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Interview with: Blanca Alvarado

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[Interview #2]

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[01:01:13] at beginning {start at [00:00]}

**Moon:**

My name is Danelle Moon. I am the director of San Jose State University Special Collections and Archives and today I am interviewing Blanca Alvarado. This is the second interview and we are meeting in the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors building where she has an office and today's date is October 6, 2006 and we will start the interview.

Well last time I was here we hadn't actually talked about really (unintelligible, 00:00:31) we hadn't really talked about the work you've done on the board of supervisors and there were a number of projects that you, that you know list on your bio that I think are really interesting to this project and just to getting an understanding of kind of your dimensions as a politician and the things that you care about. So, maybe we could just start by talking a little bit about, you know, how, how the election campaign went for you when you first had to go through that process after you had served in Zoe's seat and then I wanted to get you to talk a little bit about some of the programs that you've developed like the Girl's For Change and the Office of Women's Advocacy.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, it's hard to remember what we've done in ten years.

**Moon:**

We'll you've done a lot according to the information that I've read. I mean just looking at all the various assignments often times I think when people think of the city governments, and particularly this area where transportation and environment have been such fundamental, sort of you know, imprints of what is happened with policy but there's so many of the, there's so much more social policy that's, you know, part of what you've doing on the board of supervisors in particular and so you, just by looking at your, your vitae, from adolescent pregnancy prevention you know to the Restorative Justice Program and so there seems to be a real um, you know, thread between looking at family and community which seems to be one of the areas that you've really tried to promote.

**Alvarado:**

So, where do we start?

**Moon:**

So why don't you tell me –

**Alvarado:**

(unintelligible 00:02:15)

**Moon:**

-Yeah, why don't we start there-

**Alvarado:**

-About the campaign?-

**Moon:**

Yeah, we'll start with the campaign and then we'll just, then we could explore these other programs that you really were instrumental in developing.

**Alvarado:**

I had talked about the campaign some for the city council and the exciting, the exciting, absolutely thrilling race in 1980. And then the more difficult races that followed. Um, and when I was appointed clearly I served out the remaining two years of Zoe Lofgren's term and had to go out to campaign in '96 - and of course this is a much bigger district, my political work had been concentrated in the Fifth District [unintelligible, 00:03:01] and each supervisorial district has 250 to 300,000 people, right, so it was a much bigger territory- and although I had already established some kind of name identification, in particular in the east side as well as in the downtown San Jose area – I was an unknown in Willow Glen and Willow Glen is a very big part of this district, and I know that some Willow Glenites did not like the fact that an east-sider was the candidate for, for the ward.

There were elements of discrimination in how I was perceived – in fact I had people tell me directly, “well, why should somebody like you from the east side represent us from the west side,” right? So, it was kind of a classic comment and a classic reaction. But I took it in stride and made myself as presentable to those constituents as I could and I was able to demonstrate, I think, despite their bias that I had been in government for a long time and certainly having received the endorsement of Zoe Lofgren and other reputable elected officials that I was a qualified candidate to represent them.

It was a nasty race nonetheless. In looking back I realize – and I didn't at the time – but in looking back afterwards I realized that people like Tom McEnery, who had been mayor when I was in San Jose, and others that were associated with Tom, sought out a candidate to run against me. And that was particularly evident in the choice that they

made. Scott Mathieson, who was the opponent in that race, was a downtown resident – downtown San Jose resident – and he had never, never ran in a board or in a commission or had no political experience at all. But with the help of Tom McEnery and his ilk, he certainly got some stature behind his candidacy and the reason why Tom sought out a candidate to run against me is because he was still pretty upset with me for having supported Zoe to the Congress over him and so it was one of those payback opportunities for Tom to try to get even with me, right.

But it started off rather shakily – the reelection campaign – and two points that I want to make – and I made one of them - the fact that Tom McEnery recruited somebody to run. But I had already been on the board for a year and a half and one of the principals of the Deputy Sheriffs' Association had told me from the very beginning that I would have no problem getting the DSA endorsement and so I assumed – and of course, you know, this was such a large organization and it had so many unions and every one acts independent to the other – you've got probation officers, you've got government attorney's association – blah, blah, blah. There was just a massive change in the kinds of constituencies I had to address to get the endorsement. But when the DSA Jose Salcido told me not worry about it that I was going to get endorsed by his group, I went to the interview expecting it to be pretty much of a piece of cake, right? Well it wasn't, and Scott Mathieson was there - of course he was interviewed as well – but they gave me such a hard time, a totally difficult time. It was probing, it was antagonistic, it was unfriendly, it was everything that I did not expect.

Well, as it turned out they endorsed Scott Mathieson. But, what I found out later, that it was actually Tom McEnery who had convinced them that Mathieson was a better candidate to endorse and that's what they did.

**Moon:**

Now who was the DSA? What was-

**Alvarado:**

Deputy Sheriffs' Association.

**Moon:**

Oh, the Deputy Sheriffs' – okay.

**Alvarado:**

So, that was one of the first real, really eye openers and when I went out to Willow Glen and perceived some degree of hostility, I realized that the fact that I had served on the city council for 14 years and that I had received the strong endorsement of some many powerful and influential people wasn't going to make a difference in some sectors of the community. So, where I started off with some assumption that I was going to have an easy race; it turned out to be an extraordinarily difficult race.

And some of the things that Scott Mathieson put out in his campaign material were very derogatory. It was a nasty campaign, you know. I talked to you about the plumed serpent and all of the –

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

- extraneous, well, participants in that whole thing, but he very cleverly used that in his campaign materials against me. So, it was not a piece of cake as I had assumed it might be. And so it was just the two candidates so we knew that there was going to be a decision made by the voters in June. So that was a pretty tense time.

But as things turned out – um - we had a very positive campaign and a great campaign manager. We had wonderful brochures and wonderful literature and I attended so many neighborhood associations and just did what you have to do in a campaign of this breadth and of this scope. Um, and at that time I had been on the board for a year and so there was still a lot that I did not know about the organization and the multitude of services and complexities of the organization that I would be representing. But we did it and we had a nice big victory celebration.

So that – and that was in 96'-in 2000 I was unopposed and in 2004 I was unopposed and it really is quite remarkable that – in fact I was just talking to, I think, Pete McCue a couple of days ago because we're talking about the fact that he and I will be turned out in two years and we were considering that there will be quite a slew of candidates running for two seats – and it seems rather strange to me that there was no opposition in 2000 or in 2004, and what he, what he thought was the point is that you would need to raise a lot of money -

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

(unintelligible, 00:10:48) - district. And, people just don't want to go up against incumbents. Which is unfortunate, because I do believe – you know I will say that in 2000 when I ran unopposed, I was elated, I truly was elated, I mean I had never run unopposed and so it was kind of a breath of fresh air to run unopposed for the first time – but when I look at the campaigns I do believe that opposition is very healthy. It does keep you on your toes. It does force you in some ways to go out there and interact with the voters where often times you get pretty caught up in your ivory tower – so to speak. And the work is so demanding that you do lose touch, sometimes, with the constituents. And except for the enormous amount of constituent calls we get on any number of issues and services, um, the public at large is fairly disconnected from county government. And I have never quite understood that. In all the years that I have been here, I have never understood what is the disconnections between the voters and the residents of the county and the board of supervisors. And uh, it's unfortunate, because in fact the work of the board of supervisors touches the lives of all people. I mean, if the cops in San Jose don't have a jail to take their perpetrators to, you know you can't just leave them out in the streets, right?

Our judicial system – our law and justice system – that all of the cities rely on would be non-functioning. I mean, I mean can you imagine not having a court system or not having jails.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

What about the hospital. I mean we are the first responders in the event of an emergency. If there is terrorist attack, if it's the pandemic, any number of public health threats are in our lap.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And yet the public does not relate to it - the larger public – probably because the majority of the public does not access our services; they don't use our public hospitals, they don't use our welfare system, you know, most are law-abiding so they don't end up in our jails.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

But we've got our kids that are juveniles and create sometimes havoc in the community that we need to deal with. So, the bottom line is that our services are so direct to those that we provide services to, but the public at large just doesn't get the relevance of those services to their everyday lives.

**Moon:**

So, that was a contrast to what your experience was-

**Alvarado:**

Completely.

**Moon:**

-in the council?



**Alvarado:**

Completely, and because at the city level, you know, it's always about where this housing project is going to go and so if there's neighborhood activism against a particular project, it's because it's going to diminish the quality of their lives or reduce their property values or the traffic is going to be too heavy and so you're dealing with some practical things.

And certainly people do get threatened often times by what they perceive as a change in their environment. So there's always, and almost with every land use decision you have, a neighborhood group -

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

-you have people coming. Um, and then, you know, the city does projects: parks in the neighborhood, community centers in the neighborhood, libraries. So those, those are services and facilities that everybody loves. And so whenever you build something like this – which is a community asset – there's tremendous knowledge awareness and support for that.

**Moon:**

Now looking at um –

**Alvarado:**

Now over here that's not the case.

**Moon:**

-Right. Now, um, it's not the case at the board of supervisors. So there's more grass-roots political activism, it seems, at the more local city level than at the county. Now looking

backwards at the 1996 campaign, then later the 2000, how did you raise the money for the, you know, the campaigning that needed to take place?

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, I raised over \$200,000.00 dollars for the first campaign and by then, you know I said earlier, we have 38 unions here, so the unions were a big contributor. Except for the DSA. And of course we have higher limits for contributions. We can raise \$500.00 dollars for individuals compared to \$250.00 at the City Council level. So not only do we have a lot of unions that we went to for financial support, but there are hundreds of non-profit agencies that do business with the county. So, there is a sector of the community – I mean there's people that do business with VTA because the board of supervisors is represented on VTA as well – so there are all kinds of access points.

**Moon:**

Did you find it difficult – was it at that point that you'd already become so much a part of political process that it wasn't hard for you to really move into the county-level kind of fundraising versus the city?

**Alvarado:**

No, you know and I had good mentors like Zoe Lofgren and one of my strongest supporters when I came on the board was Susanne Wilson, and, you know, she's, and I talked to her to you about how she took me aside years before when I first decided to run for the city council. So there's a network of women too that are very well organized. I, you know, I got the DAWN endorsement, um Democratic Activist Women, NOW; I got all of the major endorsements. And with the endorsement – I mean, environmental groups – with the endorsement oftentimes comes a donation as well.

**Moon:**

Were you involved at all with the National Women's Political Caucus, or with CEWAER?

**Alvarado:**

I was involved with CEWAER, and well, you know, that was one of Susanne Wilson's creations.

**Moon:**

Um-hm, right.

**Alvarado:**

Um, I was at the beginning, but over time I just kind of drifted away.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

In particular because, while I am tremendously proud of being a feminist, these organizations—we have a lot of women that are active in this county - and this may be a strange thing to say, Danelle, but I figure that there's a lot of white women out there who are advocating in the same way that I would. And fewer women advocating or doing things that are of particular interest and importance to the minority community. And I says you know I don't have to be over there because I know that there's going to be twenty women representing this point of view: Planned Parenthood or whatever the, you know, whatever the issue may be there is a white swath of women that would be out there to advocate or to take positions on.

But for me, I have to carve out at the Board of Supervisors areas – I mean I’m the only minority, on the board and I was at the City Council as well so my perspective is, not unique, but it is pretty much targeted at those underrepresented constituencies. And that’s why the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Network, for example, was so important for us to begin, because there were a lot of young Latinas who were getting pregnant at 13,14,15 years of age. And so we needed to tailor a program that would address in particular that population. Um, and even at the Pregnancy Prevention Network, there were, there were people from all over the county that were on that task force. But there were no women leaders, other than myself as the Chair of that group. It’s a very unusual place to be at Danelle because on the one hand you want to be an insider with everybody else, but on the other hand I have often felt myself to be the outsider – not in any negative way, but outside of the mainstream political approach to problem-solving. And I - in some ways that has distinguished me for the good and oftentimes for the bad, right?

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

So, it’s a two-edge sword. Nonetheless, I’m happy in that place. It means a lot to me to be able to – as a matter of fact we had an issue with the board yesterday about a bill that is going to Congress that would deny federal aid for higher education to anyone who has had a history of drug abuse.

**Moon:**

Oh really.

**Alvarado:**

Well, I mean I think that's onerous, right, it's onerous. Our board, the majority of our board, decided that they should take a neutral position. Well, I voted against the neutral position because I'm actually opposed to it and for this reason: we're doing a lot of work here trying to reform the juvenile justice system; we're always looking to expand opportunities for underrepresented groups. We know that the educational system in our country is so bad and only caters to those who can afford it, –

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

- so that if you have someone who has been in prison and has reformed his or her life, decides that they want to go on to college – they want a second chance, right? Well, they're going to be impeded because of this history. So it's not a good law.

**Moon:**

No.

**Alvarado:**

So in fact I'm going to write letters to all of our Congressional Delegates to say this is not good and the reason why I I'm using that example to contrast and compare the work that other elected officials do, and that work I do is because I know that the majority of kids with drug abuse problems that are cited – I mean there's a lot of kids that are into drugs but they're never cited, right? They've got the attorneys or they've got the parents that then bail them out. The majority of those that are cited end up in our juvenile hall or end up in our prison are minorities.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And so it's like this is a step backward. We should be trying to remove as many impediments as we can for the benefit of this country in particular. We're concerned about the workforce of the future. Anyway, that's just an aside to the conversation but I think you get the point.

**Moon:**

No, I do get the point and I think that speaks on volumes to how you have approached your political work. One of the things I was talking to Susanne Wilson about over the summer was that the way, you know, she always has felt that she's voted according to her conscience and according to the values that she holds not according to the issues necessarily. And it sounds to me like that's how you approach your political work –

**Alvarado:**

I do.

**Moon:**

- in the same way is that you really have core values that you have to meet as a part of that process.

**Alvarado:**

But it's also part of who I am, you know those core values – yes – they are part of one's philosophy and one's makeup, but you ought to, got to, remember too where you came from. And it seems that that where you came from has tremendous bearing and has had for me. I don't remember, I mean - I don't - never forget where I came from. And that's part of what gets lost in the shuffle sometimes. You so intend when you're in office to go

along that you lose sight of who you are. And I'm not saying this in a pejorative way at all, but for me my upbringing and where I came from is so significant to who I am. Even today it's it's I tried to, uh, well let's not go there.

**Moon:**

Okay.

**Alvarado:**

But it's very important. So anyway, um, but the access to money was always available. That's one of the reasons why I thought, gee how come we don't get opposition? I mean I raised \$200,000.00. I'd never raised that much money for a campaign before. And it was probably closer to \$250,000.00. But by then I was seasoned in the way of politics. I knew if I wanted to get my message out, I was going to have to raise money and especially when I saw I was going to have a candidate who had the potential for raising a lot of money as well. And so it was practical and the right thing to do and we carried it off.

**Moon:**

Now, after you had been, after you won both the elections, did you get a different sort of responsiveness from the Willow Glen community after that?

**Alvarado:**

Well, you know I've maintained contact with them. I've been out there and I've supported their Founders' Day events and so they've gotten to know me better. Also, I'm a great consumer in Willow Glen. I love Lincoln Avenue; they've got all of my favorite little stores there, right. So over time, I've come to know a lot of the property owners and the business owners and the neighborhood associations as well. And my Chief of Staff,

Kristina, who was a neighborhood leader there in Willow Glen, has a lot of connections.

So, I had been accepted – so to speak.

**Moon:**

Well I would imagine at this point –

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, at this point. And in fact, I went to a neighborhood association meeting before June because we had this Measure A on the ballot which would have increased the sales tax by a half cents. And I was very opposed to that. Not because I was opposed to raising money for the county – we desperately need it – but because of the way it was put together and foisted upon the public. Some backroom deals were made on how that was going to get to the voters, and it was a means of circumventing the two-thirds requirement that the VTA and some of the board members here decided. If they take it to the voters for a half cents sales tax, then it will only require 50 percent majority vote. So I went out to my constituents and I says you know what I'm in a real hard place cause I know how desperately the county needs the money. And I was supporting going to the voters for a quarter cents sales tax increase because we gotta protect our hospital we gotta protect our services.

But this is clearly a violation, in my view, of the two-thirds requirement. And so I'm telling you why I'm voting against it. Well I think people were pleased – I [unintelligible, 00:26:10 ] voted remain, I don't know, its plenty important – but as some said to me they just appreciated the honesty.

**Moon:**

Right.



**Alvarado:**

Um, and it's hard Danelle when you – I have become more and more determined to always be as transparent and as honest as I can. You know, there may have been times in my earlier years as a politician when I didn't know any better. And I may have gone along to get along. But I am so infuriated with the quality of politics in our country in the last many years. From the national scene to the state scene to the local scene that I am bound and determined that I will never speak out at both sides. I, even if people disagree with me that's okay but I will never, never speak an untruth as I see it because it is so unfair and it's not right to try to convince the electorate to your mode of thinking by using tactics such as those that are currently employed. I am just so disheartened by all of that, that I need to set myself as the example that honesty does pay off.

**Moon:**

Yeah, and the voters want it.

**Alvarado:**

And they do. You see those ads and you just don't know what they mean. Television ads – they say one thing - but you know they are saying something else as well. So we have to set the tone and we have to set the example, right?

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

But it's a good space for me to be at.

**Moon:**

It is a good space for you to be at especially with all of the things that you've been championing in your, in your period in politics. Now, let's talk a little bit about some of the programs that you've been so instrumental in developing. So can you talk a little bit about the Girls' For Change program and how that kind of evolved and what your role is in that?

**Alvarado:**

Well it actually started with uh, with, with establishing the Office of Women's Advocacy. I mean we have women in jail right? We have women who are being sold, we have so many issues. It's not just about the abortion issue there are domestic violence, I mean there are so many issues that affect the lives of women. And as much as we have advanced as a society insofar as parity is concerned, we still have so many problems where women are victimized over and over again. So in setting up the Office of Women's Advocacy, it was my intention that we would bring the Commission on the Status of Women all of our advocates, NOW, we would bring DAWN, we would bring all of these organizations that represent women. And we had a tremendous time talking about how we wanted to have a person in the county government that can help to coordinate, to bring the issues forward so that we wouldn't be doing them organization by organization, piecemeal, but that we could develop some kind of a comprehensive approach that would certainly highlight the issues affecting women. So, from that came the whole idea of Girls for Change because women do have the power to make choices in their lives that will lessen the victimization or eliminate it in their lives. And so we thought it was really important to bring young high schoolers together to begin to talk to them about the power that they have in their own lives for their own lives, and for society. And it was fabulous,

it was fabulous. As you know Girls for Change has now spun off. And its doing tremendously good work along the same lines. But it spun out of the Office for Women's Advocacy and if you can just imagine what that means in the next five to ten years to have these girls from Santa Clara County go to this training, be connected to mentors, to role models, and also take leadership roles themselves – I mean some of the work that these young girls have done through the Girls for Change program is very, very impressive and heart warming. And a lot of these girls through – and there's a lot of minority girls that have gone through this program as well, we've had some outstanding students from the east side schools that participated and I think it just awesome, it is absolutely awesome – so when Girls for Change spun out of the Office for Women's Advocacy in May, and we started to reconsider what – because there are so many issues, you know, and if you try to do too much – in fact there was another program that the earlier Pat Lee had started before the Girls for Change that would take a look at the comparisons between work in the private sector for women and work in the public sector, I spent a whole year working on that project, talking to the private sector folks, talking to other non-profits and to other – and some good work came out of it, but it was such a broad sweep of a program that never really got off the ground.

So, then, having learned from that, we decided that we needed to really focus. Where can we do the most? And so what the OWA's doing now through its new director is there doing a lot with the women in our jails. That's really important because our women's population is growing in the jails, and it's important not only to, to, to, to understand why they're getting there – you know, a lot of them are prostitutes, but ,and it always irritates that the Johns never get caught, it's always the prostitutes, but anyway –

**Moon:**

Even the rich prostitutes?

**Alvarado:**

Oh yeah and you know, and then they're even, they have families. As so to the degree that we can understand who they are, how they go into trouble, what kind of services we can give them while they're in, and what kind of aftercare we can refer them to when they're gone, I think that will make a big big difference. But the domestic violence, I mean the Domestic Violence Council under Judge Lucero, I mean that's another one that just has grown by leaps and bounds. And it's part of the Greenbook Project, I mean all of, I mean, I don't know how to tell you Danelle but these, this new foci, on women's issues in a narrower vein, I think, will make a bigger difference in time to come. You know we've got great battered shelters for women, we've got, um, networks really working on domestic violence from everything we have and a social worker available when a cop comes and responds to a domestic violence situation. I mean it's just, it's just if you were, if we were to talk just about that area of improvement and focus and potential outcomes – not [unintelligible, 00:34:11] – it would be rich, it would a well of, of good work. And it's not just me, Danelle, I take a leadership, but this happens to be a phenomenal county.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

We've got tremendously active women and we are constantly, constantly pushing the envelope, constantly pushing the envelope. And I think that is the remarkable thing about

this county, is that we do not rest on our laurels. We're constantly looking for more and improved and better ways of improving life for women.

**Moon:**

Well this kind of reminds me a little bit about kind of the theme of my project which deals with the whole understanding of the feminist capital of this region, and um, I think that in retrospect in looking at the number of women that are in, in actual political, actual office holders, has actually gone down. –

**Alvarado:**

Yes it has –

**Moon:**

since the 90's, so um, but if you look at it in a holistic sort of way that that there is still the, the feminist activism that is part of that whole, you know, organizational sort of structure that under girds what you're doing and what the cities are doing and so -

**Alvarado:**

And what the county and what – I mean the non profits; almost every non profit in this county has a woman as its executive director.-

**Moon:**

Do you have any thoughts on why women are not as successful right now in –

**Alvarado:**

in politics? –

**Moon:**

in politics as they were in the earlier, you know? –

**Alvarado:**

I don't know, I don't know, um. It's hard, for one thing, to be in politics. And I think life has become increasingly complicated in the last ten years. And more and more women as, as breadwinners can't take the time off to run for office.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

They're still raising children too. And it's a very demanding occupation. If you want to be a parent, and if you have to support your family, and even in situations where there are two breadwinners, the cost of living in this area is extraordinarily high. The pressures and demands of living in Silicon Valley are extraordinarily high as well. And I just think that women feel that they can do a better job, not in politics per se, but maybe in a volunteer organization or contributing to a board or through a commission or [unintelligible, 00:36:45], not having the world's responsibility on their shoulders but having a place in the world and in their community to be a part of making things better. I, I was, I just happened to be watching television a few nights ago and for some reason I turned it on to the community channel for city council, and Judy Chirco, who is on the council, was chairing a meeting that was comprised of neighborhood activists. They were called the Project Area Committee and they had been working with the Smart Neighborhood Initiative. And it's like I was just blown away, because there were about 15 women, 15 people, I would say that 11 of the 15 were women, and they're all working at their neighborhood program to bring causes to the attention of the city council. I was blown away. So you're right, while we may not have *the* figurehead politician, feminist

politician, you've got tons of women working out there. I mean when I go, when, when you go to a meeting on the Domestic Violence Council it's just remarkable.

**Moon:**

Yeah, I was at the um, I was at the National Women's Political Caucus, or no, it was the Commission on the Status of Women's lunch that they had, or breakfast that they had in August - I think it was - And I was so impressed -

**Alvarado:**

I know!

**Moon:**

-I was so impressed by the number of women that, you know, came to that meeting, it was a huge gathering -

**Alvarado:**

Oh yeah!

**Moon:**

- very impressive, very, you know um, successful women and it was very diverse. It was a very diverse group and I thought that, I was very impressed by that. Um -

**Alvarado:**

So we happen to be living in a, in a county that is progressive but that there is so much flourishing in terms of civic engagement.

**Moon:**

- Right.

**Alvarado:**

And so people say, Well how come people don't vote anymore? I don't know, I don't know. You know, I don't want to get in to that. But I do know that in this county everywhere that you go you see activism with most of it being led by women.

**Moon:**

Right, and I think that's been a long tradition here in, um, this region – you know - from the early 70's actually probably starting in the 60's. Now um, thinking, looking forward you're going to be retiring from office, um, in the next couple of years, what would you –

**Alvarado:**

Can I talk to you about two other issues I think are very, very significant, um, and it was kind of the, the platform from which I launched what became the Juveniles Detention Reform. It was way back in my early years on the board – probably 98' – when Judge Read Ambler noted from the bench that at least 65 percent of the kids in Juvenile Hall or the ranches had a learning deficiency. Well here we go again, it's mostly minority kids right, and they've never been tested, they've never been given their independent learning plan. It was just a disaster. So, we began to challenge the County Office of Education for the lack of good, uh schools, uh good, good education [unintelligible,00:40:07] institutional schools. But that was my first introduction to this whole thing about learning disabilities. And I thought – because I have struggled for so many years Danelle trying to figure out what it is about our community – and for me I'm referring to a Latino community in particular – that we just can't seem to be making any headway. Our drop out rates is just bigger than anybody else's and [unintelligible, 00:40:39] I mean the adolescent pregnancy, the drug abuse – all of that – I said, What is going on here? So when I heard Judge Ambler talking about that, I said, My god, that may explain a lot of



things. It may be that our kids have a learning disability and if they've never been diagnosed or helped it could lead to all kinds of failures at the school level which then just leads them to other failures, Right? Well from that then we begin to form the Early Childhood Collaborative.

**Moon:**

Okay, that's right.

**Alvarado:**

And the Early Childhood Collaborative was intended to develop a center where kids could be tested early on. But, from that Early Childhood Collaborative came the Center for Learning and Achievement which is now a project at the hospital. But from that Early Childhood Collaborative came the underpinnings of what has become the work of the FIRST Five Commission. And so it's like the issues about, I mean the, the way in which we address holistically the issues affecting women - well in this instance, Read Ambler's call to action [unintelligible, 00:42:05] prompted me to make a call to action for learning disabilities, and I learned so much about the neurology of the brain and how critical it is for children to learn – I mean how they get the greatest capacity for learning from when they're born until five. So, I mean it is a monumental piece of work Danelle, starting with that to the Collaborative to the FIRST Five Commission to the establishment of our center for learning and achievement. It just kind of blows me away when I think about how much we have covered how much terrain we have covered. But it absolutely informed our interest in reforming juvenile justice system because we thought these kids are getting into trouble because we have ignored the early childhood, we have ignored all the impediments to their success, and it's like, How on earth have we

gotten away with dealing with these issues on such a piecemeal basis? I cannot deal with the development of a human being in a piecemeal way – just address that he happens to be a truant or that he has to be or that he should be off in the streets or that he’s, um, graffiti menace or I mean the, the, the, way in which we have dealt with problems has been so narrow and so lacking in inclusiveness to understand that it’s more than just the fact that a kid, a kid is not going to school that is the problem. There’s other reasons why this child isn’t going to school.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

But, so if you can imagine that in 10 years we have completely learned that to problem solve and to make lives for children and families better, we have to get to a new consensus. Otherwise we will continue to be taking care of issues after they’ve reached the level of crisis, or after it’s too late.

**Moon:**

Have you been able to determine with this, all of the various collaboratives that have kind of emerged in the last 10 years, have there been studies to, to show levels of improvement?

**Alvarado:**

We, well we’re going to have incredible longitudinal information. Studies of information, um, this is all fairly new, I mean this only has happened in the last five years. The Center for Learning and Achievement now, however, we’ve got a lot of drug-addicted mothers as you well know.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And so along with the kids that have, that are born to drug-addicted mothers are going immediately into the Center for Learning and Achievement.

**Moon:**

Oh, that's fabulous.

**Alvarado:**

We also discovered – I mean this will blow you away – that there are some children that actually are born with mental disorders and that they can be tested at a very, very, *very* young age to determine – I mean it it's just unbelievable. So, the thing now that is going to produce tremendous benefits, I believe, is occurring, is coming out of the FIRST Five Commission. Two years ago the FIRST Five Commission began to look at a lot of the factors that affect high risk children. And so they broke it down into what they call the Ecologies Right Group the parents immediately, the grandparents and extended family and then it's the neighborhood and then there's the school and there's the church and all those other ecologies [unintelligible, 00:45:57], and broadening it out to the school and to society and so forth. But when they finish all of their research to family court, to the mental health department and to social services, they said, We have been barking up the wrong tree, we decided we've been barking up the wrong tree because we have only taken into account poverty as the reason for a child's failure. It isn't poverty at all. Some people that are very poor raise remarkably resilient kids. And so we began to diagram what were all of the influences, including poverty, but including domestic

violence, child abuse, all of the things that a child who lives in high risk environment is subjected to. So as a result of that, I mean it, it's pretty unique. There is no other in county in California that has done what we have done and there are 58 FIRST Five Commissions as you know. But this work that we are doing which now has led us to select the zip codes in our county where the most children – zero to five years [unintelligible, 00:47:19] – in the most high risk environments that's where we're going to be putting all of our services. But, there's going to be longitudinal studies to go along with that, so that that in ten years, well hopefully sooner than that, we're going to be able to see some – because we're going to be evaluating every step of the way – but we're probably going to be able to see some good statistics and outcomes within the next two to three years. But that will help us to build our case for the fact that you cannot spread out resources so thinly they don't do anybody any good, but the resources need to be concentrated for those high risks where they're actually at. And we've got to start with kids when they're very, very little. You see everything has a connection. Everything that I have done is connected one way or the other, including the health plan insurance. That was my initiative to get the council, I mean the board, to put money into – I mean we, we directed our hospital staff to go out and figure out how we could cover kids in this area and then we put money into it. But there is a connection every single, everything that we have done is connected and is becoming more and more integrated and more and more enmeshed. So that, you know, by the time I leave I hope we will have institutionalized some of these efforts and that we'll be able to see some real payoff in the time to come. And I just hope that what we're able to prove, by the work that we have done and these linkages and these connections and this meshing of resources and this understanding of

how peoples' lives evolve, that the organization itself will be so on its way to recognizing all of that in doing its work according to it, accordingly. You know, Juvenile detention reform, we have entirely, entirely new way of approaching social and anti-social behavior on the part of these kids. *And* while we've got lots of new programs in there for them that we never had before, what is most important is the fact that the training and the direction and the policies are more geared toward, How can we help you? -

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

- Instead of, How can we punish you for the misdeeds that you have, that you have done. So it, I mean, even in this time of tremendous anxiety because our budget situation is so bad, I mean I am still feeling really optimistic because what we have done, um, in the last ten years is to set a new direction for this county in a way that I don't think it can be reversed. And it's going to be there for a long time.

**Moon:**

Well that's an important legacy that you'll leave behind when you leave because you've been so involved with all of these various collaboratives and you've been really forward thinking in that. Now looking at the current political situation and looking at the lack of female candidates, who's going to be able to replace you and be able to promote those things that are important social policy issues, do you think?

**Alvarado:**

Well I heard some good news a few days ago. I heard that Sally Lieber, currently speaker pro tempore, is going to run for Pete McCue's office.

**Moon:**

Oh, is that right?

**Alvarado:**

And, I think that would be fabulous because she is also a very strong woman, um, very hard worker, has great political values, and with her work, um, at the state level, if she comes here to the Board of Supervisors I think it's going to be a big plus. She's a strong woman, you know. Then I also heard, insofar as my race is concerned, that there are three women that are considering it.

**Moon:**

Any Latino women?

**Alvarado:**

One of them is, yeah. So, we're just kind of waiting, um, we're waiting until next year to see what the crop of candidates looks like. But I do think there are two men that have already expressed an interest in running for this office. But I, I would hope that – there are two women that I had in mind as well that I want talk to, to see if they have any interest. Both Latino women. I don't know that they would do it, but I'm going to be at least having an conversation with them. So, we might capture the majority on the Board of Supervisors in 08.

**Moon:**

That would be exciting -

**Alvarado:**

That would be, it would be. We haven't been a majority since Diane and Zoe and Susie were on...yeah. So it would be great.

**Moon:**

- It would be really great. It would also be great to see more, uh you know, ethnic minorities represented in all, all of these levels of government.

**Alvarado:**

Because there is a different perspective, there's a different view of the world. Life's experiences are different.

**Moon:**

Well, just your, the way that you were raised and kind of coming from those agricultural fields-sort-of-background and that community, um, gosh you know your experiences are totally different from the, the kind of the middle class, you know, white bread experiences of Susie and Janet and all of the other women that have been part of that.

Now, one of the, I just wanted to ask you one follow-up question about some of the story you had told about your earlier kind of grass roots activism that took place when you were young and you had talked a little bit about Cesar Chavez.

**Alvarado:**

Yes, did, did we agree on a time?

**Moon:**

Let me just ask this question really quick and then you, you can just try and follow-up on that.

**Alvarado:**

And rap it up because –

**Moon:**

- we can, I know you're busy and I don't want to take too much of your time, but um, you had mentioned that he, that kind of the activism that was taking place with Chavez in the community at that time was really important to some of your development in -

**Alvarado:**

- oh my god and so many other people too.

**Moon:**

- Right, so was that, in looking at that, that was really a community of activists taking place or were there members within the Latino community then that were opposing what Cesar Chavez was doing or was it really a kind of united sort of –

**Alvarado:**

Oh it was. It was just a phenomenal movement. I mean it was not different Martin Luther King.

**Moon:**

- Right, that's what, I was just curious about that because I was wondering if it was like a small portion of the, the you know, the kind of the barrio community there that was part of that or was you know, so that's –

**Alvarado:**

- Well the thing about, just like with Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez had the church behind him. And so there were a lot of parish-level people.

**Moon:**

- So activism also was connected to the church?

**Alvarado:**



It was, it was. But it was part of, I mean, it was grander than any of us. It was, we were all one in this exciting movement that, at the core of it all, reflected on the needs of the farm workers. But it also was the umbrella for all of our other aspirations for social justice.

**Moon:**

Right, and for political activism.

**Alvarado:**

And for political activism because so many, I mean so many, of us learned about politics in that environment. And even when we were, when, when Cesar was out here in the fifties before he went off to Delano, and we were forming the CSO – again, and that was a microcosm of what was to come later on – but even then the aspirations were there for political empowerment, and so going door to door and establishing the Community Services Organization and getting people turned on to voting and participating, that was just a little, I don't know, a little grain I guess.

**Moon:**

It must have been a very exciting time to, you know, be part of the whole kind of [unintelligible, 00:55:47] –

**Alvarado:**

Oh, it still brings tears to my eyes when I think about it. It was probably one of the most important, life-forming events of my life. And I mean even to the point – and I don't know if I told you this, but when I look at my own kids today, we used to go down when, when, when Cesar was fasting in jail in Salinas and we went down there and we did the candlelight vigil with our kids and all, there's something so powerful about the sense of

unity and sense of being part of something bigger than oneself that stays with you forever. I mean my kids to this day – and they were very young – remember the marches and they remember that candlelight vigil and in some ways the farm worker movement didn't affect them as deeply as it affected me. But they still have elements of that important time within them and, you know, I have four of my kids are just really active. They, they, they've carved out a presence in the community for themselves. My son Jaime, who is the director of the Mayfair Initiative, you know it's right there in the barrio, Mayfair. Teresa, who is doing the Hispanic Charity Foundation, and my daughter, my other daughter, who's really, she's a, a healer. She wants to be, she wants to be. And my son, Michael, who has been so involved in the politics of Evergreen, that, I mean it's just pretty amazing when I see how much they are living there lives and maybe as a result of their father, and my work, maybe because they were part of the farm worker movement, even at a tender age, whatever, whatever seed was planted in them along the way is now bearing fruit too. And that's pretty, in fact I was just blown away. I have a granddaughter, she's in her last year at Whitman College up in Washington State, is pretty remarkable. She went, she took one semester this year and went for one month, um for three months, four months to Chiapas. Chiapas is a hot bed of activism in Mexico. You know we've got the Commandante, whatever he is, the Che Guevara, I guess, of the times. Anyway, she spent four months studying in this little Mexican village. She got to organizing immigrants, I mean doing some phenomenal work. She's doing some phenomenal work. So she came back, she was a changed person. I mean I could see how much she had matured, and how much she had learned. But she came back and spent the summer working with an immigrant rights organization, up in Oakland. But I talked to her on the

phone yesterday, and she's organizing, and it's part of her curriculum at school, she is organizing a group of thirteen students there, all organizing these seminars where there taking students from high school and students at Whitman to seminars and discussions about the whole immigrant scene.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

Only because there is so much misunderstanding and there so much ill-flamed emotion, blah-blah-blah. And so they're going to be talking about the issue and bring in speakers from all perspectives. And so, I thought, Wow, this is really fabulous. But the thing that blew me away is that she has a radio program.

**Moon:**

Oh, she does? Oh my god!

**Alvarado:**

And she says, "Grandma, do you know what I call my radio program?" She calls it the "Happy neighbor", "El Vecino feliz," Because that was the name of her grandfather's, my husband's radio program. And it just gave me chills. So, I mean, it's all about change. But I keep telling you Danelle, there are all of these connections with all these things that are tied into each other.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

So it's a wonderful for me, as I am looking ahead to my transition into another life, its very, very, satisfying to know that the [unintelligible, 01:00:44 ] that they will continue to change for change and success for our brothers and well being.

**Moon:**

Well, that's a great way to end this interview, and I thank you so much for giving me so much for your time.

Alvarado:

Well, thank you. I've enjoyed it. It's been great talking to you.

Moon:

Well, I just brought two copies, one for my file and one for yours. Its just basically just saying authorization—

end of interview 01:01:13