

Interview with: Blanca Alvarado  
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[Interview #3]  
[Alvarado#3.Wilson#7.wav]  
[111:46] at beginning {start at [00:00]}

**Moon:**

My name is Danelle Moon. I'm the director of San Jose State University's Special Collections and Archives, and today I am interviewing Blanca Alvarado in her office at the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors in San Jose. Today's date is October 6, 2006. (possible cut here?) It's about really (tape skipping (?) - unintelligible). You hadn't really talked about the work that you'd done on the board of supervisors, and there were a number of projects that you've, you know, list[ed] on your bio that I think are really interesting to this project. And just to getting an understanding of, kind of, your dimension as a politician and the things that you care about. So, um, maybe we could just start by talking a little bit about, you know, 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, um, then I wanted to get you to talk a little bit about some of the programs that you developed like the Girls for Change and the Office of Women's Advocacy.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, it's hard to remember what we've done in ten years (both laugh). But, um—

**Moon:**

Well, you've done a lot according to—

**Alvarado:**

(laughs) Yeah, I know!

**Moon:**

-the information that I've read, I mean, just looking at all the various assignments. Um, oftentimes I think, when people think of the, um, city government and particularly this area where transportation and the environment have been such fundamental, sort of, you know, imprints of what has happened with policy, but there are so many, there's so much more social policy that's, you know, part of what you've been doing on the board of supervisors in particular, and so you, just by looking at (laughs) your vita, from adolescent pregnancy prevention, you know, to, um, 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:**

Um-hm. Yeah. So, where do we start?

**Moon:**

So, why don't you tell me-

**Alvarado:**

There?

**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 can explore these other programs that you really were instrumental in developing.

**Alvarado:**

I had talked about the campaigns, um, for the city council, and, um, the exciting, 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 of the city. And, um, each supervisorial district has two-hundred fifty to three hundred thousand people.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

So, it was a much bigger territory. And although I had already, um, 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 Glennites did not like the fact that an east-sider was the candidate for the board. There were elements of discrimination in how I was perceived. Uh, 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? (Moon laughs). So, it was kind of a class comment, and a class reaction. But I took it in stride, um, and made myself, um, as presentable to those constituents as I could. And I was able to demonstrate, I think, um, despite their bias, that I had been in governance for a long time, and certainly having received the endorsement of Zoe Lofgren and other reputable elected officials, um, that I was a qualified candidate to represent them. But it was a nasty race nonetheless. Um, and 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, um, sought out a candidate to run against me. And that was particularly evident in the choices they made. Scott Mathieson , who was the opponent in that race, ah was a (downtown ??) resident, downtown San Jose resident. And he had never, never been in a board or a commission, or had no political experience at all, but with the help of Tom McEnery, and his ilk, uh, he certainly, um, got some stature behind his candidacy. And the reason why Tom sought out a candidate to run against me, ‘cause he was still pretty upset with me for having supported Zoe to 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 out rather shakily, uh, the re-election campaign. And two, two points that I want to make – and I’ve 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, making the same endorsement. And so I assumed – and of course, you know, this was such a large organization.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And it had so many unions. And every one acts independent of the other. You’ve got probation officers, you’ve got government attorneys’ 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 [?? sounds like house is off sayder??] [00:06:46] told

me not to worry about it, that I was going to get endorsed by his group, I went to the interview, um, 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, I found out later that it was actually Tom McEnery who had convinced them that Mathieson was a better candidate to endorse than me. And – and that's what they did.

**Moon:**

Yeah, who was the DSA? What was-

**Alvarado:**

Deputy Sheriffs' Association.

**Moon:**

Oh, the Deputy Sheriff, okay.

**Alvarado:**

So, um, that was one of the first real, really, eye openers. And when I went out to Willow Glen and perceived some degree of hostility. Um, I realized that the fact that I had served on the city council for fourteen years, and that I had received the strong endorsement of some very powerful and influential people, um, wasn't gonna make a difference in some sectors of the community. So where I started off with some assumption that I was gonna have an easy race, 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. He – I talked to you

about the plume serpent(??) and all of the “extrenuous”, uh – well, oh, participants in that whole thing, right? Uh, but he very cleverly used that, uh, in his campaign material against me. Oh, so it was not a piece of cake as I had assumed it might be. Um, and so it – and it was just the two candidates, so we knew that there was gonna be decision made by the voters in June, so it 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 attended so many neighborhood associations, and just did what you have to do in a campaign of this breadth, and of this cope. 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. Um – but we did it, and we had a nice big victory celebration, so that – and that was in ’96 – uh, in 2000, then 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 McHugh a couple of days ago, um, because we’re talking about the fact that he and I will be termed out in two years. And, uh, was say – we were considering that there will be quite a slew of candidates running for these two seats. And it seems rather strange to me that there was no opposition in 2000, or in 2004. Um, and what he thought was the point, is that – you would need to raise a lot of money for supervisorial district. And, um, people just don’t want to go up against incumbency. 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 – I had a, 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 oftentimes you get pretty caught up in your ivory tower, so to speak.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And the work is so demanding, that you do lose touch sometimes with the constituents. And except for the enormous amount of constituent calls that we get on any number of (??) – of issues, of services. Um, the public at large is fairly disconnected from county government. Uh, and I've never quite understood that. In all of the years that I had been here, I have never understood what is the disconnection between the voters, and the residents of the county, and the board of supervisors. And 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?

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

Our judicial system, our law and justice system, that all of the cities rely on would be nonfunctioning. I mean, can you imagine not having a court system, like, not having jails. What about the hospital? I mean, we are the first responders in the event of an emergency. If it's a terrorist attack, if it's a 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 hospital, they don't use our welfare system. You know, most are law-abiding citizens(??) who [don't?] end up in our jails. But we've got our kids, that are juveniles, and create, sometimes, havoc in our 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 was that a – that was a contrast to what your experience was in the council?

**Alvarado:**

Completely. Completely. And because at the city level, you know, it's always about where this housing project is gonna 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's gonna be too heavy, and so you're dealing with some practical things, and certainly people do get threatened oftentimes 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, you have(??) people coming. And then, you know, the city does projects: parks in the neighborhood, um, community centers in the neighbor[hood], libraries – so those are services and facilities that everybody loves. And so whenever you build something like this, which is a community asset, tremendous knowledge, awareness, and support for that.



**Moon:**

And looking at-

**Alvarado:**

Over here, that's not the case.

**Moon:**

Right. Now, um, it's not the case at the board of supervisors.

**Alvarado:**

Right.

**Moon:**

So there's more grassroots political activism, it seems, at the more local, city level than at the county.

**Alvarado:**

Um-hm.

**Moon:**

Now, I'm looking backwards at the 1996 campaign, and then later the 2000. Um, how did you, um, raise the money for the, um, you know, the campaigning that needed to take place?

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, I raised over two hundred thousand dollars for the first campaign. Uh, and by then, you know, we – I said earlier, we have thirty-eight unions here. So the unions were a big contributor, except for the DSA. And of course we have higher limits, uh, for contributions. We can raise five hundred dollars from individuals, uh, compared to, um, two hundred fifty at the city council level.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

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 is, um, people who do business with VTA because the board of supervisors is represented on the VTA as well. So there was – there are all kinds of access points.

**Moon:**

Did you find it difficult, um – was it, at that point you had already become so much a part of the 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, you know. One of my strong supporters when I came on the board was Susie Wilson. And, you know, she's – and I talked to you about how she took me aside, uh, 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. Oh, you know, I got the DAWN endorsement – Democrat 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:**

Right. Were you involved at all with the National Women's Political Caucus or with CEWAER [California Elected Women's Association for Education and Research]?

**Alvarado:**

I was involved with CEWAER. Well, you know, that was one of Susie Wilson's creations. Um, I was, at the beginning, but over time, I just kind of drifted away. In particular because, while I am tremendously proud of being a feminist, um, these are organizations – we have a lot of women that are active in this county. Um, and this may be a strange thing to say, uh, Danelle, but I figured 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.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

Uh, 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, and whatever they – [inaudible] I mean, whatever the issue may be, there is a wide swath of women that would be out there to advocate and to take positions on it. But for me, I had to carve out, um, 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 under-represented 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 thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years of age. And so we needed to tailor a program that would address in particular that population. Um, and you know, even at the pregnancy prevention network there were people from all over the county that were on that task force, but there

were no women leaders other than myself, was the chair of it. 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 often had felt myself to be the outsider, not in any negative way, but outside of the mainstream political approach to problem-solving. Um, and in some ways that has distinguished me for the good, and oftentimes for the bad.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

So, it's a two-edged 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 at the board yesterday about a bill that is going through 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 think that that's (odious ??), right? It's odious (??). Our board, the majority of our board, decided that they should take the 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 our criminal justice system. We're always looking to expand opportunities for under-represented groups. We know that the educational system in our country is so bad and only caters to those who can afford it. So that, if you have someone who's been in prison, and has reformed his or her life, and decided that they

want to go on to college, and they want a second chance, right? Well, they're going to be impeded because of the system. So it's not a good law.

**Moon:**

No.

**Alvarado:**

So, in fact, I'm gonna 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 the work that I do, 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?

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

They've got the attorneys, they've got the parents that are gonna 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:**

Um-hm. 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 if we're gonna start (??) 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, um, volumes to, um, how you have approached your political work. One of the things I was talking to Susie Wilson about over the summer was that, um, the way 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, um, 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 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 oughtta – gotta remember, too, where you came from. So, and – and it seems that where you came from has tremendous bearing. It has had for me. I don't remember – I mean, I don't never forget where I came from.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

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:**

(laughs) Okay.

**Alvarado:**

But it's – 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 two hundred thousand dollars; I'd never raised that much money for a campaign before. It's probably closer to two-hundred-fifty thousand dollars. But by then, I was seasoned in the way of politics. I knew that if I wanted to get my message out, I was gonna have to raise money. And especially when I saw that I was gonna have a candidate, who had the potential for raising a lot of money as well.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And so, it was the 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 point?

**Alvarado:**

Well, you know, I've maintained contact with them. I've been out there, and I've supported their founder's day event, 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, Christina, who was a neighborhood leader there in Willow Glen, and has a lot of connections. So, I had been accepted, so to speak.

**Moon:**

Well, I would imagine at this point, you would have. (laughs)

**Alvarado:**

(both talking at same time) Yeah, at this point. And in fact, um, 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-cent (inaudible). 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 that it was put together, and foisted upon the public. Some back room deals were made on how that was gonna get to the voters. And it was a means of circumventing the two-thirds requirement, um, that the VTA and some of the board members here decided. If they take it to the voters, for a half-cent sales tax, then it will only require, um, fifty-percent majority vote.

**Moon:**

Oh.

**Alvarado:**

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 would've supported going to the voters for a quarter-cent sales tax increase, 'cause we've gotta protect our hospital, we've 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. How they voted, I mean, I don't know, and that's not



important. But as some said to me, they just appreciated the honesty. Um, and it's hard then, you know, when you – I had become more and more determined to always be as transparent, as honest as I can. You know, there may have been times in my earlier – 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 of 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, um, convince the electorate to your voter thinking (??) by using tactics such as those that are being employed, um, after that – I am just so disheartened by all of that, that I need to set myself as an example that honesty does pay off.

**Moon:**

Yeah (laughs). And the voters want to have honest politicians.

**Alvarado:**

(both talking at same time) 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're saying something else. And well – So we have to set the tone and we have to set the example, right?

**Moon:**

Right. Well –

**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 the things that you have been championing, in your period in politics. Now, um, let's talk a little bit about some of the programs that you've been so instrumental in developing, and, um, so – Can you talk a little bit about the Girls for Change program, and how that, kind of, evolved and what your role was in that?

**Alvarado:**

Well, that really started with establishing the Office for Women's Advocacy. I mean, we have women in jail, right? We have women who are being, um, 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 – 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 would 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, um, 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 it's doing tremendously good work along the same line, but, um, it spun out of the Office of Women's Advocacy, and if you could just imagine what that means in the next five to ten years, to have these girls from Santa Clara County, going through this training, be connected to mentors, to role models, and also take leadership roles themselves, I mean (??) some of them – some of the work that these young girls had done through the Girls for Change program is very, very, um, impressive, and heartwarming. And a lot of these girls – 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's just awesome. It is absolute awesome. So, when Girls for Change spun out, uh, the Office of Women's Advocacy remained. 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 early – uh, 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 nonprofits and to other – and some good work came out of it, but it was such a broad sweep of a program that it never really got off the ground. So that 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, um, is they're doing a lot of work with the women in our jails. And that's – that's really important because our women's population is growing at the jails. And it's important not only to – to understand why they're getting there, as (??) a lot of them are prostitutes, but, um, and

that always irritates me, that the johns never get caught, but it's always the prostitutes, right?

**Moon:**

Right. (laughs)

**Alvarado:**

But –

**Moon:**

(inaudible) they think they're rich prostitutes, huh? (??)

**Alvarado:**

Oh yeah. And you know, and then, they're even, um – they have families. And so, to the degree that we can understand who they are, how they got into trouble, what kind of services we can give them while they're in, and what kind of after-care we can refer them to when they're gone, I think that'll 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 bown (??) shelters for women, we've got, um, networks really working on domestic violence from everything they 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 (inaudible) outcomes already. It would be rich – it would be a wealth of – of good work. And it's not just me. I – yeah, I

take a leadership, but this happens to be a phenomenal county, where we've got tremendously active women –

**Moon:**

Very.

**Alvarado:**

-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 since the (inaudible) 90s, so, um – but it – but if you look at it in a holistic sort of way, that there's still the feminist activism as part of that whole, you know, organizational, sort of, structure that undergirds what you're doing, and what the cities are doing and so on and so forth.

**Alvarado:**

And what the coun[ty] – well, what the – I mean in nonprofits, almost every nonprofit in this county has a woman as its executive director.

**Moon:**

Yeah. Do you have any thoughts on why women are not as successful right now in the-

**Alvarado:**

In politics?

**Moon:**

-in politics as they were in the earlier, you know, years?

**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. They're still raising children too. And it's a very demanding, um, occupation. If you want to be a parent, um, and if you have to, you know, 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 the 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 the volunteer organization, or contributing through a board or through a commission, or being (ling??), not having the whole world of responsibility on their shoulders, but having the place in the world and in their community to be a part of making things better. I – I was, uh – I just happened to be watching, um, television a few nights ago, and for some reason I turned it on to the, um, community channel for city council, um, and Judy Chirco (??), who's 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, uh, the Smart Neighborhood Initiative, and it's like, I was just blown away, because there were about fifteen women – fifteen people, I would say that eleven of the fifteen were women. And they're all working at their neighborhood level 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 got tons of women working out there.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

I mean, when I go – when you go to a meeting of the Domestic Violence Council, it's just remarkable.

**Moon:**

Yeah. I was at the, um, was it the National Women's Political Caucus – or no, it was the Commission on the Status of Women, the lunch that they had, or breakfast that they had in August, I think it was? And I was – 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, very impressive, very, you know, 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 – live 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, and I don’t want to get into 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 seventies, actually, the – probably starting in the sixties. Now, um, thinking – looking at – looking forward, you’re going to be, um, retiring from office, um, in the next couple of years. What – what would you –

**Alvarado:**

Can I talk to you about two other issues-

**Moon:**

Sure.

**Alvarado:**

-that I think are very, very significant, um, and it was kind of the platform from which I launched what became the juvenile detention reform. It was way back in my early years on the board, probably ’98, when Judge Read Ambler, uh, noted from the bench that at least sixty-five percent of the kids at juvenile hall, uh, 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, and it was just a disaster. So, we began to challenge the county office of education for the lack of good, uh, school – uh, good education at the institutional schools. Um, but that was my first introduction to this whole thing about learning disabilities. And I thought – ‘cause I had



struggled for so many years, Danelle, trying to figure out what it is about our community – and for me, I’m referring to the Latino community in particular – but we just can’t seem to be making any headway. Our dropout rate is just bigger than anybody else’s, and [unclear – sounds like widget then earn] – I mean, the adolescent pregnancy, the drug abuse, all of that, and I said, well, what is going on here? So when I heard Judge Ambler talking about that, I says, “My God, that may explain a lot of things.” And maybe that our kids have a learning disability, and if [then?] they’ve 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?

**Moon:**

Um-hm.

**Alvarado:**

Well, from that, then, we began to form the, uh, 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.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

But from that Early, uh, Childhood Collaborative, came the underpinnings of what has become the work of the First 5 Commission.

**Moon:**

Um-hm.

**Alvarado:**

And so, it's like the issues about – I mean – about (?) the way in which we have addressed holistically the issues affecting women, well in this instant, Read Ambler's call to action, oh, 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 have the greatest capacity for learning from the time they're born until five. So, I mean, it's a monumental piece of work, Danelle.

**Moon:**

So have you –

**Alvarado:**

Starting with that, to the collaborative, to the First 5 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 the juvenile justice system, because we thought these kids are getting into trouble because we have ignored their early childhood. We have ignored all these [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. You cannot deal with the development of a human being in a piecemeal way – just address the [thing?], he happens to be a truant, or that he has to be – or that he should be, uh, off of the streets, or

that he's a graffiti menace, or – I mean, 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's – kid is not going to school that is the problem.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

There's other reasons why this child isn't going to school, right.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

But – so, if you can imagine that in ten years we have completely learned that to problem-solve, and to make lives for children and families better, we have to get to the root causes. Otherwise we will continue to be taking care of issues after they've reached the level of crisis.

**Moon:**

Now have you been –

**Alvarado:**

(both talking at same time) (inaudible) too late.

**Moon:**

-able to determine, with this – all of these, you know, various collaboratives that have, kind of, emerged in the last ten years, have there been studies to show, um, levels of improvement? Or-

**Alvarado:**

Well, we're gonna have incredible longitudinal information studies, and information – um, this is all fairly new.

**Moon:**

Sure.

**Alvarado:**

I mean, this only has just happened in the last five years. The Center for Learning and Achievement, now, however, we've got a lot of drug-addicted mothers, which (a lot of them?)

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And so a lot of the kids that have come – that are born to drug-addicted mothers are going immediately into the Center for Learning and Achievement.

**Moon:**

Oh, that's fabulous.

**Alvarado:**

We've 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's just, uh, unbelievable. So, the thing now that is going to produce tremendous benefits, I believe, um, is occurring – is coming out of the First 5 Commission. Two years ago, the First 5 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, the parents, immediately, and the grandparents, and that – extended

family, and then it's the neighborhood, and then it's the school, and there's the church, and all those other ecologies that affect [the child]. And broaden it out to the school, and to society, and so forth. But, when they finished all of their research, through family court, through the mental health department, and through 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.

**Moon:**

Oh.

**Alvarado:**

It isn't poverty at all. Some people that are very poor raise remarkably resilient kids. And so, they began to diagram what were all of the influences including poverty, but including domestic violence, and child abuse, all of the things that a child who lives in a high-risk environment is subjected to. So as a result of that, I mean, it's pretty unique. There is no other county in California that has done what we have done. And there are fifty-eight First 5 Commissions, as you know.

**Moon:**

Um-hm.

**Alvarado:**

But this work that we are doing, which now has led us to select zip codes in our county where the most children zero to five years live, in the most high-risk environments, that's where we're gonna be putting all of our services. But, there's gonna be longitudinal studies to go along with that. So that in ten years – well, hopefully, sooner than that – we're gonna be able to see some – because we're gonna be evaluating every step of the

way. But we're probably gonna be able to see some good statistics [of] 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 - that they don't do anybody any good. But the resources need to be concentrated where those high risks are actually at, and you've got to start with kids when they're very, very little.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

But see, everything has a connection. Everything that I have done is connected, one way or the other. Including the health insurance. That was my initiative, uh, to get the council, I mean, the board, to put money into - I mean, 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 - every thing that we have done is connected, and it's becoming more and more integrated and more and more enmeshed, so that, you know, by the time I leave, I hope that 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 people's lives evolve, that the organization itself will be so on its way to recognizing all of that and doing its work according to it - accordingly. You know, juvenile detention reform. We have an entirely, entirely new way of approaching social and antisocial behavior on the part of these kids. And while we've got lots of new programs in there for them that we've never had before, what is most important is the fact that the training and the

direction and the direction and the policies are more geared toward, “how can we help you” instead of “how can we punish you”-

**Moon:**

We can't do this 'cause –

**Alvarado:**

-“for the misdeeds 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'm still feeling really optimistic because what we have done, um, in the last ten years, uh, is to set a new direction for this county in a way that, I don't think it can be reversed. And it's gonna 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 same sort of important social policy issues, do you think?

**Alvarado:**

Well, I heard some good news a few days ago. I heard that Sally Weber – currently, Speaker pro tem – uh, is gonna run for Pete McHugh's office.

**Moon:**

Oh, is that right?

**Alvarado:**

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

**Moon:**

Any Latina women?

**Alvarado:**

One of them is. So, we're just kind of waiting, um, I – we're waiting until next year, to see what the crop of candidates looks like.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

Um, but I do think there are two men that have already expressed an interest in running for this office. Um, but I – I would hope that, um – and there are two women that I have in mind as well that I want to talk to to see if they have any interest. Both Latina women. I don't know that they would do it, but I'm gonna be – at least having the conversation with them.

**Moon:**

Yeah.

**Alvarado:**

So, we might capture the majority on the board of supervisors in '08. Um-

**Moon:**



Well, wouldn't that be – that would be exciting, to see that.

**Alvarado:**

That would be! Would be. We haven't been a majority since uh, Diane –

**Moon:**

Zoe and –

**Alvarado:**

- and Zoe-

**Moon:**

-and Suzy

**Alvarado:**

-and Suzy were on, yeah.

**Moon:**

Yeah.

**Alvarado:**

So, it would be great. Um –

**Moon:**

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

**Alvarado:**

'Cause there is a different perspective. There's a different view of the world.

**Moon:**

Well, (I can see, yeah.)

**Alvarado:**

Life experiences are - are different.

**Moon:**

Well, just your – the way that you, uh, were raised, um, 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, whitebread experiences of, you know, Suzy 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 this – uh, story you had told about you earlier, kind of, grass-roots activism that took place when you were young, and you had –

**Alvarado:**

(talking at same time) Oh, my gosh!

**Moon:**

-talked a little bit about Cesar Chavez?

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, do – do we agree on the time?

**Moon:**

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

**Alvarado:**

And wrap it up, because –

**Moon:**

And then we can –

**Alvarado:**

Yeah.

**Moon:**

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 – a community of activists taking place, or were there members within the – the Latino community then that were opposing what Cesar Chavez was doing, or was it really a, kind of, united sort of sense?

**Alvarado:**

Oh, it was, it was just a phenomenal movement. Uh, I mean, it was no different than Martin Luther King.

**Moon:**

Right. Okay, that's what –

**Alvarado:**

(both talking at same time) And his work, you know, and – no-

**Moon:**

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

**Alvarado:**

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

**Moon:**

So activism also was connected to the church.

**Alvarado:**

Oh, 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, um, learned about politics in that environment. And even when we were – when Cesar was out here in the fifties, before he went off to Delano, uh, and we were forming the CSO, and you know, 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 – uh, that was just a little – I don't know, a little grain, I guess.

**Moon:**

That must have been a very exciting time to, you know, be part of, you know, the – that whole, kind of, you know, civil rights –

**Alvarado:**

(both talking at same time) Oh, it still brings tears to my eyes when I think about it. Oh – it was probably one of the most important life-forming, um, events of my life. And, I mean, even to the point – and I, I don't know if I ever – if I told you this, but when I look at my own kids today, we used to go down – when, when Cesar was fasting in jail in Salinas, and, uh, we went down there, and we did the candlelight vigil with our kids and all – Um, there's something so powerful about that 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. Um, and in some I don't - I'm not – I – 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 - uh, four of my kids are just really active, I mean, they – they've carved out a presence in the community for themselves, um, so – I mean, my son, Jaime, who is the director of the Mayfair Initiative, you know, it's right there on the (barrio? it's?) Mayfair, Teresa, who's doing the Hispanic Charity Foundation, and my daughter, my other daughter, who is – really, she's a – a healer, she wants to be – that's what she wants to be, and my son, Michael, who has been so involved in the politics of Evergreen, that – and, I mean it's just pretty amazing, when I see how much they are living their lives, and maybe it's a result of their father and my work, maybe, uh, 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 – that's – and in fact, I was just blown away – I have a granddaughter, she's in her last year at Whitman College up in Washington state, um, that's pretty remarkable. She went – she took one semester, uh, this last – this – this year, and went for one month – um, for three

months – four months, to Chiapas. Chiapas is a hotbed of activism in Mexico, you know, they’ve got that Commandante, whatever his name is, yeah – the Che Guevara, I guess of the time. Anyway, she spent four months studying in this little Mexican village in Chiapas, organizing immigrants – I mean, doing some phenomenal work. She’s doing some phenomenal work. When she came back, um, she was a changed person, and I could see how much she had matured and what she had learned. But she came back and spent the summer working with an immigrant rights organization in, um, up in Oakland. But I talked to her on the phone the other day, and she’s organizing, and it’s part of her curriculum at school, she’s organizing a group of – and there’s a group of thirteen students there, who are organizing these seminars, where they’re taking students from high schools there in Washington, and students at Whitman, to seminars and discussions about the whole immigrant scene. Only because there is so much misunderstanding and there’s so much inflamed emotion, blah blah blah. And so, they’re gonna be talking about the issue –

**Moon:**

Oh, that’s great.

**Alvarado:**

- and bringing speakers from all perspectives, right? So, (laughs) I thought, “wow, this is really fabulous,” but, the thing that blew me away, she has a radio program.

**Moon:**

Oh, she does? Oh my gosh!

**Alvarado:**

And, and, and she's like, "Grandma, do you know what I called my radio program?" She called it The Happy Neighbor and Vecino Feliz, because that was the name of her grandfather, my husband's, radio program.

**Moon:**

Oh, my gosh!

**Alvarado:**

And I – and it just gave me chills, so, I mean, it's – it's all about change, but I keep telling you, Danelle, there are all of these connections. There are all of these things that are tied into each other, right?

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

So it's – it's – it's a wonderful – for me, as I – as I'm looking ahead to my transition into another life, it's very, very satisfying to know that the links are there, that they will continue the chain for change and success and progress and loving.

**Moon:**

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

**Alvarado:**

Well, thank you. I've enjoyed it.

**Moon:**

It's been great talking to you.

(end at [1:00:46])