

ELEONORE SOSA: TAPED INTERVIEW WITH LELA CHAVEZ

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The following is an interview conducted by Eleonore Sosa with Lela Chavez. The date is November 28, 1989.

Question: Where did you go to, you and your brothers and sisters go to elementary school?

Answer: In San Jose, East San Jose. We were all basically born and raised in the San Jose area on the East Side. We attended Elementary School. Actually it's in the Alum Rock area, closer to the Alum Rock area.

Question: And High School and College?

Lela: We went to James Lick High School and for college I attended three years at San Jose State College and one brother attended one year but then he went into the service and continued military life after that. My other brother did not even graduate actually from High School. He dropped out when he was in 10th grade and did not attend college either.

Question: Did they find financial support for their education, as far as financial aid?

Lela: There were programs and grants available, for myself and my brother. Like I said, he went for one year. He was able to get a loan upon entering which he quickly had to repay since he didn't finish.

Question: Were you involved in the Chicano student movement at San Jose City College or San Jose State College?

Answer: At San Jose State College, yes.

Question: Were you a member of the MASC or any other student organization?

Answer: Yes I was, I belonged to MECHA organization.

Question: OK, what was your role in that?

Answer: I think that my role was as a participant in terms of, I would not consider myself a leader, I guess, I was more of a supporter of the issues and the activities.

Question: And the nature of the group?

Answer: The nature of the group, in terms of the composition of the group?

Question: What was the basic philosophy of that time?

Answer: The group was focusing on a lot of issues and situations that basically have been ignored for a lot of years. Dealing specifically with the lack of representation and injustices towards Chicanos. And not anything new, but at that time, we were more active as far as attempting to organize and take on these issues head on.

Question: And how often did you meet as far as in your group and stuff, daily or weekly?

Answer: There was contact constantly. There was informal meetings that were scheduled on a weekly basis, at a specific time, but people pretty much bonded together, those who were the core group of the activities. I think that there were a lot of individuals who were invited and showed up to the meetings and maybe we would not see them until the next meeting, but there were a core group of individuals who were in constant companionship they worked together, lived together and had classes together and would see each other in the student union, and in the dorm rooms.

Question: And unless you do not want to give names I know we talked about that previously, telling us primarily how many individuals were actively involved in the Chicano movement at that time. Can you give us an estimate?

Answer: Well gee, I could recall that at some of the meetings we had up to 30 people, some of the meeting 50 people, it was a snowballing effect as far as individuals that were involved, but I think that your basic core group was probably closer to 20 individuals that were the most consistent.

Question: Have you heard of the Mexican American Youth Organizations or any other organizations at the High School level? And could you tell us a little about them.

Answer: I remember when these organizations existed when I was in high school, and that was a long long time ago. And I know that they still exist. My daughter was a member of my old group just before she graduated. What I remember from the group when I was there, and from what my daughter tell me, and has shared with me when she was involved, was more towards education and cultural types of activities. It was a support group for them to do projects, for raising money for scholarships. She headed up a committee for say no to drugs campaign. When I was there, we were not dealing with those issues, but that is as much as I know about it.

Question: What was your perception of the Chicano movement on the local Chicano and non-Chicano communities?

Answer: Good question. The impact was quite significant. It again created a lot of awareness brought a lot of attention to the issues of our community, as a group, as a whole. There were a lot of activities that took place, they were recorded in the newspapers, people were very out spoken either on an individual basis or on a group basis. And it was a beginning of acquiring some recognition in

terms of the injustices that are faced in our communities that needed to be stopped. There was a significant impact and I am sure that individuals themselves had some impact in terms of their personal lives. I certainly did.

Question: And on the non-Chicano communities, how do you think they perceived things going on?

Answer: They probably were surprised for one. We always as Chicano have unfortunately been tied as playing second fiddle and a follow up to the Black movement. The Blacks were the ones that were more aggressive and outgoing that had more national attention, and that Chicanos would piggy back. That is not true. At least not in my opinion. I think that is a misperception. But I think at the time, the non-Chicano community began to realize that, we had our own issues, our own way and means of being able to bring those issues to the surface and get them addressed.

Question: You did not see much of an allegiance with any other ethnic group?

Answer: At the time there was, I think for the most part that Chicanos realized and recognized that we had to pull ourselves together before you could align yourself with anybody else. You have to pull yourself together. You have to set you own agenda. You have to make sure of the direction that you are going. How it is best for you to achieve what you have to achieve otherwise if you are not prepared in doing that, you are going to have the other groups that you are tied up do it for you. I think that were some activities and times where the Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians said OK, we have to go in as a minority coalition to do this or do that and that is OK. Chicanos were really working and struggling to become recognized as their own force.

Question: And you saw that happening then, that they perceive that looking back now?

Answer: I think so. Again that is only my perspective, but I think so.

Question: Give me perspective on how you saw some of the more mainstream institutions affected by what was going on? I will just start out with the Church since it so an important role in Chicanos lives.

Answer: It is. The Church was affected. There was I remember when we used to have our meetings at the Newman center, which was run by Father Genta, and he was very supportive. There was another priest that was very supportive of our cause and issues and he let us have meetings there, and let us work with individuals. So that the Church did play active role.

Question: What about city government?

Answer: City government, I did not recognize it at the time much. I think there were, gee I am trying to think what representation we had in city government. Probably not very much since no one person comes to mind. We had a few people in some positions. I do not think it is as significant as it is now. Now you could really see some leadership, and see how our activities have impacted what goes on. We have Ron Gonzales, it is clear back then again it was part of the struggle.

Question: What about education institutions?

Answer: I think that schools were impacted significantly. You are hitting the heart where the issues lie. That is in the educational system. You can get parents and community people involved in PTA, the school board with one on one with the teachers and the students get actively involved with some of the tutoring programs, with the kids. Also making their concerns visible in knowing with the educational system not only in elementary, high school and at the college level too. I believe the educational system definitely was impacted.

Question: What kind of impact did your involvement have on your immediate family?

Answer: I guess it did not have too much impact other than the concern they had for me making sure that I did not get into any kind of trouble. I think that from my mom's perspective, that there was a certain amount of pride because of the awareness on my part wanting to be part of addressing these kinds of issues. Because she experienced a lot of injustices and discrimination here. She was born here but raised in Mexico. She came back to the U.S.. It was relatively a different experience. She has some difficult times again where she experienced prejudice and things like that. The fact that I was involved with addressing this concerns I think make her feel pretty good.

Question: So would you categorize her as being very supportive of your role?

Answer: Yes.

Question: What about your brothers and sisters?

Answer: I have two brothers. They were supportive basically by not being negative about what I was doing. There was no real criticism. We tried to share with them and make them understand what was going on.

Question: I want to ask you on something that you touched on before. What are your views about that movement looking back at it retrospectively? What are your feelings? How do you look at it now?

Answer: I hope I am understanding your question correctly. But I think that I see things now in retrospect what happened back then in the 60's was just a beginning. It is just like anything else. You go through the beginning stages , you go through some rough times. The challenge is real difficult and the changes and the awareness of the environment, that there is so much going on, people need to adapt to it. But I think that those years I saw as the beginning. Hopefully nothing has really changed other than. I think in general, we have a more stronger, solid, educated political base. We have Chicanos in key positions in segments in the community. That is real good. That is a result of a lot of the things that happened back then. The difference is with the students themselves. They do not hear them as much now as you did then , but that is not necessarily bad. A good example is that I work with SHIP (Society of Hispanic Engineers). I went with a group over at Stanford. I went to a meeting to address opportunities in engineering and specifically with my company here. I felt real good to see so many Chicanos going to Stanford, and in engineering. They themselves are involved with the community and with programs like MESA which goes out to schools and minorities schools. They work with young kids. They tutor them with their math, also try to gear them into these kinds of fields. They are doing a lot of positive good things. So that activism is much more low key but I do not think it is not because people do not care. It is because the focus is different now. There are more people out in the political area, in city hall and we have more people in key political positions in the educational system. That makes a difference. We are hopeful. It is different now. It those times it was the beginning and starting off you to get attention. There are many ways to get attention and you are not going to get it if you are going to be quiet off in a corner somewhere. Now that we have got the attention, we need to follow up, we need to back it up. We need to be consistent and follow through and not let ourselves get in a position where we are not represented on the school board or city council, we are not represented in the fire department, police department, educational system. We can not allow ourselves to go backwards and we got the attention and a lot of talent. We have such a large talent pool in our communities and my only concern is that some times we do not recognize it as a group.

Question: Thank you.