell had a friendship, developed a friendship, and he was going to write her biography. So my recollection is that she had the time and she had the brains, so she would come up with these proposals, and there wasn't anything contradictory about them. That's the direction we were going, so it wasn't exactly like we went along with her, we agreed with her.

Aceves

Now, the Chicana Center, it was the second meeting that we had off the [Mexican American] Issues Conference. The first meeting was organizing Comisión, and then the second one was when the people--and I can remember Margarita, she's passed away, but she was a social worker, and she and Francisca were real good friends, and Jerry [Ledesma], she was a real good friend of hers, too. So I remember Margarita saying, "What we need is a center where the women can go and we can direct them where to go," and that's when the idea of the Chicana Service Action Center came up. But like I said, she had these proposals. She had thought them out and there was nothing to debate. We all agreed, and if there was any disagreement--I remember at that second meeting, I believe it was the second meeting, I mean, we could look it up if it was the first or the second meeting, also I had worked with Delfino with immigration, and Ramona (Romana) Banuelos was appointed, she was being appointed treasurer of the U.S., some big cabinet position. She had--what was the name of this Mexican factory?

Aceves

Anyway, a lot of the people that worked for that factory came to our office to immigrate, and also a friend of mine, Manuel Ocampo, was the director of Local, I believe it was 660 of the Teamsters Union, and he tried to organize that factory. It was some kind of food factory. And the women complained to him and said how abusive the workers were and how a lot of times they had to do sexual favors in order to keep their jobs. There was just horrible--so it was no problem starting to organize them. But then one by one fell by the side, and the women refused to cooperate or testify. You know, if you're threatened with your job and you don't have any skills, you're afraid that--and in those days jobs were not as scarce as they are now. But still you were afraid. Maybe they were not documented, I don't know.

Aceves

Anyway, so I knew that they had to have a letter of employment in order to be able to immigrate. That was one of the conditions. And according to the people that I coordinated their applications for them, they would say some awful things, that they either had to pay for the letter or they had to work or give some kind of favor or something, so when they were going to support her at the workshop, I spoke totally against her, and I said all of these things. I didn't know that people had recorders. Then I was going to go meet with Dr. [Ernesto] Galarza, but I managed to get up there, because it was a business trip and I was going to stop by at Dr. Galarza's and talk with him. So these women say, "No, we're not going to support her because we know that she's not a people's--she doesn't represent us," and all the things, so it was after that there were a couple of people that came to the Chicana Center and really told me off royally, telling me that it was hard enough getting Mexicans into positions, and this was a great position and a great opportunity and I was being petty and all of these things. So I just sat there and listened to them, and then I would tell them this was my experience, and I don't care if they're Mexicans or a woman, if they don't represent the people, I'm not going to support them. So needless to say, I was on a lot of people's s-list because of that.

Aceves

Because even when MAPA was formed, that was also the push. "Let's get Mexicans in there, and once they're in there we'll make them represent the

people." Well, that's not what happened. I mean, I think I told you when I went to Washington, D.C., and I went to visit [Edward] Roybal, he said that the seniority system was so entrenched that he could not get any of his bills done, that he went over there thinking that he was going to be able to do all these wonderful things for the community, but if he didn't go along, as distasteful as it was, with some of the bills, he would never get any bills through. But I didn't know that till way after. But it was around those days.

Aceves

But when MAPA was formed, they were saying that it was to get Mexicans in the system. It kind of made sense. But when I was dealing and I knew them, then it didn't make sense. So if I knew a lot of things like this, and maybe--she was also the treasurer of the first Mexican Bank [Pan-American National Bank] that we had in East L.A. I forget what the name of it was. I don't know if it's still there or not. It was on 1st Street. And if it was her--but I mean, she was the one--it was her factory. Whether her son or her sons managed it or had to do with that, that I didn't know, but it was her name that appeared in all the papers, so that was what I knew. I don't know if she's still living or not.

Espino

That was an issue that came up in the sixties, when more people were moving into those positions. Before, like during Roybal's time I think you mentioned that you always knew that they'd represent you, because everybody was equally discriminated, but as time progressed it seems like it changed a little bit, that you were a little bit more skeptical of certain people and their politics, and you weren't willing just to give your endorsement to somebody just because they were Mexican.

Aceves

Right. Yes. They gave in too fast. And I know I still hear it, that, "Well, if you don't play ball you don't get anything done, and there's not enough of us." There's the Mexican Caucus in Congress, there's the African American Caucus, and still they have problems.

Espino

So I guess then that kind of leads into your work with Mayor Tom Bradley, because at that point you moved away from community activism to more establishment. I mean, you were now within the system and you're working for the City of Los Angeles. Did you have any conflicts with your political views?

Aceves

No. What we were doing, we got a grant that they were going to redevelop certain areas of the city, and so one of the conditions of that grant was that there be community participation, so we were supposed to go out there and organize the community so they would participate in the redevelopment of their area. Now, the area that I was assigned to, there was a leader there that was totally against the redevelopment, and most of the people that belonged to his organization were monolingual. They only spoke Spanish. So I did everything in Spanish and English, and I remember that my supervisor, who was married to this big, famous basketball player--I'll think of her name. And then the director, well, the director didn't get too much involved. But then Bradley said that the mayor had too much power, so a lot of his departments, he was going to put them up for civil service instead of the Mayor's Office, because we were all part of the Mayor's Office.

Aceves

So there was a change there, but that came a little after. That came almost in the fifth year that I worked there. So what we were, we were community organizers and that's why we were hired, because that's what we knew how to do. So I forget the name of this man, but he was a feisty man, and he spoke good English, but with a real thick accent. So I would speak to him in Spanish and he would say in English, he says, "What's wrong, my English isn't good enough for you?" [laughs] Because I wanted him to speak in Spanish, because we could communicate better, because a lot of the things that he said I knew he didn't mean what he was saying, because I knew the slang English and I could--but it would have been much easier. But anyway, he finally got to like me and we worked very well together.

Aceves

And I didn't quite understand at the time why he fought, he didn't want that area to be redeveloped. So that's what we did, so there was no conflict. I was still working with the community. Then with the GLACA [Greater Los Angeles Community Assn. with the anti-poverty funds, I think what the city and the county did and the state, they said, "Well, let's just make an agency and they can handle the anti-poverty funds." That way the council people weren't involved. But there were representatives, and so they asked me to represent the city. So again I was representing the city, but I was also--but the people that were coming to get funds from the anti-poverty program were people from the community. So it was still pretty much community work. I got paid a lot. I mean, I didn't get up to that salary. I got paid \$1800 a month in those days, which was--well, I had already bought this house. Not bought it, but I had already gone into--I was already living here.

Aceves

So I could see why everybody fought to get that once they turn into civil service, and I didn't get selected. I mean, they brought in people from real far away to interview us. That's all they were going to do was give an interview to see if we stayed in the job or we didn't stay in the job, and my supervisor when I didn't pass the test, it was just an oral test and I didn't pass the test, she said, "What am I going to do? You're the only one that I could get." Because they were all appointments, and not all the people were qualified to do the job that they had to do or that we had to do.

Espino

You believe that, that they weren't qualified?

Aceves

Yes, yes. So, yes, they were community activists, but what was required of us they weren't--I remember there was a young man from the UAW [United Auto Workers], and later on I knew people from the UAW, and we became good friends. Everybody was very friendly and worked well together. And I said, "Well, so-and-so is from the UAW." And he says, "Yeah, well, they put him in that job because he's useless." [laughs] He was useless as an organizer for the UAW, that's what I got. They were good, but the job was demanding if you wanted to do a good job. Of course, people thought I made a lot of work for

myself in terms of doing everything in English and Spanish and translating everything and then having the community meetings in Spanish and English and all that, but I enjoyed doing it. And later on in GLACA, in terms of giving the proposals, giving the money to those organizations that did the best, because they had their, how would you call them, people that were not serving the community, they were serving their little group or whatever they did. Not all of them were hardworking and representing the people they were supposed to represent, but you find that all over. There's good, bad, and mediocre. So there wasn't that kind of a conflict. I was still doing the same kind of work. And then since I was getting paid so much, I felt I had to do a super-good job.

Espino

Well, can you explain a little bit what redevelopment meant? Was that part of urban renewal?

Aceves

Right.

Espino

What exactly does that mean? Because it means something different today than it did probably in the seventies.

Aceves

No, I think it means pretty much the same, where they were going to knock down these old neighborhoods and build new neighborhoods. It was pretty much that's what they wanted to do.

Espino

I guess I said that's a little bit different from today, because in some places they try to preserve the integrity of the old buildings. At least that's a little bit more discussed today. I don't think that was discussed back in the late sixties, early seventies, trying to preserve some of the old buildings and trying to keep the integrity of the old buildings. It was basically to modernize. Is that what you recall?

Espino

Right. It was, well, freeways were going to be going through there. I remember this--and he appeared to be an older man to me, so I was very respectful of him, even though he in his own way insulted me in many ways. But I can understand a lot better now than I did then. Then I was doing my job, and why wouldn't he want redevelopment or urban renewal in his area? It was going to be better. But I didn't think about the displacement, I wasn't thinking as far--although we got into, I don't remember the issues exactly, but I'm sure they were revolving around those issues that we had good arguments, good debates, good discussions, but I still had my point of view that I had to put across, and it was difficult. He also became a very good friend of Porfirio Miranda. As a matter of fact, he invited us to his daughter's or his son's wedding. They had it on some ship in the Bay Area, real nice. So, yes, they were fighting. This particular man knew what it was going to be like if people got displaced. Now, I don't remember any buildings going up. I don't remember any actual development that did go on during those five years I worked there.

Espino

So what were you doing exactly then?

Aceves

We were organizing the people, we were having them put input, but for them to come out and plow down the areas, I don't remember that. I mean, I've passed by there in that area and I've seen--I'm trying to visualize it right now, especially where he worked, where he lived, and it has been cut into with commercial stuff.

Espino

So eventually they did end up demolishing some of the neighborhood?

Aceves

Changing some parts of it.

Espino

Do you remember what the initial proposals were? They spoke about demolishing houses to put in freeways?

Aceves

No, no, none of that.

Espino

Can you maybe talk about how you would articulate the purpose of the new development? How would you tell the community? How would you talk about it?

Aceves

Well, I think that our selling point was that HUD [Housing and Urban Development] was going to be bringing money into making this neighborhood a better neighborhood. I think that was our selling point. I don't quite remember all the details. When I got appointed to GLACA I spent a great deal of my time there with that program, and that took almost full time of the work that we did. So I did go out and visit all the community organizations that we funded, so that took a great deal of my time. So I just had to make reports. I don't know if I have any of that information or what we kept. I can get in touch--he lives here in Alhambra, the one that became the supervisor when the original appointee, I don't know if she resigned or she left or something. Then Carmen Diaz, I'll think of her name, then she became the director. I'm sure she would remember a lot more, since she was doing all the paperwork and I was just doing the organizing. She's a little younger than I am, but that's where I met her, in that job.

Espino

Okay. So then going back a little bit to what you mentioned earlier about being a community organizer, being elected by the community or appointed, and then having to actually apply for the position once it became--and you said you didn't pass.

Aceves

Okay, what happened is that it wasn't GLACA, it had another name, but that was the organization that was going to be set up for the anti-poverty funds to come in and they were going to be administered there. So I was appointed by the Supervisor [Ernest E.] Debs to represent the community, and people called, because his deputy was very active in the community. Well, he

represented Debs, but he was the one that was in our community all the time. So when people found out that I was getting a divorce, I qualified. My husband was giving me fifty dollars a week and was trying not to work. So then I qualified as a representative of the poverty community. So they all did a phoning--I didn't know that till after. As a matter of fact, I think Grace [Montañez Davis] was the one that told me. So then they appointed me. I went to Debs office and he told me, because I had worked against him, because he ran against Roybal and he won, and I didn't like him, and I had done a lot of things against him, but anyway he said that everybody said that I would represent the community and he was going to let bygones be bygones, words to that effect.

Aceves

So I was the poverty community representative for the first six months, because after that there had to be an election by the community, and Ursula Gutiérrez, who was Tony Rios' sister, she was from CSO [Community Service Organization], she was elected and she got that job, or she was elected to represent the people there. So then when I went to work for the City of Los Angeles, to Mayor Bradley's office, which that's what it was called, you were working for the Mayor's Office, you weren't working for the city, because at that time it was separate. So then they appointed me to represent the city, so I don't know if that was maybe ten years later. I mean, I could figure out the dates. So that's how that happened that at one point the first appointment was representing the poverty community, and the next appointment was representing the city.

Espino

And that was with Mayor Tom Bradley?

Aceves

Yes.

Espino

And that's after five years you were asked to interview, to actually keep the position? Is that what happened?

Aceves

Oh, okay, no. Then Mayor Bradley felt that the mayor had too much power, it had too many offices. So he felt that all of these offices except for, I don't know, maybe the administrative office of the mayors themselves, should be civil service, and they should go through a civil service process. So being that we, our particular department, we were all community people and knew everybody in the community, they had to bring in a panel to interview us to see if we qualified for the job, which was going to be the same job, but it was going to be under civil service. But we didn't have to go through a test. It was just going to be we would be skipping the written test. We would just go into an oral interview inasmuch as we were already there.

Aceves

And we had been having a lot of trouble with GLACA. It had gotten pretty bad, and I didn't sell myself at that interview. I think I felt a little down, so I mean, I just didn't pass that oral test. So everybody in the department was scrambling for jobs, and oh, what's her name? Evelyn Martinez is her last name. Anyway, she was part of Comisión. She was working there and she was a good friend of this councilman in the City of South El Monte, and she came. "Look," she says, "there's this opening for the human services director in the City of South El Monte. I don't qualify, because you have to have a B.A." By that time I had a B.A. She said, "So why don't you apply for it?" Her friend was a councilman and he knew me. He used to come to the Comisión meetings and all that. So I went and I applied and I got the job.

Aceves

But I had also applied--I had made applications all over, and I called everybody that I knew, and I called this particular person that worked for the Department of Fair Employment and Housing, and I told her if there was an opening there or there was a job there, but the civil service is going to be real slow. "Oh," she says, "I'm so glad you called. I was assigned to recruit Mexicans." We're still not Latinos. "Mexicans," she says, "because," that's another story, but, "they're recruiting and so, yeah, come and get an application and submit it." So I did that. I was submitting applications all over, and it was a little scary, because by that time I had gotten used to a good income and I had just bought this house, and it was before the Jarvis tax went, and the taxes kept going up and up and up.

Aceves

So I applied for the job and when I went to be interviewed then I passed it. I don't think there was anybody else as qualified that applied for the job. As a matter of fact, I heard some people say, "She's overqualified." But I got the job. But then about four months later, in the meantime I'm going through all the process for the state. I passed the written test and then I got interviewed and I passed that test, and then they called me. But I was already in, because we had gotten a grant for an outreach program in the City of South El Monte, so I wanted to stay there. But my friend José Castorena said, "You know, your ambition is to go to law school," and he was the very first person that got the job when they made that law, the Fair Employment Practices Act, FEPC. So he was one of the first ones, and Audrey Kaslow was one of the first ones, too, that got that job when that law was passed. And so he said, "You're looking forward to becoming an attorney, and you'll be dealing with the law there, and I think that that's a much better place for you. I think you should accept that job." And I had all of these plans with Porfirio [Miranda]. We were going to do all this organizing in South El Monte and all of that, so that's how I happened to go with the state.

Espino

And that's why you were only in South El Monte for a short period of time.

Aceves

Yes. And when they did a little goodbye thing, one of the fellows there wrote real big, real fancy like graffiti, real fancy, it said, "Here yesterday and gone tomorrow," or today, or something like that. [laughs]

Espino

Do you have regrets that you left South El Monte?

Aceves

No, no, not at all, not at all. The job with the state was right up my line. You went out and you interviewed the people. You interviewed the people and determined whether there was a violation of the law, and then you went out and investigated it. I learned a lot. And in those days we did both employment and housing, and that was very interesting. And being bilingual, at the end I

was getting a hundred dollars a month bilingual pay, whereas some of the people said, "No, thank you. I'll go without the hundred dollars. I'm not going to be a bilingual consultant." That's what they called us. Because you just got loaded more, because the majority of you were not Spanish speaking. So I dealt with the working poor again, and I went to the factories where they worked, I went to the housing that they lived, so again that kept me very humble, watching all of these people.

Aceves

One of the sad things, though, when the technology came in, when the computers came in, even waitresses got affected, because then they were-- and they didn't give them any training. They'd say, "On your breaks and on your lunch hour you can come before you work and you can stay after you work and learn how to use a computer." And a lot of the waitresses and waiters, they just didn't have that. Well, none of us had it at the time, but a lot of people were able to pick up real fast. So that was a lot of the discrimination complaints that I got, because when you're interviewing you try to get all the story so that you don't waste any time going out there and finding out that there's no violation of the law, since you have all of these cases to do if you're going to do a good job. It takes a long time. So I would go out there and find out that when they computerized, when the restaurants, especially the chain stores, the chain restaurants, they wanted everything on the computer, they wouldn't do it. They gave them a certain amount of time to learn, and they did not learn it, and they would be terminated.

Aceves

And the same thing happened in warehouses. They would take inventory, now with the computers, and everything that they were able to do they did with the computer, so when a lot of the people came and filed a complaint that there was an age discrimination, and you'd go out and find out that there was no such thing as an age discrimination, that they weren't able to learn the computer in the length of time they had given everybody, so technology was-- and these were not people that were in their sixties or seventies. They still had a long time to go before they could retire, and most of them all they had was Social Security. These were all private businesses, so like I say, that was sad to see.

Aceves

The housing was kind of funny in a lot of times that you went. Well, when they had the children, when the children became a protected category. Also, one of my co-workers was gay. It's was because he's passed away. And actually he was an attorney, but I guess he was just being mean to his father, he wouldn't practice law and he worked there with us. When he found out that my friend [Joe Placencia] was an international rep with the UAW, and he was a good friend of this assemblyman [Senator Joseph Montoya] that was in charge of the committee where there would be no discrimination against gays, we formed meetings, because he would say, "There aren't any gays in the Mexican community." So we formed a lot of meetings and met in that UAW hall, and everybody would bring in all the gays and they would tell their story.

Aceves

God, I remember one of those meetings I was in tears. Like I remember this young woman, and I remember her because she was so beautiful and so sexy, and in those days you didn't wear low things and she did. I remember her story, saying the she would talk about her partner like it was a man and try to be real careful to make sure that she was gay would not show or she wouldn't talk about it, but she said somehow or other they always found out and you'd get terminated for no reason, and they didn't have to give you a reason, because gays were not protected. I'll think of this assemblyman's name. He was later put in jail.

Aceves

I remember, I don't know if you know Conrado Terrazas. He worked for, oh, what's her name? She's a real progressive assemblywoman. She was also a councilwoman. I remember he was--we're still friends, and he walked in with all of these groups. His parents were very active and this assemblyman knew him, and he said, "Hi, mijo, how are you?" [laughs] But in those days nobody knew who was gay. But anyway, for housing that was a protected category. The gays were protected. We didn't get them into employment till years later. So that was quite a learning experience.

Aceves

Not that I--when I was going to high school I think I just knew one gay person. Maybe there were more than that, but if they were, they weren't that open. I don't know whether I would have discriminated or not discriminated. I mean, I just didn't--I know that if you knew, you made a lot of fun of them, especially the men. The men were the ones that were more in the open than the women were, at least in my experience. But once you start dealing--and when I went to People's College of Law I went to the women's caucus. I went to the Chicano caucus, but I just didn't seem to--they didn't always have their study groups in the school, whereas the women's caucus did, and a lot of the women there--it was a small college. I became very good friends, very close friends with three of them, were gay and I just studied a lot with them, and they were more ethical.

Aceves

As a matter of fact, Lisa Korben, who has since passed away, I used to tell her, "When I retire, I'm going to go to your office and collect from all those people that owe you money." And she says, "Well, it's not the poor people. Sometimes the poor people overpay me, because they're paying me twenty dollars every paycheck. It's the ones, the big settlements, the rich people that don't want to pay me my share." But that wasn't the last--pregnancy became, I think, the last protected category, where women had to be allowed to stay out at least six weeks or two months, I don't know, if their doctor said that they couldn't go back to work. Otherwise, when there wasn't that protected category, the women went back to work in two weeks. I interviewed a lot of them that were just out, especially in the factories, and even when that law was there they couldn't take the six weeks, because they couldn't be without pay that long.

Espino

Well, maybe next time you can describe some of the stories that really stand out during your time working there, and in the next week maybe you can try to remember some of the people or stories or issues of discrimination that came up, and we can talk about that the next time.[End of interview]

1.9. Session 9 (March 12, 2009)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino and today is March 12, 2009. I'm interviewing Lilia Aceves at her home in Alhambra, California. Okay, Lilia, we never really got to speak in detail about what happened after you and your husband [Bill Aceves] divorced. There are just some issues that I'm curious about, and that is especially at the time that you were divorced not too many people probably were divorcing at the rate that they are today. How did your friends and family react to that, and what was it like becoming a single woman again after having been married for--how many years were you married?

Aceves

Fourteen years. Well, happened was when I was pregnant with my third child [Patrick Aceves], I realized that the marriage was not going to work out, and so I gave myself ten years to go back to school and get a teacher's diploma and become a teacher. I would teach all year long and travel in summers with my children, that was my plan. So about six years down the road--so I started to go to night school, and as a matter of fact, when my youngest one, Patrick, he was born in '57, when he started to go to kindergarten I put him across the street at, I think it's Robert Hill Lane Elementary School in kindergarten, and I went to East L.A. College while he went to school there. So I kept doing that. I went to school and I was a homemaker.

Aceves

So right about six years down the road my ex-husband said that he wanted out of the marriage, and I said, "Fine." We talked about it, and I didn't want the kids to suffer, and he said that he wouldn't, he was supportive. So one time he came and he said that he didn't have enough money to make ends meet, that he was spending a lot of money eating out, and I said, "Well, lookit. I work during the day and I go to school at night, and I feel real bad leaving the kids." My mother [Francisca Medrano Porras] lived next door, but she had a very hard life and I felt that she kind of lived to work instead of working to live, so when she no longer had a job--that was another sad story in terms of where she worked, the three partners broke up, and that way they broke up the union, and my mother wanted to remain working in union places, but it was harder and harder for the union to place her. And when she was home she started to drink more and more.

Aceves

So I told Bill that we could help each other, that I felt bad working all day and then going to school at night, but I would leave dinner ready, dinner done, and he could come home and give the kids dinner and have dinner and by the time I got home they would be in bed. So that worked out, that worked out for many, many years until he remarried, so maybe something like six years or something like that. And then one time I came home and he said, "You know, the boys don't need me anymore. They're all out playing. Even Patrick is out at Salesian Boys Club. They [Patrick, Bill, and Paul Aceves] come and they go and play, and I'm sitting here by myself watching TV." I said, "Fine." By that time they were big and they didn't need as much care.

Aceves

However, there were times when I felt that they needed me, that they were fighting too much or they were not paying attention and they were acting up, and I would drop out of school. I would drop out of school for a semester or a quarter and I'd stick around. What I did also the weekends, I spent the weekends with them. Then I got a good job, got a good-paying job with Delfino Varela at the Mexican American Immigration, so that was a good-paying job. But the days off there were Sunday and Monday, because you're dealing with a working-class clientele and we were open on Saturdays. But Sunday I made sure that I took them to church every Sunday. Then after church we'd go do something. We'd go to the movies or play miniature golf or we'd do something. I tried to spend some good quality time with them. So that went on.

Aceves

We didn't have Sunday school during the summer. I brought them up in the Unitarian Church on 8th and Vermont, and I was one of the coordinators for the Sunday school, so I was pretty involved with that and became good friends of a lot of people there. So, I mean, you're young and I was fearless and very optimistic, so things--there were times that were hard as a working mother and with an alcoholic mother there were times that were very difficult. But I managed to do them all well until everything went smooth. Then I broke down. But while the boys were growing and all of that, it was very challenging, but like I say, I didn't realize a lot of the things that I was encountering. I didn't take them as, what would I say, as anything negative. It was just something I

had to deal with, and I felt that I wasn't a working mother all during the time I was married, which was, I think, one of the problems, because the economics are always--I mean, there's always a lot of fights over mis-spending the money, if my husband came home with a short check, because he got paid every week, so there was always a big fight over that.

Aceves

I think we got, what, fifty dollars a week, and every Saturday I'd take the kids to the Central Market and I'd load them all up with a couple of shopping bags with the big ones, and the little one would take a little bag, so we managed, we managed. I didn't even think of if I was doing anything right or I was doing anything wrong. I mean, I just tried to do what I thought was right, and I always had real supporting friends. I did start to get very active. Well, I was already active. The Heights Co-op Nursery, well, actually with the Ramona Co-op Nursery the activity started, because we had activities with the Heights Co-op Nursery. Of course, when I became active in the Heights Co-op Nursery, they extended themselves more and they were much more into being the organizations.

Aceves

And Ethel Young, who was a director then, and Bunny, her nickname was Bunny, her name was Miriam Rabirot, she was the assistant director, like I said, we still meet, some of the mothers. Not all of them had their children at the same time I did, but some of them did, and you see in that article we still meet every other month. It's a social luncheon, but everybody in that group, we're all active one way or another. So I'm sure that there's a lot of things that I don't remember, but what I do remember is that I didn't think about the negative parts. If they happened, somehow or other I overcame them all during that period. Like I said, it wasn't till I had moved here and the kids were grown up that I kind of collapsed.

Espino

Well, we can talk about that collapse. That's interesting that you held off that emotional collapse until much later. So at that time you didn't have any of your friends commenting about or judging whether it was the right decision, a

good decision or a bad decision, or your family? I mean, how did people respond to the--

Aceves

Well, my mother didn't find out I had gotten the divorce till I got appointed to the anti-poverty. It came out in the paper. They came and they took my picture with the boys, and I had been appointed by [Eugene] Debs, and then everybody found out, and people called up my mother and yes, she was upset, but we didn't discuss it or anything. She was upset about it. I know my mother-in-law [Marina Aceves] always said that her sons should pick on women that were humble. I'm sure that there was criticism, but my friends, I don't remember my friends criticizing. Now, by that time I'm kind of active. I'm a little active, and people in the community that are active are more broadminded in certain things, certainly politically, and outgoing in terms of the community. In the personal, I'm sure there was a lot of criticism, but I was too busy to pay attention to it. I know a lot of my friends were married and they stayed married, and we were still friends. I didn't see their husbands being threatened by me.

Aceves

So it was a different community that I was moving, a more political, more broadminded, more worldly, more intellectual, and so it was broadening not only intellectually but also, yes, I mean, you became more worldly, more aware of everybody else and not in a critical manner but in an interest in how other people were different, not necessarily better or worse, but different. I've always been very--that's my prejudice of elitist, and yet I met some people that were, that had fundraisers in their home and lived up in the Hollywood Hills and in Casuda Canyon and all of that, that were very humanitarian, so then I didn't consider them acting as elitists. I didn't even think about it, how did they get up here in this upper-middle class. Most of them were professionals, so that's where they got--

Aceves

Now, I come from the working poor neighborhood, family, although my mother didn't consider herself working poor and she wasn't. She came from land owners in Mexico, although when I went to Mexico they were very poor.

They had gone through a drought, I think it was an eight-year drought that Mexico had gone through, and even though they had a lot of land they were very poor. As a matter of fact we were talking about it, my son and I, because we went down to Pinon Hills and a lot of the family was there, and we were talking to the cousins that my Aunt Regina [Medrano Mendoza] told my Uncle Refugio that she wasn't going to go to the farm until he built outhouses. [laughter] So that was my upbringing and that was my association with the working poor. I mean, look. God forbid anybody that didn't want to be a Mexican. If I could, I'd pop them. So I was very proud of being a Mexican. I think I said that before, that I was ashamed that I came from a couple that were not married, but as far as being a Mexican I was very, very proud of that.

Aceves

So you form your prejudices, I formed them along economic, because I could see the difference that people acted and the people that looked down at us. But there were a lot of poor people that looked down at other poor people, and I noticed all of that, too. You know, when you're young and fearless you think you can accomplish everything, and what you can't accomplish, well, you just keep trying. So like I say, I'm sure there were a lot of obstacles. I can't think of them now. I do believe that all the negative encounters did make me-- that I learned from them and did make me a better person.

Espino

How did your social life change after that? I mean, did you think about dating?

Aceves

Oh, yes, I dated a lot. Yes, I dated a lot. I had, like I say, steady friends. But I remember the Reverend [Stephen H.] Fritchman giving a sermon on rebound marriages, so I said, okay, I was married fourteen years. Of course, two years my husband was at the Korean War, yes, the first few years. I said, okay, I was married fourteen years, so I'm not even going to think of marriage for seven years. Well, by the time the seventh year came around I liked being single. And many of the men that I dated were male supremacists, and it was fine dating, but as they got very comfortable with one and as we say in Spanish, "Te agararon confianza," then their true colors would start coming out. It's okay when you're dating somebody, you can just say, "Well, I don't want to go

out today," or, "I don't want to go to that place today," or, "I don't have time."
But if you start living with them, that makes it a little harder, so that was my
out. And I never dated anybody but Mexican men.

Aceves

I did have friends that were Caucasian, but there was nothing romantic with
them. So the clash would come, the clash would come.

Espino

So you noticed a difference between married life and single life that led you to
want to stay single?

Aceves

Yes. Yes, I wanted to do, I wanted to keep on--I mean, I really had taken it into
what we were taught in [Frances] de Pauw, that you were here--and religious,
too, in the religion they taught us, that you're here to leave this a better world
than you found it. So I really took that very seriously, so, I mean, little by little I
realized that I wasn't going to be able to make a big difference in life, so I said,
I'll do my part. I'll do my part, and whatever happens happens. I can't move
mountains, but I certainly can do whatever I can and hope that everybody else
does whatever they can. Right now I feel, god, I thought I was going to leave a
better world for my children and my grandchildren and my great-
grandchildren, but now with global warming and all of this I wonder. I say,
well, I'll just have to keep on.

Aceves

I mean, I'm not saying that it was all rosy. I'm sure that I worried a lot about
my kids, and you always think, well, did I do the right thing? But you can't go
back and undo what you did wrong, and you can't go back and do what you
didn't do, so you have to take it from here on. But that's a nice thing about
getting old is that you start accepting life as it is and not like you want it to be.
Like when you're young you want to change things, at least that's the way I
was. Even though I might have been very diplomatic about it, nevertheless
that was the way that I thought that we all thought and the way we all acted,
too.

Espino

So how would you consider yourself then at that time, with your personality and wanting to change things and wanting things to be different? Did you see yourself as different from your other peers that were female?

Aceves

Not my close friends. Like Connie Pardo Muñoz, we were together since we were ten or eleven years old and we remained very, very close all through my years. Then as I met people, like when I met people at the Heights we became very close, some of the people, and Ramona, my neighbor, and Irene Zepeda, my oldest boy and her son became real, real good friends. So I just felt very supported. Of course, when we were married there was all this group from high school and from 7th Street and we were pretty tight. We hung around together a lot, all the baptisms and the parties we did all during the time that we were married and even after we were married I continued to go to parties when they didn't conflict with something that I had. And we remained good friends. A couple of them have become widowers and they've remarried. Well, one of my closest friends, Ray Guerrero, we've always maintained a friendship, and Annie, that we went in high school, she passed away, left him two daughters, and we've remained friends. He's remarried. So I have my high school friends and then the friends that I re-met from 7th Street, because my husband was from 7th Street the first ten years that I lived there, so we remain friends.

Aceves

I mean, if I wanted to go to something that they were having I would go. Sometimes I went with my ex-husband, and once he remarried I didn't go to places that he was going to be there. But even now, for family gatherings the boys invite him, and that's fine with me. He has his wife, who's a lovely person, who has lost her two sons, so I feel very empathetic toward her. My ex-husband has picked out very nice women for his ex-wives.

Espino

He's had more than one? That's interesting. You never remarried, and how many times did he remarry?

Aceves

Remarried two for sure. He doesn't count the ones he lived with for a while.

Espino

That's interesting. Okay, well, I think that's a pretty good understanding of what--

Aceves

Now, you know what? I think that if the Feminist Movement hadn't been beginning to develop and to grow, maybe it would have been different, but you had that kind of support for active women, for single women, even for people that wanted to become professionals, something other than homemakers. Like in Heights [Co-op Nursery], a lot of them while the kids were in school, they were getting their degrees, because as soon as the kids grew up they were going to go back to their profession, things like that. So everything was kind of--I may not have had support from my immediate family or say my mother, but there was the general support. Like I say, the Feminist Movement was growing, there was the political aspect. I think that it was just a good environment for me at that time.

Espino

Right. So that was probably in the late sixties?

Aceves

Well, I got divorced in '64 to be exact. In '64 was the exact date. I think it was September, because I remember Bill saying something about that he got his divorce papers on his birthday or something like that.

Espino

Oh, that was his birthday? [Aceves laughs] What about your mother as a role model, because she never married? Or she never remarried.

Aceves

She was married when she was eighteen years old, I believe in New Mexico. She always told me that her husband had passed away, but later on little stories that I heard, I don't know if that was so. But anyway, she was single and according to what I have picked up, my Uncle Telésforo Medrano, who was her uncle, he would be my great-uncle, he was involved with one of my

father's wife's sisters. So he wrote to them and told them that he had a home, that they could come and live in Long Beach, that he shared with another family. So my father had his wife, his mother and his three children, and I believe that his wife died in childbirth. I'm not too sure about that, but I believe that's what it was. So that's how my mother met my father. She had never gotten pregnant, and I understand that she did have, I don't know, relationships or friendships or boyfriends, at least a couple of them in between her first marriage and the time that she got pregnant with me, but by that time she was thirty years old, and I think she was just so grateful that she got pregnant. So she did have other men that she lived with during the time that I was growing up, and when I went to boarding school she went to live with this man that, I don't know if he was a widower or divorced, but he had two children, too, and I don't remember if he had his mother there. But he had a little business, a little tortilleria, and then my mother got boarders, as they say. She would cook the breakfast and dinner and make lunch for them, and they would pay her by the week or things like that. So I felt that was a very stable relationship. Of course, I was in boarding school all during that time. That was a very stable relationship.

Aceves

When I came home from boarding school I thought that she had become--she was still working very hard. She would work all week long, and she could still hold her liquor pretty good, but I guess maybe she was not used to having me around and when she did drink too much she became indiscreet and began to really lock horns. And those were hard. It became a real love-hate relationship, what would I say, a very emotional one, very strong, both of us. I mean, she had always felt that I should do what she said, and I started to lose respect for her and I began to say it, to do whatever I wanted to do, and if she criticized me--I remember one time we went dancing and then we went to an after-hours place, and then they dropped me off at the house. So when I'm coming in she starts scolding me. Well, she starts scolding me, very angry, and I remember this part, and she tells me, she says--well, I did get home at six o'clock in the morning, but we did go dancing till two o'clock, then we went to eat at Carioca's, and then we went to this after-hours place and then they dropped me off. As a matter of fact, I was with a friend [Betty Villagrana] that married my cousin, so they dropped me off. So she tells me, in Spanish she

says, "¿Cómo se en que pasos andas?" And I got so angry at her because she said that, that I told her, "Los mismos que usted," and I went into my room and slammed the door.

Aceves

So by that time we had already moved down to Kingston and Marengo, right across the street from the general hospital, and in those days, around I guess it was in '47, '48, maybe it was after '48 because we had already graduated, yes, I had already graduated, and they were evicting us from those houses. They said they were going to sell them or put something commercial. Well, the little houses are still there, but there is like a hot-dog stand in front of them. So we had moved, and houses were very difficult to rent. There was a shortage of houses, and this lady that she worked with said that she had her house up for sale, so I talked my mother into buying it. And my uncle Jose Villagrana, who was my aunt, her sister's husband, and my mother was very close to the family. As a matter of fact, when my aunt died my mother went every weekend and took care of the girls, and my cousins all love her very much. But she got them their first jobs in the laundry and then the sewing factory, so she was a good sister and a good aunt.

Aceves

So I told her, I said, "Well, let's buy a house." And she said she didn't have any money. I said, "What do you mean you don't have any money?" So I think she showed me that she had in her savings account something like \$800, and I said, "Okay. Well, I'll go work full time and I'll give you the check and we'll buy that house." So that couple let us--we moved in with them, because we were being evicted, until they found a place, so that was how we became homeowners, and we were kind of forced into the situation because there weren't any houses to rent, or maybe that we could afford. I don't remember that. But I do remember when we moved to 2nd and Bixel that we squatted. Somebody told us, "Hey, somebody's leaving that house," and we moved in there, and when the owner came to collect the rent there was this woman with her daughter, but that's the way we did it.

Aceves

So we bought that house and so I had my own room there in that house. But that was the kind of relationship that developed. I held it against her that when she drank she became indiscreet. Of course by that time we're all experimenting with drinking and, of course, I was always very offended because I never got invited to the pot parties. [laughs] But we were regular teenagers, but we were a real tight group that we hung around together at Belmont High School. We were very close. As a matter of fact, then Ray talked all the fellows into going into the army, because then they could come home and go on the G.I. Bill. That's how it began some of the Chicanos getting a college education, because some of them were in the service. They came back and went to school. And in our particular case, those of us that were a little younger, Ray talked them into--

Aceves

Now, there were a couple of the fellows that the mother didn't sign off, and the other one, he was supporting his mother and couldn't leave her. Oh, and then there was the twins. One of them got drafted and he got killed in the Korean War. So we were very close and we did everything together. I think I have a picture of them in front of my house. And we remain friends. I think I was the one that kind of, when I started to get very politically active, I was kind of the one that didn't attend all their activities, and they were all married and I was going with a single crowd.

Espino

Right. It seems like just your experience, your upbringing kind of paved the way for you to accept the idea of a divorce. Your mom was not married, and then you had an active social life where you went out, because it seems like it didn't have a huge negative impact on you at the time, wasn't something horribly traumatic.

Espino

No. No, it was easy. Like I say, I was pregnant with my third child and my ex-husband came home one day, he had been out all day, and I said, "No, this is not a life for me. It isn't what I want." And like I say, I gave myself ten years. Six years down the road I had to kind of adjust and change it.

Espino

Can you talk a little bit about what you did want? What did you want that was different, besides working? Because you said you wanted to work as a teacher and then spend the summers with your children. Was there anything else that you wanted that was different?

Aceves

No, I just didn't want that--I'm trying to remember. I remember exactly the day or the circumstances. I can see myself sitting there on a Sunday afternoon watching TV, ready with my big stomach and saying to myself, no, this is not a life for me. It's not a good life. It was a limiting life. My mother-in-law's words came to my mind in saying that her son should marry somebody that's humble. I guess she didn't see me as somebody being humble, being more outgoing, and I was very talkative, so I wasn't exactly aggressive nor would you say I was assertive, but I had real good manners around adults. I would talk and converse with them and give them firsthand attention. I guess whether you're taught this or you just learn it by watching or what's expected of you, but you give adults their respect. And I did have a background that did prepare me for a more encompassing life than what our parents had been. All our parents were working parents. The mothers were all working. They all worked. There wasn't one that was a homemaker. Everybody had to work, like they do now.

Aceves

There were some during the depression in the thirties people [unclear] because there weren't any jobs. Most of the people in the neighborhood were on welfare, if not all of them except us. And then when the war started, a lot of them started to take work in their homes. I guess they would have a sewing machine and they'd do sewing in their homes, so women always helped, it didn't matter how poor you were, unless the husband had a job that was able to support them in every respect. But, yes, my mother being so outgoing and her being assertive and her being always the breadwinner of the whole family--thinking about it, I didn't think that I should stay in a situation that I was not happy or I thought there was more to life than what had become a good friendship in a relationship.

Aceves

You're young and a lot of the things that you do, or that I did when I was young, some I did thoughtfully, like I said I have my three kids, because I did want to be a good mother and always they came first. I don't know if they think that they came first or not. But that's an interesting question. I'll have to just think more about it. As we would say in Spanish, "Te aventabas." You just did, or I did what I thought was right and enjoying it all the way, and like I say, some things I didn't enjoy, and there were some bad experiences that I had to overcome.

Espino

Do you want to talk about any of those?

Aceves

No, I don't think so.

Espino

I guess then we can move on into your jobs, because we talked about your work right after your divorce, your work with the Chicana Service Action Center and then you worked for [Tom] Bradley for a little while, so I'd like to move into your work with the Department of Fair Housing and Employment, and that was in 19--

Aceves

It was '78.

Espino

In 1978. Where did you start exactly with the Department of Fair Employment and Housing? What was your first job?

Aceves

Well, what happened is that Bradley--I don't know if I've said it before, but what Bradley decided was that the mayor had too many departments. And it was, practically the mayor handled--what was the name of the department that we had? I can't think about it right now. But anyway, he had that department, and he felt that they should all become civil service, so the department that I worked, we handled some housing funds from HUD, and they were going to redevelop certain areas, and one of the requirements was

that there be community input, and that's what we were hired to do. So if I had a certain district and they were going to develop those areas, then I had to go out in the community and organize the community and have them have input into it.

Aceves

So when they said all those departments were going to become civil service, we had to have a civil service test. Now, they weren't going to give us a written test, but we had to pass an interview, and because all of us that worked in that department were all community-picked people, and that was one of the requirements, because we were going to go out and organize the community, then they brought in people from far away that didn't know us to interview us. Well, at that time we were having a lot of problems with GLACA [Greater Los Angeles Community Assn.], and I was feeling pretty down about that, and I didn't pass the oral test. I didn't sell myself. I remember that I was feeling a little down and maybe I just thought it was a given and I was going to get it.

Aceves

But in the meantime, when we heard that that job was going to be changed to civil service, I called up everybody I knew and told them that I was looking for a job. So I called a friend that was working at the Department of Fair Employment and Housing, I can't think of her name right now, so she said, "Oh, yeah," she says, "we are." Because what had happened there is that a Mexican and an African American had filed a suit against the department, because they had applied for, at the time it was area administrator, and they had brought in a Caucasian woman, and so both these two fellows filed a suit. So they were hiring minorities, and so I put in my application. Well, you know, the state takes forever. And then one of my co-workers said that there was an opening for the Human Services Superintendent in the City of South El Monte, but one of the requirements was to have a B.A. and she didn't have a B.A.

Aceves

But her buddy, who I also knew, was going to be on the panel to interview the people, so that I should go and be interviewed. So I went and got interviewed and I got hired for that. Well, four months later they called me from the state,

but I already had some programs going, and Porfirio Diaz [Miranda] was working at UCLA and he was into community and he had all kinds of ideas to organize South El Monte. We had outreach programs that were very good.

Espino

Is that Porfirio Miranda or Diaz?

Aceves

No, Miranda. Yes, he was a teacher at UCLA. He was a Boy Scout for Tony in Chicago when Tony was a scoutmaster. That's how he knew him.

Espino

And he was also on the board of Euclid Foundation.

Aceves

On the board, yes. He brought him in when he saw him. So then when they called me, José Castorena, who was a very good friend and his sisters had been in de Pauw, so he talked me into accepting the job, because he says, "That's where you want to go. That's your field. And you want to go into law school, you want to become a lawyer, and you should take that job." So I was only there in South El Monte for about four months, and I felt real bad leaving, but José Castorena's advice was very sound and I agreed that it was the thing to do. And I had just started law school, because my supervisor at city hall had started law school, and she told me, "You say you always--." Because I always said, "When I retire, I'm going to go to law school." And she says, "You know, you could get in." So I did go and I did get in at, what was the name of that law school? It's in Culver City.

Espino

The People's School--

Aceves

No, no. That was the third one I went to. So I went there for a year or two, I think, and then my grade point average dropped, so I said, it's too hard, I'm not going to go. So then my co-worker talked me into going to Glendale Law School, because they were trying to bring in minorities. All that year I had bronchitis, so then I said, no, this is too much for me. Then Connie talked me

into going to PCL [People's College of Law], so I graduated from there. So anyway, so that's how I got into the Department of Fair Employment and Housing, and it changed throughout the years that I was there. When we first started there, of course, I came in as a bilingual consultant they called us.

Espino

How many bilingual consultants were there at that time, do you remember?

Aceves

Well, at that time it was separated. How was it that we were separated? Oh, okay. We were separated, the interviewers and the ones that did the investigation, so all we did was interview. How many were we? Maybe two or three of us. We weren't all that big at the beginning. So I did interviewing all the forty hours a week, and then we turned it over if I thought that during the interview that there was enough information to indicate that it needed to be investigated because there might be violation of the law. Then I would write up what I found and turned it over to the investigative section.

Aceves

At some point a year or two later, I don't remember, they combined the whole thing, and you did the interviewing and you also did the investigation, and you had about 20 percent of housing investigation. Well, that was a lot more interesting because then you interviewed once a week or twice a week, I don't remember now exactly, and then the cases you took in, you went out and you investigated. I mean, you had one year to resolve the cases. Well, because I had 80 percent of my caseload was Spanish-speaking, I had all of these people that worked in these sewing factories, in mostly factories and in hard-labor jobs. I remember having some in some meat factories. I remember how--I mean, I couldn't believe some of the job sites that you went to that were such hard work. I remember going to this meat factory, and people were standing like on little platforms, and the meat was passing by, and they would be chopping it. It was hard work.

Aceves

There was a movie that I saw, I remember, and it reminded me of that so much, as if they had duplicated it so well, almost like the meat factories that I

did go, or the meat companies that I did go. And I had some friends when I lived in City Terrace, and we had the parents' sports association. We met at City Terrace and Moe [Moses] Garay was a director there, and it was baseball teams for kids in the neighborhood. A rule was that every kid had to play ball, and, of course, all the coaches who were the fathers wanted their team to win, so they wanted to put the kids that were good in to play. We were a pretty [unclear] group, and so some of the people that were in that group worked in what we called matanzas, in the meat companies. I remember one of them always smelled such strong perfume, and one time I brought it up to her and she says, "Well, you come out of the matanzas smelling bad." So she would perfume herself. And there were people from City Terrace, and I'm sure some of them still live there.

Aceves

So like I say, some of the places that I went to were real bad working conditions, but, of course, that wasn't what I was looking for. I was looking to see if they had been treated differently because of their race, national ancestry, color, religion, gender, age over forty, a physical handicap. I know that we kind of got about ten, and then they did bring in toward the end some of the last protected basis were pregnant women, that they had to be reinstated and given six weeks or two months, whatever the doctor had said. So that was one of the last protected basis that we had. So it was very interesting.

Aceves

Then toward the end, when a lot of warehouses became computerized, I had many age-discrimination complaints that I took because they would come in and say, "I've been working there twenty years, thirty years, and they laid me off and they kept these young guys." And I went in there and found that they had computerized taking in inventory, and these older guys, which weren't that old, maybe fifty years old or something like that, they didn't learn. They couldn't or they refused to learn the computers. The same thing happened with waitresses. They would come and they terminated and they left everybody else there, and they were usually Latinas, and the same thing happened with them, that they computerized doing the receipts. And what I

found, see, with that particular law you had to show that they were treated differently based on this evidence that you found.

Aceves

So I remember these two particular situations that happened more than once, like the waitress. Everyone was told, "We're bringing in the computers, and you can come in early, you can go learn the computers at your break times, on your lunchtime and after work," but nobody got training. They just kind of had to learn on their own or pick it up, but they did that to everyone. So the people that just spoke English seemed to have an easier time than the ones that their second language was English, and they didn't need to know that much English to do a waitress job nor to work in a warehouse.

Aceves

What was the other job that the computers did? Those are the two I remember. But when the computers came in, they dislocated a lot of the monolingual Spanish-speaking people, and those are the only ones I knew. Maybe there were others that didn't. I remember having an African American that also worked in a warehouse and was laid off because, when I went in there and did the investigation, that he wasn't able to, or he didn't want to learn it, or he wasn't able to learn it. In the warehouses they did give them a little training if I remember correctly, but I remember very distinctly investigating that aspect, how much training that the English-speaking waitresses get versus the non-English-speaking or the very limited English-speaking waitresses get, and they all had to learn on their own. I mean, jobs weren't as hard to get like they are right now, but if you were very limited you had a hard time getting a job.

Aceves

I also remember if you had a physical handicap you had to be able to do the job with the handicap being accommodated. I remember having this case where this young man was very brilliant. I don't know what he had, but he walked with these two things that he held and he moved all over. I had to turn over that case because, of course, I always had a lot of cases, more cases than I could handle, so when they would take cases away because we had a year to resolve them, I would give those that the people that spoke English or spoke a

little English, those were the cases that I would turn over. I turned this case over to one of my co-workers, and they would see him and they would think that he was not able to do the job, but he was a brilliant young man, he really was. So, I mean, that was a very exaggerated case.

Aceves

I remember one time that I went to a unionized, I think it was aerospace, and I was saying that this young man had to be accommodated, his physical handicap had to be reasonably accommodated. He could do the job with a reasonable accommodation. And his co-workers went against him, because they felt that if he couldn't do the job that he should be treated like them. They had no sympathy for him, but that was the law, and even if the place was unionized it had to remember that.

Aceves

Now, there were other places that I went to that somebody filed a discrimination complaint, but it was a discrimination. I couldn't handle any other aspect of it, and the places were horrible, were real horrible places for anybody to work. So that would be something that Labor Standards would handle, but that we couldn't handle.

Espino

Can you walk me through a bit of what the procedure is? So the person files a complaint?

Aceves

Yes. The persons came in. They made an appointment, they filed a complaint. You interviewed them to determine whether they were treated differently and if the difference, there was some information that would indicate that the difference had to do with one of the protected bases. Most of them were race, national origin, ancestry and color. Most of them were those. So if you interviewed them and you'd say, "How many people work there?" Let's say there were thirty, "And I'm the only--." Well, one of the latest cases, one that was right here in Alhambra, it's a little machine shop and she was the only female. And she filed, she said that the men harassed her, not sexually. They just harassed her because she was a female, and they were real jealous of her,

and they would all make cracks about her and all that made the working conditions very intolerable. She would complain to the owner, and he didn't do anything about it. And she didn't want to lose her job. It was a good-paying job. It was a job that she could do with her limitations.

Aceves

And so what I did was I went to the employer and I said, "You know, you're going to have a big legal case if you don't do something about it, and in order to help you out, because she's happy, she likes the job, I need to come in and tell you and your employees, give you an orientation about the law." I don't know if that happened or not, because I remember getting very upset with the young men, because they were disrespectful to me. And I told the employer, "If they're disrespectful to me right here, obviously they don't recognize who I represent." I had to get real rough. And they were all Spanish-speaking, so I had to talk to the employer who spoke only English and then interpret to the young men.

Aceves

Now, there was another incident, and I'll never forget this one. That one also, the woman was working there. But in this particular case the young men were all very respectful. This was way down in the San Fernando Valley. I mean, I thought I was in some poor section of Mexico. I had never been that far down there. It was a shop that did little ceramic things, they did them and they painted them. It was a small little factory. And this woman came in and said that she had to go from her section where she did her--I think she painted or something--but her section and come all the way over here to go to the ladies' room. And when she went to the ladies' room, the guys all harassed her and told her dirty, bad words, "La puta pa'ca," and stuff like that, and that she had complained to her employer and he didn't do anything about it.

Aceves

So I went and did the investigation, and this is what the young men told me. Says, "Well, she used to be the bartender at the corner bar, and she did everybody favors. And then she takes off and she finds religion, and now she comes back and she's real pure." And they weren't accepting that, but they admitted everything. They admitted everything. I mean, it was very hard to

keep my--because they talked, as we say in Spanish, chistoso to begin with, and then for them to express themselves so freely and so honestly, like they were not committing any violation of the law whatsoever. I mean, where did she get off being--here she was the barmaid on the corner, and now she's real pure, and they were holding that against her. Well, in that particular case I got her a settlement for a thousand dollars and I had the employer post all the things, because if it wasn't going to cost him, what did he care what went on in the factory? He was staying in his little office. There weren't very many employees, maybe thirty, fifty, sixty. I can see it. It was a big thing, very clean, very clean, so if it wasn't going to cost him any money--it had to hurt him in order for him to enforce the law. I never got a complaint again, but I mean, it was hysterical. I mean, it was all I could do. I mean, sometimes I had to turn away so they couldn't see me laughing. And I said, I wonder if they can see the laughter in my eyes.

Aceves

Some of the other things that I was up against was that a lot of times they wouldn't cooperate. Like I remember going to this other factory, and I could see it. I don't remember where it was, but this young woman filed a sexual harassment, and she said that her employer was sexually harassing her. Well, so I went out and did the investigation, and all the women that I interviewed, they were, "Ai, no. A mi nunca me ha faltado respeto." And I couldn't find anything to support her allegations. Nobody had seen it, nobody would say that happened to them, too. I couldn't. So a lot of times--and then because it took you so long, and for me it took long sometimes to get to a case, and because I had so many cases, what I did, I would handle the ones that I thought had a violation of the law, because you take the complaint, you send the complaint to the employer, and then they send back the response. You go over the response with a complainant, as we called them, and if they didn't have any witnesses or they didn't have anything to negate what the employer said, then you knew that you weren't going to be able to find a violation of the law.

Aceves

So those, I didn't give them preference, and I gave preference to those I thought were a violation of the law. Sometimes it was going to take a long

time to settle those cases, and sometimes as had been my experience, that by the time you got around to them, all the witnesses were gone and you couldn't find them. They didn't leave any forwarding addresses. The complainant didn't take their address. They were not sophisticated enough to know what to do or how to do it. They just came and filed the complaint, and they thought we would take care of everything. So there weren't any witnesses, the employer denies it, so you couldn't handle it, so I would settle them. I said, "Well, would you be willing to settle if I can get so much money?" And I would tell the employer, "This is going to be on the record for all this time and all that. Would you be willing to settle the complaint for a thousand dollars?" or something like that.

Aceves

Now, there was this, what is the name of that, I still see it advertised where they have housekeepers come to your house? They would send three or four. They charge you so much, Molly Maid or something like that.

Espino

Yes, I've seen that, too. It's the pink, I think they have pink--

Aceves

I don't remember. But I had two or three of those cases where they terminated the girls that were pregnant.

Espino

Oh, wow.

Aceves

Yes, they terminated them when they were pregnant. They weren't the same one. There were several of those, but they were similar companies, and those I settled. They would say, "Well, if they can do--," what was the wording I used, because they had to be reasonably accommodated. Well, in that kind of job if you send three girls and one's pregnant and one can't stoop anymore, the other two get upset, and I understood all of that. So I would say, "Well, it's just easier for you to settle, because I can go in there and probably--." And that's what the girls would say. "I mean, just because [Spanish words]." They were hard jobs and they had to do so many houses in so many hours. I mean,

they were under a lot of pressure, so the hotel housekeepers, too, you had a lot of those. They were under a lot of pressure. Those you had to get on something else, whether pregnant, because most of them were Latinos and Latinas. So it had to be either they were pregnant.

Aceves

Then there came in the difference, the different nationalities came in from Guatemala, from Puerto Rico, the Dominicans. To the employer they all looked the same, but when they were competing for the jobs or who did more work or who didn't, then there was a difference, and then if the supervisor happened--say, for instance, I remember this one time. I don't remember exactly the towns, but it all had to do with Zacateca, that's why I remember. Anyway, this fellow would hire everybody from his home town, I think it was Jerez. But everybody else was a Mexican, and they couldn't understand why I couldn't take the case. "You're all Mexicans." There has to be a difference, you know? "Yeah, but he's favoritism his people from his home town, and he terminated me to give a job to his brother-in-law," or whatever. But when that started, well, that was all the same. But then other Central and South Americans and Caribbeans and Puerto Ricans, all of that started to come out, too, the competition. They're hard jobs and they would complain about, "Well, yeah, well, she licks his boots," and, "Yeah, well, she goes to be with him."

Espino

But there's no law that allows you to--

Aceves

If it's consensual. [laughter] And I remember this one case, this woman came in and filed a sexual harassment complaint, and what she told me sounded like she was being sexually harassed. But when I went and did the investigation, the man never touched her, never did anything. The only thing that he did was that when she sat down, he threw his handkerchief on the seat, and when she came out--he was her supervisor. He saw her coming and he went and picked up this handkerchief and started smelling it. [laughs]

Espino

That's not sexual harassment? That's some kind of harassment.

Aceves

It was, but it wasn't enough to file. Like I told him he had to stop it. I mean, some of the things that were like that I said, "You have to put these posters, and you have to make it very clear as to what's acceptable and what's not acceptable in the work site." Now, there were a lot of people that went after work to the local bar or the local thing and a lot of things went on there, but if they didn't take it into the job site there was nothing that we could do, that the law covered that. So it was very, very interesting, a lot of pressure because you had so many cases, and you needed to do them in a year.

Aceves

And God forbid, and it happened many times, when you did get to a case and you had one month to go and you found that there was a violation of the law, you had to turn it in and write the report and send it to the legal department. That was very stressful. I mean, I was working, I always worked. Then when we moved to these beautiful offices on 6th and Grand, it was hard to get in when it wasn't working. When we had the office between 1st and 2nd and Broadway and Hill, I had the key and I could go in and go out and go there on weekends and work. But in that other building, I think I did it one time, and security was so heavy and all of that I just stayed late and I got to know all the young women that came and cleaned the offices. So then they would start telling me about what was happening with them and what was this, and I would just leave because they would be taking up my time, and I started bringing work home and doing it here. But it was very interesting, kept me very humble and kept me very close to my roots in terms of the working poor and how it can bring the worst out of--I think employers like to put employees under competition and seeing how much work they can get out of them.

Aceves

And then some of them, like this man in the San Fernando Valley, I mean, he didn't get involved at all in the shop. He was in his little office. It wasn't fancy, but it was everything that he needed. This was pre-computers. But he let them do--he didn't get involved with the workers. They did their work and that's

what he was happy with. That's why when the lady came and complained to him he just ignored her. He didn't even talk to the fellows or anything.

Espino

So do the people can go back to their jobs and the conditions are fine for them afterwards? Do you get their feedback once you've resolved a case and talked to the employer, talked to the employees?

Aceves

No. No, I didn't get any feedback. Very seldom did I get any feedback. You settled. If you settled you got some monetary compensation, or it was such a case that all you did was enforce the law and make them put up the posters and send a notice to everyone that this wasn't going to be tolerated. No, you just went back to more cases. No, you were always so busy with all of these cases. Like I say, it was very interesting work, and the people that worked there were also very good. We're still, a lot of us still--as a matter of fact, a couple of them have been getting together here in the area, and I haven't been able to get together with them, but we still remain friends, a lot of them. Well, some of them have retired and go back to work for the county or someplace else on a part-time basis.

Aceves

So the group that worked was also a very good group. We were very congenial and all got invited to their daughter's marriages, or whenever the family made them big birthdays. I've been invited to their retirements lately. So the group was--and people that worked there--and people that couldn't handle the job transferred out to another, because it was a heavy-duty job, the interviewing, the investigation, and the load. Then later on, I don't know if it was a year or two years later that then they put a quota on us, that we had to do eight closures a month. And when we first started there weren't, and the people that were before us, maybe they closed one or two cases a month or something like that, because there was no quota. But then they did say that the law was put that they had to resolve them in a year.

Aceves

The commissions even started, because there was a commission that enforced the law, and the commissions changed and they got tighter and tighter in terms of how enforcing the law. We were never a very popular department, because they enacted the law and then they set up the agency, and my friend José Castorena was one of the first ones that worked there. At that time it was FEPC, Fair Employment Practice Commission, and Audrey Kaslow worked there and somebody else. They were the very first consultants that worked there enforcing the law when it was enacted. I guess I could look it up and find out exactly what year it was enacted.

Espino

So then when you would find something, like you mentioned that the working conditions were horrible, but that wasn't something that you were looking to investigate, what would you do? Would you do anything?

Aceves

Yes. I would call Labor Standards and tell them, "I don't know if you have jurisdiction over this particular case, but I went here and they have umpteen employees there and only one toilet," or, "It was real dirty." So, yes, I would call them up and tell them. What they did, I never did follow up on that. But there was one particular case that I remember that this employer paid minimum wages, but he had a child care center there for the parents, so if the child got sick or something--most child care centers, if your child is sick you have to keep them home. And they could go eat lunch with them and all of that, so that was a good model. But the women, mostly women, were grateful to work there, because they knew their kids were taken care of and if anything happened they would get called and they could go take care of their kid for whatever. So except for minimum wages I don't think they had anything else. I mean, the man observed the law. They had to have certain breaks, labor standards, certain breaks and the minimum wages, and I think that they had to have at least fifteen minutes for lunch and a ten-minute break in the morning or something. I mean, I still always look when I go any place, and usually they have them in the ladies', in the bathroom, all these rules. Or where I go do my exercise at the Yomemoto Clinic, they have it behind the accountant, all the laws of Fair Employment and EEOC.

Aceves

But like I say, from the very beginning, and I knew the history because of José Castorena, that department was not very popular, and the people that went to bat for it had to really fight for any of the perks that we got. We had that little office, that building, and for a number of months I worked out of the house because some of the workers reported that there was--what is it that's in the walls?

Espino

Asbestos?

Aceves

Yes, asbestos, and they had to come in and take all the walls. I don't know how many months I worked out of the house. We didn't have any windows, our particular section did not have any windows. So there was actually this Republican that got appointed as a director, and she had us moved to 6th and Grand and got us computers. She did more for us than any of the other directors that had worked there as directors. It was a beautiful office. I had two window. I had a corner office, because I had the most seniority there. Other people had worked there as long as I did, but they had gone and come back, but I was the one that had--so that particular office was supposed to be for our office director, but she wanted to go to the other corner, so that one was left there, so I got it. It was great. The last three years were very pleasant, hardworking, but I mean, I had windows. The only thing that scared me was when they were washing the windows. And then sometimes, I mean, I couldn't go in on weekends and work there because of the security that they had. I could stay there as long as I wanted to, but once I was out to get back in was a hassle.

Aceves

But it was--now we're in corporate America. We're at that area there that had been built up, back to back to the library that had been modernized, my old stomping grounds when I was little. So those three years were very good. Of course, in the last year I was in a lot of pain, so when I fell the second time, and they were filming a picture right there in this Deco restaurant on the corner of 6th and Olive, and I don't know what I did, but I put my briefcase in front of me and they called the ambulance. A big old fuss was made. I says,

"Take me back to my car. I know I'm in shock right now," because they checked me. They said, "Nothing's wrong with you." "I'm in shock. I can move mountains." So I came home and I called up Joanie who was the director's secretary. I says, "I fell on my way to work and I'm not going in today." So the next day I went and I told my boss that I was retiring. I said, "My body is telling me something. This is the second fall I've had. I'm in a lot of pain and I just can't handle it anymore."

Espino

Did you stay active in the evenings with your other organizations when you started working for the Department of--

Aceves

Yes. Well, by that time the two older boys [Bill and Paul Aceves] are married, and Patrick is here living in the back room. And before that my mother was there, so there was some responsibility on her part. She adored Billy. Billy was already, I mean, Billy's twenty-two months older than Paul, and then there's six years difference between my middle one and the youngest one. So, yes, I remained active all the time.

Espino

What were some of the issues that were important to you in the eighties? Because you started with the department in '78, so then the eighties were a little bit different from the seventies as far as--

Aceves

Yes. Well, I was in law school by that time. Now, I moved here in '72. Well, there were already all the Comisión [Femenil Mexicana] issues that we were handling, and I remained active in Comisión, especially the L.A. chapter, which is the chapter I belong to. So we were still with all the women's issues, and that was one of the biggest organizations that I worked with. By that time the Alhambra Democratic Club I joined. Now, what is their anniversary? I think we're going to be celebrating twenty years. I got the card, it's right there, I'll get it. Twenty years since the Alhambra Democratic Club started in the area, so I was still active there. I did pull back a little bit because of the time, mostly the time. In those days I seemed to have a lot of energy.

Aceves

But, oh, when I moved here, one of my co-workers, this woman had just come in from Mexico with two little kids and he cleaned all their family's house, so he got everybody to hire Esperanza [Espinoza], so she came. I don't know if she came once a week or twice a month, I don't remember. Practically everybody let her go except me, so that's how I started having somebody help me with the housework. But I would still come home every week or whenever I had the time and vacuum the house from ceiling to floor, but between her and I we kept it pretty good. But that was, like I say, when I started to have somebody to help out. But we were all used to doing our own housework, even if we worked. There were very few people that I knew that had housekeepers or had somebody to help them.

Aceves

So, yes, I mean, I must have pulled back. I had to, because I would work all day and go to night school, and then I had to study, but maybe that's why I didn't pass the bar. But it was very funny, because when I took these classes to the study groups, when they had the tests there I would pass them, but when I got to the bar I never passed enough to make the points. And then at that time when I started taking the bar, you could take it two different times, one with a written test and one with, what do you call that one where you had multiple choice? But then they changed it and you had to pass both of them, and that was where I failed in taking the test was the multiple choice, but I didn't when we took the classes. In the study groups I passed them. But I remember coming home one time and then I was renting the back room to Vince Banillo [Mannino], who since has passed away, and he was going--that's where I met him, at PCL [People's College of Law], when I decided to go take the refresher courses over there, just take the whole course again. So what was it that happened that I said, no, this is too much?

Aceves

Oh, I know what happened. I guess it was in one of the recessions that we had, and they gave everybody that had less than five years working for the department the pink slip. So they all scrambled. They all got other jobs in the state, but then there was a lot of pressure on those of us that were left, so you couldn't even do a good interview, because the supervisor would come and

knock at the door, "Other people are waiting. You've already--." We were on time limits now. So one day I came and I said, "Well, what shall I do? Shall I take off six months and take the bar and then just go into a job?" I knew I could get a job as an attorney. "Or shall I just give this thing up?" And then I thought, what if I take off, I quit my job for six months, because they weren't going to let me take off a six-month's leave, I take off six months and I don't pass it, luego me quedo sin Juan y sin las gallinas. So I said, well, I'll just give us this dream, forget about it.

Aceves

So I came and I told Vince. I said, "Vince, go get all the books that you want, anything you want, because I'm through with studying for the bar exam." And I said I gave that--I don't know if I threw them away or gave them away or something, and that was it. I just walked away from it, and it was fine with me, because I had taken the bar I don't know how many times already and they wouldn't give me any time off. They gave me time off the first time, like six weeks or something like that, and I did very well. I barely missed it. But after that they wouldn't, and I kept getting worse and worse and worse, so I knew that I needed the time to concentrate.

Espino

Well, it seems like your job entailed a little bit of that kind of--

Aceves

We were like paralegals, yes. We were like paralegals. We got everything ready for the legal department.

Espino

So you were able to satisfy that desire a little bit through your work.

Aceves

Yes, and it was very interesting work. I mean, it was very challenging and very interesting.

Espino

So just getting back, and this will probably be the last question, is there anything that stands out for you about Comisión, your activism with Comisión

later, some of the last issues you got involved in in the eighties and maybe nineties? Was there any one issue or two issues that really stand out to you that was important?

Aceves

Well, we got Gloria [Molina] as an assemblywoman, and that campaign was very interesting because it was the A la Torre group, and we were very close to A la Torre and [Art] Torres. They came around a lot to Comisión, and Yolanda Nava got married with Torres, and A la Torre, a lot of the girls in Comisión were at one time or another were his girlfriends. It was a political group and we were pretty political. So Gloria, who had been working for Torres, went up to them and said, "I want to run for the Assembly." There was a vacancy there, and A la Torre says, "Oh, they're not ready for a woman yet." So she came to us and we said, "Well, we'll get you--." We got her in there and she won. And I remember going with her doing campaigning. In those days we did door-to-door campaigning a lot more than they do. Maybe they still do it, but I don't do it anymore.

Aceves

So I remember going to the person--what's his name? I can't think of his name right now, but it'll come to me. He was running, and we go to his family's home and we went to the back yard. They were all in the back yard, and they were pretty rude to us. I told her, "Forget about it. Don't let them bother you." So that was very satisfying, very satisfying that we got her in, even if the Mexican political machine was not supporting her. They were supporting this other young man [Richard Polanco]. And the last time I ran into him it was in a big union, because I was also the shop steward for the Civil Service Division of the State Employees. We went to some--I know they have it every year, some breakfast, and he was there and he spoke very well of Gloria. So I went up to him and I said, "I like what you said about Comisión and Gloria and all of that." And he made some comment, "Although she's the one that cut me low," or something like that. So we had that.

Aceves

Then we had the Centro de Niños, the daycare center which Sandy Serrano Sewell was very instrumental in setting it up. We all helped. I mean, there's

always somebody that was there fulltime, but we were there helping all the time. They still have--I think that one is being managed by somebody else, but she has the one right here on Mednick and Cesar Chavez, I believe. Yes, it's where the college is, right there, and I think they're expanding it. So those were very good triumphs for us, and we were doing what we said we were going to do. There were offshoots. What's the name of this group? They've gone into housing and they kind of split off from Comisión, and they took over the Centro de Niños. I believe they took over the Centro de Niños on Loma, on 3rd and Loma, and they built housing there also above the Centro. It used to be a beautiful old home and then they knocked it down and built the Centro, and then they added housing, and they did a lot of low-income housing. So there were a lot of accomplishments that as a group we're doing, but there was always somebody that spearheaded it, like Sandy with the child care and this other woman with the housing.

Aceves

And then, of course, the Chicana Center became a big organization for training, and the concentration was on that. I think that this young woman that has been the director ever since Francisca [Flores] left it--I had been to many, many funerals right there in that mortuary, which is on I believe it's 1st Street. It's not Alma, it's the street after or before Alma. But anyway, it used to be--but she took it over and she redesigned it. I mean, she fixed it up. It's a beautiful place. It's a training center. When I first saw it I said, "She missed her calling," an interior decorator. But it's a beautiful building, and they have--the other day I passed by and they had another Chicana Center right there on, is it Cesar Chavez and Mednick? But it looks like they knocked down that building and they're building something else. I haven't followed up on it.

Aceves

Although the other day Sandy and her husband Mario Sewell stopped by, because I have the peace vigil on Fridays right there on the corner of Garfield and Main. She was having dinner with one of the other former members of Comisión and she asked her about me. She said, "Well, she's still doing her thing on Fridays," so her and her husband came over and we talked. It must have been in December, because they were staying over because she rents a place here in Alhambra. They were staying over because they were going to

have a Christmas party the next day, so it must have been December. So there were a lot of things that as a group of women that we did, and a lot of things that we started that other people completed. It's just so many things, it's just hard to pinpoint the one thing. I think that the very beginning is always the most challenging.

Aceves

I don't know if I told you, I remember this one particular young woman that came to the office when I was there at the International Institute, and she just talked and talked and talked, and I just listened to her. And a few weeks later she comes back with this big painting that she had painted and she said, "This is for you." And I said, "Well, thank you." I mean, it was a beautiful painting. And she said, "You know, you saved my life." And I said, "How's that?" because I was looking at the painting. She says, "Well, the day I came I was suicidal and I was going to commit suicide. But after I left, you gave me so much hope that here I am and this is a gift for you." It was a very dramatic painting. It was, if I remember. I gave it to my friend who has since passed away, Sandy [Hurwitz]. I gave it to her because she was going to frame it, and it got lost. When I asked her about it, she said her father had something or other. But anyway, it was very dramatic with flames coming out the bottom of this woman. It was a beautiful painting. I mean, it wasn't a professional painting, but after she told me that I could see a lot of it. So when I showed it to Sandy she said--she liked to dabble in paint, too, and she thought it was very good even when I told her the story. Hurwitz, Sandy Hurwitz, and I told her the story, and she thought in that sense it was good.

Aceves

So that's the only time that I can remember something so dramatic like that. A lot of women came at the Chicana Center, and I don't know if I told you this, but a lot of them were on welfare and working. The welfare was a supplement, and it was all I could do to tell them to just stay home. You work so hard and you take your child to the care center. You have to come home and do all of this for eighty bucks a month or some small amount. But I didn't dare. I guess I knew enough about social workers to know. So it's just very hard to say one thing. I think it was a great movement. There were a lot of good things that we did, especially at the beginning, like I say, that we would

close the Chicana Center and there would be seven, nine of us that would-- Gloria was one of them. She was the youngest one. They would come after work and we'd go to this little corner restaurant and come back and plan all of these things. And then we got chapters going, so I met a lot of young women in that. They were all younger than me. And like I say, it was the beginning of the Feminist Movement and all of these young women had a place to go, and they were very happy and they were very instrumental, and they're all hard workers. They were all hard workers. We did a lot of hard work.

Aceves

There was a lot of things that didn't get off, I mean, like this Caroline. She teaches at Santa Cruz, and I know her and Esperanza Arce tried to start something and it didn't--I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was one of the things that didn't get completed. But there were just so many things.

Espino

Just to get back to the Gloria Molina campaign, did Comisión, we you like the campaign organizers for Gloria, or did she have somebody else?

Aceves

No, she hired somebody. She hired somebody and she was very good. I think that lady has since passed away. I worked on her campaign, but I wasn't one of the organizers. I mean, I would go on Saturdays, I'd go out doing door-to-door campaigning. I think that's mostly what I did. But she did hire someone and that person was very good. I don't remember her name, but I think that somebody told me that she has since passed away. So I remember going to Sacramento when she [Gloria] was sworn in. A lot of us were there.

Espino

What was that like?

Aceves

It was beautiful. It was crowded. I think all of us were there. I was real far away, there were so many people I could hardly--I think we sat behind somebody. I hardly remember. But I was elated. I was so happy that we had gotten her in against the odds, but we did. Everybody pitched in, some a lot, some what they could do, but we were all there. I know that every time I went

the place was--this little place, maybe not even as big as these two rooms, and we were all sent out with our little packets. I don't remember how many times Gloria went with me or I went with her, but I remember that one time when we hit her opponent's family's home. And since then a lot of the women got appointed to commissions, and we got--there was this particular--what is her name? And she got appointed to the woman's commission that the county had set up, and we went and spoke. It was Yolanda and Gloria. Who were the other ones? There were about four of us, myself, and we spoke before the woman's commission, giving them stats as to how the Mexican community--and in those days it was all Mexican, so how those needs weren't being addressed, so that was very interesting.

Aceves

So we were doing challenging things. I mean, Yolanda was going to UCLA. I mean, we got a lot of the professional young women that were just up and coming. Some of them were still in school, working. They all had their B.A., but probably working on their master's and whatever, so they were very--they weren't prepared in community organizing, but they were very, extremely intelligent and eager, so they were easy to work with.

Espino

Is there anything else you want to add before we close out the session?

Aceves

Where would you want me to concentrate, toward the later years?

Espino

Whatever you want. Whatever you feel like we haven't talked about, anything that you want to discuss that we haven't already discussed, in any period from your childhood on to the present. If there's anything that you want to add before we stop.

Aceves

I can't think of anything that we haven't touched on. So, I mean, the work still continues. I mean, now since I've retired and I'm into the peace--that was one thing. One time at the Alhambra Democratic Club I was going to talk against the war and this other gentleman was going to talk pro the war, and I

remember getting up and saying--well, this was the ending part of it, that I was totally against the war because I was nine months pregnant when I got the telegram that my husband had been wounded in the war, and I didn't want any woman to go through that. I mean, I said a lot of things, but that was the closing. So the gentleman, who's still active in the Alhambra Democratic Club, he said, "I thought we were going to speak for and against the war, not something like this." He refused to talk. But I feel very strongly that we've reached a certain level of sophistication throughout the world that we don't have to fight over things, and who are the ones that suffer the most if it's not the children and the women?

Aceves

So right now we're in kind of a crossroads, because a lot of people, we're averaging something like eight people at the vigil on Fridays, where we were sometimes twenty or thirty people before the war started. We tried to stop the war. When the war started, a lot of people dropped out, and then there was a big core that stayed on. And now with the economy, a lot of people feel that--well, they haven't come, for whatever reasons. We did have a meeting to say what we were going to do, and people don't know that we're still spending a lot of money on wars. I get the Quakers legislative, the Friends [Committee on National Legislation], someplace right there. Now, they're a lobbyist group, and they're the only group that I know that's pro-peace. I know the Quakers have always been against wars. So I'm a member, I get their newsletter. I was just lucky that my kids didn't go to war. My grandson, my oldest grandson did join the Army, but I don't want anybody to lose their child or husband or brother or their son. Now so many women are going in, too, into the service, and right now with the economy I know more and more people are going. I know that my daughter-in-law's son can't find a job, and he thinks that he's going to join again.

Aceves

So I don't think that should be an alternative. I think that we can--I do believe that the world can come to a situation that we can settle things with, what is the word that they use, with diplomacy, so that's where my emphasis is right now, and that's where I want to put my energy. I'm not too sure exactly where we're going to go. Like this group, we call ourselves the San Gabriel Valley

Neighbors for Peace and Justice. Now, there's many, many groups throughout the world that are peace-and-justice groups, and sometimes you hear a lot about them, and sometimes--we don't get, because I have KPDK on all the time. As a matter of fact, I heard your husband the other day being interviewed on this retake of, what was--

Espino

El Norte?

Aceves

Yes, El Norte. So that's my direction, and I worry that the Aceves are males. There's just a lot of males. My mother-in-law had seven, nine. I think two sons died, but one daughter and seven or nine sons, and I don't know how many grandsons she had before she had a granddaughter. Well, I'm lucky I have two granddaughters. But like I say, now even the women are going into war. And then even yesterday at the retirees meeting, one of the ladies had gone to some kind of fair, and they had honored this young man, and she passed around and everybody was honored because they served the country. And I agreed, because I remember after one of the moratoriums that we had a meeting, and I remember what hall it was or what school or auditorium it was. And this woman got up and she said, "My son was killed in the war. Are you telling me that my son died in vain?" Nobody said anything. And I don't remember, was it that day that somebody had put the flag on fire or something like that? But, I mean, it was just the group that we were. I mean, we could all feel her pain. What were we going to say? "Yes, he died in vain"? He died to make somebody else rich? So I think that people that believe that their children have died for the country, without knowing who's making the money and who's not going to war and who's going to war--it's all the poor people that go to war.

Aceves

I mean, during World War II there were a lot of people that I remember, somebody's sons, but they were all generals or--I guess if we remember correctly, I guess we could go back and look at history, who of the big politicians' children went to war. So I'm very anti-war. And sometimes I think that it's a real macho thing, but one time I couldn't sleep at night, so I turned

on the radio and it was NPR, and it just happened that they were running something over again, but Hilary Clinton was speaking for the war. I remember I couldn't sleep that night and I woke up and I says, that's it for you. I was never for her again if she was so adamant for the war. I'm sure that she got a lot of votes with that speech that she made, and when I saw her at the International Womens Conference in Beijing, she was not for the war. I mean, of course she was addressing the women. And I didn't go. Everybody got up really at the crack of dawn, because the area that they gave us for the international conference was way out of town and it was a real small little place. But I didn't go that day. We had another trip to go, and I said I don't want to get up at the crack of dawn and then I might not even get to see her. But I heard her speeches and what everybody was saying, and it was a very different Hilary Clinton that I knew then and what she stood for. And she was my representative, but after I heard that speech on NPR--and then after that I heard a lot of other things and I didn't support her, and everybody was so surprised, because I am a feminist, that I didn't support her.

Aceves

I supported a feminist, Cynthia McKinney, and in the primaries I didn't know who I was going to vote for. I was there and I [laughter], I had no choice in terms of the primaries.

Espino

You decided at the last minute?

Aceves

Yes. I was just torn, because I knew that both of them, both Obama and Clinton didn't get as far as they did if they weren't part of the corporations, and so I had no, how shall I say, I had no illusions of what they can do. But I was very impressed with the whole world, the way they came out for Obama. But I'm not that disappointed when things that he's doing, like the Cabinet that he's selected and things of that type, I'm not, because I didn't expect that much, because he wouldn't have gotten as far as he did if he wasn't part of the group, part of the corporations I'm saying, the big powers that be. Maybe this economy, it's putting a lot of people out of jobs and it's going to hurt us a lot. However, people are beginning to see, where is the money going, where

does the money go? It's always gone that way. I mean, this is nothing new. But we are kept in the dark, so to speak, in terms of what our history really is.

Aceves

Like I remember seeing something on PBS. This family was the heirs of this big slave owner, and according to that program, if I remember correctly, he had slaves up to 1942, and he was a big congressman. So this new generation, I don't know if it's the second or third generation, they go back and follow his footsteps. And at one time they're interviewing this slave, that negotiator, the one that sells the slaves to other countries, and they ask him the question, "How can you do this to your own people?" And his response was, "There's been slavery since the history of man." And that's true, there's no denying it, but who are the people--if there weren't any people to take on those positions, we wouldn't have slavery, but there's always somebody that I guess they figure, why should I starve if I can make money for my family? Or I don't know what the thinking is of people that are willing to sell out or sell their own people. Even now you hear a lot about families selling their daughters so the rest of the family can have something to eat, or selling their children for that matter, so the rest of the family can have something to eat. I don't know if they know what's going to happen to their children, or they don't know, or the desperate--maybe to sacrifice one so that the others can live? I don't know. I don't know what I would do.

Aceves

I know that a lot of women that I know go without eating to feed their children, but I don't know how far, and I know a lot of women have gone into prostitution to feed their children, so one can't be so judgmental as to what would happen. But that's what I want to do in my later years is work on peace. I don't think that I'll see peace in my lifetime, but that would be one of the things that I want to spend the rest of my energy on.

Espino

Thank you so much. This has been a wonderful process for me, and it was great listening to all your stories, and I really appreciate the time you gave me.[End of interview]

Date:

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