

Interview with: Blanca Alvarado

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[Interview #1]

[Alvarado.interview 1.wav]

[1:09:14] 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 in the office of Blanca Alvarado, in the Board of Supervisors' Office in San Jose, California. Okay, well, once again thank you so much for letting me come in and talk to you today, but as I had said, just before I put the tape on, kind of the whole interest of this project was related to my interest in trying to get a handle of what it meant—what the feminist capital really meant to the women that were actually in the capital or in other, you know, venues within, uh, local politics. And so, I thought maybe I'd start by asking you what impact did the feminist capital or this kind of terminology have on you as you were getting ready to get into politics?

**Alvarado:**

Uh, well, you know, in order to tell my story. I really have to go back in time because, um, my career as an elected official didn't begin then.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

It was truly, um, in many ways my foundational experience as a child born, uh, to a coal miner and his wife, in a little town by the name of Cokedale, in Colorado. Um, and I always like to say that, you know, my arrival in politics in the eighties, uh, was a result of standing on the shoulders of those people that had influenced me. And I always like to claim that my biggest political influence in my life as a child was my father. He was an illiterate man, self-taught—uh, I think went to third grade education. But he was very active in the coal miners' union in Colorado. And he was very learned in the sense of knowing what was happening nationally. And for him, and I'll always remember this, his biggest heroes were Franklin Delano Roosevelt because of the Depression, and then John L. Lewis who was president of the coal miner's union. But he was very much involved in the politics of that little community, and the union of course. But never failed to vote, and certainly always emphasized the importance of that franchise. My mother, on the other hand, uh, Native American, uh, strong, strong pioneer woman, who after raising twelve kids, and never having been educated, was nonetheless one of the smartest women I ever knew.

So, when I, uh, when I grew up and, you know, came to California because the coal mines closed, and we migrated to California to work in the agricultural fields. I, as a student at San Jose High, already at seventeen had instinct for organizational work. And I was one of maybe fifteen—there were about sixteen Latino students at San Jose High in the late forties, and we formed an organization called the Club Tapateo. And that club was important for a lot of reasons. Not only did it establish our identity as Latino students, but it also gave us some kind of social conscience. You know, we did little

fundraisers and raised money, food—clothing and food for poor people. And again, that was kind of the first time where I became one of the leaders, so to speak, of this fledgling little organization, and was probably the first one of Latino students at San Jose High.

After that, um, my later-to-be husband, Jose Alvarado, who was a very prominent leader in San Jose politics. Uh, a very charismatic, very well-known personality. He was the first Latino to have a bilingual radio program in Northern California, and it was through KLLK at the time. But one of the things that he did on that program was to raise consciousness. He constantly spoke to his listening audience about the importance of education, about the importance of voter registration and education and participation. And he also took on some of the issues of the day: police brutality, for one thing, discrimination, things of that nature. And I met him because what he did was to form for us a little clubhouse at his studios in downtown San Jose.

**Moon:**

For the San Jose High School club?

**Alvarado:**

For us. For our little Club Tapateo. And it was one of those after-school recreational sites. You know, he'd open it up, his place, for us and we would go down after school. And he had ping pong tables set up for us and a Coke machine, and, you know, music and it was a place where we hung out. But in the process of hanging out—and his really was, in many ways, the first after-school recreational center for Latinos. Um, but as I became more familiar with him, I became more interested in the work that he did as a radio announcer and as a community leader. As the sum of his activities began to

influence me and to rub off on me, to the point where eventually, um, he allowed me to have a radio program of my own on his station. And, eventually, we married. So, between my father, the “strongness” of my mother, the work that I did with my husband, and continued to do after we were married, were all very formative years. So that by the time, um, the sixties rolled around, and, you know, in that earlier period a lot of work was done with my husband and other community folks in organizing with Cesar Chavez. Cesar Chavez was a presence in our Mayfair district. He was the founder of the community services organization whose primary focus, again, was to highlight issues in the Latino community, out there in the Mayfair district. And to form the CSO—in order to advocate, again, for voter participation and, you know, we used to go house-to-house registering people. We used to have meetings in our garage, uh, organizing and preparing our strategies. And so with Cesar Chavez in the mix and other leaders of that time, eventually that led to the creation of Model Cities in the Mayfair district, and it also positioned me as a continuing community activist.

When our church, Most Holy Trinity, was built in East San Jose, and what we did as mothers and fathers of children going to the first parochial school in the East Side, was to make demands of the church hierarchy that, as an example, we wanted to have a Spanish mass. And, of course, they didn’t want to do that. And so we protested and we picketed around the church, and we went to San Francisco and picketed there, and eventually won our case, and a Spanish mass was established for us. And out of that came the group called Los Amigos. And so we met every Sunday after church and had kind of a community of events after church. We always had breakfast in the church hall and were

very present in the activities of the church and certainly very present in being outspoken parents insofar as the school itself was concerned.

By then, however, I had divorced my husband. And so I was raising, you know, five kids. Uh, but again, because of my passion for community work I became involved with the Mexican American Political Association. And, by then, uh, Ed Sandoval, who was our president of the state organization, had very close ties with then-Governor Brown, Jerry Brown. And so we were quite influential in working with Jerry Brown on the state level, and out of that came some real good appointments of Latino lawyers throughout the state to the bench. So, uh, there again, it was all this activism that was taking place. And as I became head of—I was on the state board of the MAPA and then I became president of the local chapter of MAPA. And so that elevated my standing, uh, within the Latino community but certainly brought me to the attention of people like Janet Gray Hayes, who appointed me to two very significant committees. One of them was the Bicentennial Commission. And we were going to have this big, you know, two-hundred year celebration, uh, of the founding of the pueblo, the San Jose de Guadalupe.

**Moon:**

Was this when you had—after you had been elected to the city council?

**Alvarado:**

Oh no, no. This was prior, in the seventies. You know, but just to give you the kinds of roles that I was playing in the community. So, on the Bicentennial Commission, which introduced me to folks that, you know, I hadn't worked with before. But as a MAPISTA I was also working state-wide on Jimmy Carter's election to be president. And again, all

of those activities, um, introduced me to the larger political community of San Jose, so that in 1978 when the—or in 1976, when the city council formed the Charter Review Committee, I was appointed to that committee. And our task was to research forms of government throughout the country and then make a recommendation to the city council.

Well, out of that two-year work, I met some very influential people on that committee. But more importantly, we selected a form of government that would call for district elections in San Jose.

**Moon:**

So you were very directly involved with the district—

**Alvarado:**

Absolutely.

**Moon:**

—in creating the district.

**Alvarado:**

Exactly. I was on the committee. So when we gave our recommendation to the city council, and the issue was placed before the voters for approval or denial, we were pretty excited because, where the city council had been elected at large historically, this was an opportunity for marginalized sectors of San Jose to have a voice through a districted council. So the voters approved it. You know, and it was a very slim margin, but it was approved nonetheless.

**Moon:**

Who were some of the other members who—

**Alvarado:**

Oh, God, don't ask me to remember names, Danelle.

**Moon:**

Okay.

**Alvarado:**

Later on I'll remember better. Jeremy Fogel was one of them and he's now on the bench.

Chuck Davidson was a very prominent housing developer. Uh, anyway, I'll have to get back—

**Moon:**

Okay, if you think about it.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah. But anyway, when it was approved by the voters, you know, in East San Jose we began to scurry and as I was still the president of MAPA at the time. And we began to say, Oh my God, you know, here's our chance. We'd been clamoring for the door to open for so many years, for decades, in fact. What are we going to do? We've got to find us a candidate. So we identified three or four people that we thought would be, you know, viable candidates. But, you know, the job was paying four hundred dollars a month, right? And we didn't find any takers. So we were really quite struggling because here it was 1979. The elections would be in '80.

And, uh, in 1979 I was invited to Washington and I took my daughter Teresa with me.

She was only a teenager but we went to a Valentine's party that Jimmy Carter and Rosalind hosted. And that was a lot of fun. You know, it was pretty exciting to be

invited. And again that, I think, just pretty much said, you know, this is an up-and-coming political leader in the Latino community. And so it was great, and we had a wonderful time.

But coming back I was—at that time had taken over my husband's tax service. And it was early in 1979 and I was sitting in my office when this young, very attractive man came in and said, you know, "I've been sent by Al Garza, who used to be on the city council, and he suggested that I needed to talk to you because I'm interested in running for the fifth district for the city council."

So I listened to him, and then when he left I said, Unh-uh, this is outrageous. And this is no disrespect for Victor Ajlouny, but it was clear in my mind that Victor Ajlouny had selected the fifth district because it was probably the one that had the least voter turnout and might have—because he had never lived in the east side. And I thought, This is a classic carpetbagger who has, you know, moved into the district for this political opportunity.

So we reassembled and said, You know what, this is—we've got to do something. We can't let somebody from the outside come in and represent us. And suddenly the question began to be turned around. Well, why don't you run? Why don't you run? And I said, Oh no, I can't do that, you know, I can't. I can't afford it. What am I gonna do when I've still got kids to raise? Uh, but I gave myself about three months and the more I thought about it the more I realized that I had a significantly long history in the district,



that I had been involved at many levels, and that—certainly that I was as viable a candidate as there could be.

So I immediately—well, not—three months later, I said, Okay, I'm gonna do it. And it was a scary decision to make. I mean, I had worked on many campaigns as a volunteer but never as a candidate. And so for all new candidates it's a very daunting decision to make. Nonetheless, you know, we put together a very, very, very, very effective organization so that, by the time the campaign opened up that fall and into 1980, we probably had the most effective grassroots organization with good consultants, good fundraising, in my camp. And it was an exciting campaign, Danelle. I mean, I look at the campaigns now and I am saddened by the level to which campaigns have degraded, in my opinion at least. You know, there is so much negativity, um, and it's just rather a pathetic thing, when I consider how truly grassroots and exciting and filled with energy and hope and optimism that my first campaign generated.

We had about four candidates. It was not an easy race. I will tell you, it was not an easy race. Uh, there were three other Latino candidates: Joe Tafoya (??), a woman by the name of Anita Duarte, and I forget who the other guy was. Oh, and Victor Ajlouny. So we worked awfully hard, came in, um, in first place in the primary and then had go back out and get going for the fall election against Ajlouny. Um, it was a tremendous victory and it was a very significant moment and occurrence for the Latino community, having never had anybody at the table of political decision making. So you can imagine the pride that we felt, and the hopefulness, and, uh, just this coming together and this

convocation of community folks who had never really experienced this kind of an activity, or this kind of an outcome in their lives.

Okay, so I get, you know, seated in 1981 and it was a brand-new council, all ten districts, you know, the new mayor Janet Gray Hayes was still mayor. Um, and it was an exciting time. And at that time there were seven women who were elected and so it—San Jose was dubbed the feminist capital of the world. And if you don't think that was exhilarating, it most certainly was. And all of the women came from, um, very, um, community-driven backgrounds and experiences. Every one of the women that had been elected was involved in community to one—to some degree or the other. So it was just amazing because San Jose not only had a majority council women, but at the county level the women were a majority as well. Uh, Zoe Lofgren, Dianne McKenna, Susanne Wilson. So we were feeling, you know, on top of the world. We had made history. And we were going to show the world what good women leadership is all about. And we did. And we did.

**Moon:**

Did you, um, define yourself at that time as a feminist, or did you—

**Alvarado:**

I always have. Oh, I always have (both talking at once). I always have. That's always been, you know, I'm a Latina feminist. And it's always been an appellation that I carry very proudly, very strongly. And of course my work in the feminist—in the world of feminism has centered primarily around Latina issues. But I was the only Latino on this city council that had ever been elected so—

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And, you know, the majority of our voters and our constituents in the district were Latino, so it was the natural thing for me to do.

**Moon:**

What was it like working on the council as the sole—kind of, you know, really, sort of immigrant—sort of voice or minority voice?

**Alvarado:**

Well, I think that for us, because we were all women, the ethnicity really wasn't of prime importance. And now, it was acknowledged and recognized, but just the fact that we were all women, uh, heading the government of this emerging large city in the country—by then it was the fourth largest city in California. And because it was a districted council, we were given an opportunity, in a very unique way. You know, the Mercury News will accuse the council members of being—what do you call them? Not nation builders, but that they're so prone to, uh, vote according to the interest of their district that sometimes they lose the big picture of the city wide issues. But I don't think there's anything wrong with that because, in fact, that's why districted elections were called for; because we wanted a voice that could directly represent the interests and the needs of the diverse interests of the population. But on our council we never lost sight of the need to do things globally for the city, in particular because, at that time, we were beginning to redevelop the downtown. And when Tom McEnery was elected mayor in 1982, his primary focus was on rebuilding the downtown. And we all shared in that, you know,

grand vision of an improved downtown, but we were also given the opportunity to speak the voice for the constituents that we represented. And it was interesting because Tom McEnergy never interfered with our work at the district level and, again, because his interests were in the downtown, we had pretty much a free hand to lobby our, you know, our colleagues and to do what we thought was necessary.

And I'll give you one example of a very major issue that I confronted almost immediately. Um, if you know anything about the East Side, back in the late seventies Story Road became the cruising capital of the world. And it was horrendous. It was a terrible, terrible scene, not only because you had a lot of very young kids milling around with the adults. And there was drugs, and there was drinking, and there was very—a lot of really bad behavior. And thousands of cars converging on Story Road every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night. I mean, this was called the cruising capital of the world. You had people from Stockton, from Fresno, from Salinas, from Sacramento. Oh, they came from all over and it was quite a scene, right? And for the people that lived there and for the folks that had businesses there, this was just a tremendous, tremendous stress and strain on their lives. I mean, it got to the point where your public safety, um, emergency vehicles couldn't get into driveways. And it got to the point where the parking lots for these businesses were just covered with locusts, you know, people who—in their cars, and they were just milling around, I mean. And it wasn't just a few hundred, it was thousands of people. Noise, music blaring. I mean it was the worst possible scene.

So for four years into my term—and I had had to go through another election in '82, because the city council, when we were all seated in 1981, took a straw vote and the odd-numbered districts got the short two year term initially, and the even numbers got the four year term. So back in 1982 I had to go out and recampaign. Um, and you know, it was a very, very difficult campaign. So different from my 1980 election in that one of the women who ran against me in 1980 ran against me again in 1982 and she was very successful. I mean, here I was newly elected, and I thought, Oh my God, you know. The voters can't expect me to have created miracles in one year. I don't think I'm going to have a hard time getting reelected. I was elected that first year with 68% of the vote so it's like, I shouldn't have any problem, right? Well, I was naïve because this woman went out and mounted a campaign as the absentee council woman, because I had had some emergency surgery and had missed a few council meetings— well, anyway, it stuck. The long and the short of it is, in that primary I came in second, so that for the general election in November of '82 I really had to work hard to get reinstated.

So by the time '83 started and I began to address the multiple layers of issues and needs in my district, the cruising situation was the first thing. And my first attempt at trying to build support on the city council to direct the staff to work on a plan to, if not eliminate the cruising, to at least abate it, uh, was met by strong opposition from our chief of police. So I failed on that first attempt. But then we got smarter and began to work with the city attorney and, as I have described earlier, um, the property owners and the business owners were in a very bad place where you had all of these cars parking in their parking lots. And so the first thing that we did was to get approval from the business

owners to install “No Parking” signs on their property, thereby allowing the police to enforce the law and to move those cars out of there. But eventually, um, our brilliant city attorney Joan Gallo devised—and we had looked at other legal measures—but she finally came up with a plan that would create a no cruising ordinance on Story Road. And, believe me, that was highly controversial. First of all, cruising is a cultural phenomenon, you know, in the Latino community. So all of the car clubs were absolutely irate and very much against me, and along with the people who supported car clubs and that kind of a cultural activity were just appalled that a Latina would attempt to change that scenario. Well, you know, we were able to bring property owners and residents to come in and talk about how their lives were severely and so harshly affected by this activity, and eventually the council approved the establishment of a no cruising ordinance with the police being there every weekend to move the cars out, to get them out of the freeways and off of Story Road. It was a difficult, difficult issue. Probably one of the most challenging issues that I ever faced in my political career, but as I told—tell Nora Campos now, who represents that area, and the previous councilman Manny Diaz, if I had not done that, the kind of improvements that have occurred in Story Road now would have never happened because not only did we take on the cruisers and that whole scene and practically eliminated it, but my next big challenge on Story Road also had to do with the worst slum in San Jose—

**Moon:**

That was the Poco—

**Alvarado:**

Poco Way, yeah, and that was a horrific slum. You had absentee landlords who only came in to collect the rent once a month, right?

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

We had one landlord who, um, whose units were in such bad shape that you had the media out there filming cockroaches and plumbing that didn't work and the most devastating housing situation that you could possibly find. And one of the first community meetings that I had with the landlords was nothing but a riot. I mean, the people that lived there were just screaming and yelling at the property owners because of the conditions in which they maintained their properties. I mean, it was a hellhole. It truly was a hellhole. And the first thing that we began to do there was to bring our code enforcement people out and to create a place for code enforcement as well as for a police substation. And so having the code enforcement people and the police presence in this unit allowed them to track twenty-four hours what was going on and to provide some remedial action for what was occurring.

But it wasn't enough. I mean, it really wasn't enough. So I went down to Santa Ana with our then housing department director and reviewed some the things that he had done to create brand new communities, and we devised a plan which called for an investment of what were twenty million dollars from the city to completely restore that entire area. We bought out six of the property owners. We bought out the units that were frontage of Story Road. I mean, we created a miracle there. It is a miracle what we did and what

was so beautiful about that, too, is not only that we got the support of the council for this enormous investment—I mean, investment. I mean, when I look back on the support that I got from the council for the cruising ordinance and for the takeover of Poco Way, I mean, I have to be just extraordinarily grateful that they were there for me on that. But so we completely, completely made a brand new neighborhood out of Poco Way. And what was so beautiful about that is that we involved the community to master plan. And Laura Paretti (??) who was still with the housing department was our planner who worked with us for a year in creating this new community, closing down some of the streets, I mean completely renovating and making a park-like setting on the grounds of the school which was adjacent, I mean, and tearing down some of these units, putting the trashcans in hidden ways. I mean, it's a completely brand new community now. So those two anchor projects I think, as I've said to Nora and to Manny, created the environment that now has allowed them to make better improvements.

But anyway, that—when you talk about feminism and how it ties into that activism, as a woman, as a mother, even though I'm grateful for the city council's support, they understood that we have as one of our most natural attributes, uh, is the need to protect families and to nurture kids. And they saw on Story Road that a lot of these kids were being misguided by the circumstances. And we saw that families were living in the most appalling conditions and that as women we couldn't tolerate that.

**Moon:**

Did any of the other council members go out with you to that area to view for themselves what was actually happening?



**Alvarado:**

Oh yeah, some of them did. And of course there was such major media exposure to this one property owner in particular. I mean the public interest law firm took that property owner on, and then of course we took on—the city took on the others. But when the public interest law firm took on that particular landlord, I had already called community meetings with the other landlords, but the focus by the media on the horrific conditions that existed there shed a lot of light on the extreme nature of those places. And, in fact, the media scrutiny was so intense and the lawsuit against that property owner was so severe that the son of the owner, who was managing the place, committed suicide. I mean, it was just—I mean, God, when you look back on the history of the chaos that was going on and the dramatic nature of what we confronted and what we changed. It is, uh, a case that I don't know if they ever did but, you know, planning departments, for example, at the city college—I mean at San Jose State, it's a classic example of planning and community involvement and political will all wrapped up into one. And so when, you know, when I leave office from the board, I can certainly say with a great deal of pride that the work of Story Road, including Poco Way, will stand for a long, long time to come. And a very major example of how politics does matter and how you can make a difference to really affect people's lives for the good.

**Moon:**

Right. Well, that's a really important legacy—

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, it is.

**Moon:**

—that you will have, you know, provided. Now, just going backwards a little bit to your family history, you said that your parents had migrated to California after the mines closed down in Colorado. They came to enter the migrant farm working industry. And so did your—you and your siblings work in the—?

**Alvarado:**

Absolutely. Oh, of course. We came to Los Angeles first because my father had a cousin down there who had encouraged my dad to come. You know, he used tell my dad, “You know, you’ve got twelve kids. You know, bring them out to California and you can make a real fortune.”

Well, my father believed that. And so by this time three of my brothers were already out of the family and in the military, but we all came and, um, our cousin brought us from L.A. to the ranches that he had worked with and was familiar with, and we settled in the Maclay Ranch (??), which is now a housing development on Pueblo Road (??). And we planned to stay only during the summer; we were just going to be there for the summer harvest and then go back to L.A. Well, as it turned out the Maclay (??) sisters offered my father a permanent, year-round job as a foreman at the ranch which was wonderful because I cannot imagine what my life would have been like if I had—

**Moon:**

If you hadn’t moved (unintelligible, both talking at once) migrant camp—

**Alvarado:**

Well, or gone back to L.A. I mean just the thought of that sends shudders up my back.

**Moon:**

So were you living in the barrio in L.A. at that time?

**Alvarado:**

We were, but we were only there one month. So when we came up here we spent, you know, June, July, August, and September picking walnuts and apricots and string beans and everything else in between. Prunes—

**Moon:**

How old were you when you were doing that?

**Alvarado:**

Well, let me see. Um, I was fifteen—sixteen.

**Moon:**

So you were doing that while you were also going to school?

**Alvarado:**

Well, in the summer I didn't, of course. But as soon as I finished—as soon as we finished the harvest that first year and my dad was offered the job year-round and we decided to stay, we continued to live on the Maclay Ranch (??) in little tin shacks, which is what we had. And my mother, I mean, I think about it now, my God, they were brilliant to have immediately, I mean, at that age they could have kept us out of school. They really could have. But instead they enrolled all of the rest of us in high school. One of my siblings was enrolled in junior high, and in elementary school. So, but my parents were brilliant in that regard. They knew the value of education. And they never for once said, You're not going to finish school. You've gotta finish school.

**Moon:**

So were your parents English—they also spoke English, right?

**Alvarado:**

Right.

**Moon:**

And so you grew up in a bilingual household. And did you mostly speak Spanish in the household then?

**Alvarado:**

Oh, when we were little, but by the time we came out here, you know, we were pretty immersed in English more than anything else. So English was still the dominant language.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And, uh, my mother, as I said, she was a brilliant woman. She was never educated, but she could carry on a conversation with anybody.

**Moon:**

So after you had graduated from high school and you started working doing some of the—working with the radio station, had you lived in the East Side area in that—

**Alvarado:**

Well, we lived out in the East Side area from the time we actually—well, we came and then at one time, before I got married while I was still going to high school, my parents bought a house on 25th Street. And then—I mean, this is just a remarkable story because my father was the only one of all of the miners in Cokedale who had saved two thousand

dollars and could bring his family to California. So he was a wizard insofar as finances were concerned.

**Moon:**

Especially with such a large family.

**Alvarado:**

Oh yeah, with such a large family. And so, you know, that's why I said we stand on the shoulders of those who've gone before us. I mean, my father was just a hard worker, always so devoted to his family, and my mother, she made ends meet and she took care of a large family.

But we bought a house after we left the ranch. We bought a house on 25th Street. From there, I mean, my parents bought four houses in the time before I went off to get married, and I got married at twenty-two. Well, we bought the house on 25th or 26th, I forget, and loved the house but it was too expensive. So then they bought another house off of Alum Rock Avenue next to a cemetery, which was cheaper. I think he paid six thousand dollars for it. (both laugh) Isn't that amazing? And we had spent an entire weekend completely painting the indoors of that house, ready to move in, and because of the fumes, which we didn't ventilate the house—it blew up. Right.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

So we were left without a house, but with the insurance money bought another house on 24th. And then eventually my parents bought this big two-storey house on 9th Street, which we still have, for nine thousand dollars.

**Moon:**

Oh, my God.

**Alvarado:**

Oh, yes. So, I mean, within a matter of four years, I mean, they had bought and sold property that, you know, was pretty remarkable. I mean, when you talk about—

**Moon:**

Very entrepreneurial of your father.

**Alvarado:**

Absolutely, oh, yeah. So that's why when I, um, finally got married in 1953, my husband had already been living in the Mayfair district, which is the same house that my son lives in now. I mean, we're East-Siders mostly.

**Moon:**

So you all still live in that same area?

**Alvarado:**

Pretty much, yeah we do. So I lived in, um, on Sunset Avenue, which is right in the heart of the Mayfair district. And my son lives there and he's also now the executive director of the Mayfair Improvement Initiative, and my daughter-in-law is the artistic director of the Teatro Vision, which is a Latino performing arts organization that is a resident at the Mexican Heritage Plaza. So, I mean, our roots continue to be very, very deep in the East

Side. And I've lived in my same house for forty-five years, you know, so it's a place that we love. And so—

**Moon:**

So your politics, your, you know, your political activism was really deeply embedded in your community.

**Alvarado:**

Um-hm.

**Moon:**

And so I just wanted to make sure that we had that on tape to show—

**Alvarado:**

And it's very clear. And it still remains that way now.

**Moon:**

Well, that's fascinating. Now, when you were running for the city council, do you recall who the people were who endorsed you? Did you get endorsements outside of your Latino community?

**Alvarado:**

Oh, my God, yeah. The Police Officers Association, the Chamber of Commerce. I mean, I got a lot of the establishment.

**Moon:**

Did Janet Gray endorse you?

**Alvarado:**

Oh, yes. Yes.

**Moon:**

That's what I thought.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, she did. But I got a lot of establishment endorsements, not because they knew who I was, but because Jerry Estruth, who was also on the city council at the time, his real close political ally, Milt Cutler (??), was my campaign manager. And at the time, Jim Beall was running, and I was running, and Milt Cutler (??) and Jerry Estruth were tied into our campaign. So we had, you know, the support of an already established politician in Jerry Estrew, and through his consultant, Milt Cutler (??), they were the ones that, you know, opened up the doors for me and were able to persuade others to endorse my candidacy. You know, my endorsements from the district were pretty wide. But insofar as the mainstream was concerned, I relied on Jerry and Milt (??) to open up those doors. And Janet Gray Hayes.

**Moon:**

In looking at some of the work of the other women that I've talked to like Susanne Wilson, and Dianne McKenna, and, and some other women, it sounds like you had a different route to getting into politics than what they did, because Janet Gray and both Susan Hammer, they had been—they got involved in politics by getting involved with the planning commission. And so that they were tied to kind of the environmentalism, you know, kind of neighborhood initiatives. But it sounds like they were really, you know, they—

**Alvarado:**

They were already part of the establishment.

**Moon:**



They were part of the—or they became, or knew, you know, got involved in that part of the establishment. And I was talking to, um, Linda LeZotte the other day, and she was saying that it was really her—that’s what she was. When she wanted to get into politics, she talked to Susan Hammer and she talked to Susanne Wilson and they said, Get on the planning commission. And that’s what she did as kind of an entry into politics.

**Alvarado:**

Land use, yeah. Lots of land use with the city. But you’re absolutely right, Danelle. Every single one of the newly elected council people had served on the planning commission, or on some commission, or had direct ties with city government. And I don’t remember about Lu Ryden, I think she was the exception.

**Moon:**

I don’t think Lu—yeah.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, she wasn’t. But, you know, she had a strong—

**Moon:**

She was a—kind of a personality, too, so she had that kind of, you know—

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, she’d been on television, yeah.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And, you know, the Almaden district is considered probably the main Republican bastion in the city, so it was natural that she would win. Although it’s quite remarkable that a

Democrat now holds that seat. But it's true. All of them had connections. Um, and all of them had, you know, spouses to support them as well. And I was the only one that was a self-supporter and that still was raising children. And it was a struggle. I mean, I probably struggled financially more than anybody on the council.

**Moon:**

How did that, um—how did your political work affect your family life? Was that a difficult—

**Alvarado:**

Well, yeah, it was, of course. But in 1980, most of my kids were already adults. But nonetheless, the youngest one was Teresa, and she was still at home and she was going to private school. But the way I was able to sustain myself, uh, was—and I gave it up after the third year—was the little tax business, which my daughter and my daughter-in-law ran. So the revenues that I collected from that tax season helped to support me, but, you know, that was only three months, four months out of the year. And then the other time, regrettably, I had to finance my house, refinance my house several times to be able to keep me going. And you know, during all of the years that I was on the city council we never really had—

**Moon:**

Much of a salary.

**Alvarado:**

Much of a salary. And we never had any benefits. So that by the time I came over to the county—it wasn't till I came to the county that I began to build a retirement account. But it was tough, it was really tough. And, you know, I think that my situation was unique in

that I was a sole supporter, um, I didn't have anybody else to support me. And there wasn't any way to make additional income.

**Moon:**

Right, and did—

**Alvarado:**

And it was a struggle, it was a real struggle.

**Moon:**

The council was also very white, and so I think you and Iola Williams really represented the minority factions. And so that was an important part of the whole districting process.

**Alvarado:**

Exactly. You know, it was women and a black woman and a Latina.

**Moon:**

Right. Right. Now, I want to go forward a little bit on to the supervisor work, but I also wanted just to ask you about this one controversy that I read about, it was the statue of Quetzalcoatl. And it's—at one point you had said that it had escalated into a war of your character. And so I was wondering if you could just, like, share a little bit about what the controversy was with that?

**Alvarado:**

Well, first of all, you know, I had been very active in creating the public art program on the city council. That came about as a result of the huge controversy that surfaced when Tom McEnery brought forward, without any public discussion, the statue that he had had erected.

**Moon:**

The Fallon—

**Alvarado:**

The Fallon statue. And so, you know, none of us knew anything about it. He had gotten a commitment from, I guess, the Fairmont folks to invest a million dollars. And they had it commissioned with some artist in England. So nobody knew anything about it. So when it comes out, I mean, there was this huge firestorm. Horrific firestorm. Furor about, how dare he consider putting the statue of this man—who really wasn't a captain but an opportunist, a mercenary—in the center of our city? And a mercenary who was, you know, that guy. You know, he was a womanizer, he was a drinker, he was a gambler, he was all kinds—how dare you put him in such a prominent place? And it was offensive to the Latino community. Well, it was a very harsh scene. And over and over again, when I realized what had erected, you know, I talked to Tom several times and I says—because he was offended, you know, how dare them? I mean, he was really offended that there would be such antagonism toward this piece. It was a beautiful piece. But I said, You've got to listen, you've got to listen, you've got to pay attention to what these people are saying.

So what we did was to put together an arts—a public arts advisory committee. And we says, Go out and develop a plan whereby San Jose can commemorate its history. And so there were five things that were selected: the founding of the pueblo, our agricultural history, the Ohlones, I forget what the other was, but anyway. They came back with all of these recommendations, right? And the furor finally—the dust finally settled. The city council approved this public art program, the arts commission was involved, we had

community stakeholders involved, and so we worked out an accommodation that seemed to serve everybody's purpose.

But in the meantime, when this furor erupted, we had already started an arts program which would have created gateways in the four directions coming into San Jose: the south gateway, the north gateway. And we had wonderful ideas on how we could embellish those four entry points into the downtown. And one of the persons that was working with us on the south gateway was Robert Graham, a very, very famous sculptor. And so it went through the development agency, and me and Robert Graham, uh, we began to work on the south gateway project. Well, in the meantime, the arts advisory committee had selected the founding of the pueblo in San Jose as a piece to be done on South First. So then we began to say, Well, we've got Robert Graham, we can't just dismiss him, right? He's been working with the city and the redevelopment agency.

And he came up with a brilliant idea. It was a brilliant idea. It was a Quetzalcoatl with the morning star. It was very reflective of ancient Mexican mythology. And we just fell in love with it. We thought, What a piece it would be for the downtown, right? It was just a magnificent concept. So he began to work on it and we got the approval of the city council redevelopment agency to commission him to go and do that. And it was, you know, half a million dollars.

Well, when the final product came up, and, you know, I won't go into all the details, but suffice it to say that what happened along the way is that Robert Graham was a purist in

his own way—had gone to Mexico, had spent a lot of time at the pyramids in Tenochtitlan and came back and said, “How can I be using bronze? Bronze wasn’t even a metal that was used, you know, those thousands of years ago. How can I make it authentic if I’m going to create a bronze piece?” Uh, so he said, “I’ve got to go with the original Quetzalcoatl that is there in the pyramids in Mexico City because that—it reflects the times and the philosophy.”

But as well, when he unveiled the original piece with the bronze, it was enclosed. The base was enclosed and covered with a structure that some people said, Oh no, you can’t do that because you’re going to have the homeless people sleeping in there, blah, blah, blah. So, you know, these things having to do with public art do take their twists and they do take their turns.

So, Robert Graham came back and said, “Well, if we can’t do the bronze, and I’m not going to do it because it isn’t authentic enough. It’s gotta be a replica of what the original Mayans believed in—this mythological character who represented beauty and flowers and poetry and peace and harmony.” I mean, the symbolism of the Quetzalcoatl was very profound and very deep, right? So he went ahead and the redevelopment agency kept working with him, and he came up with what we have now.

Well, when we unveiled it, it was like all hell broke loose. And it—all hell broke loose because the religious right came forward and said that that is a pagan symbol of a bloodthirsty god who used to sacrifice human beings. And, I mean, they made such a

scene about this, Danelle. It was the most revolting thing that you could have heard. When they came to the city council to protest, I mean, even before the unveiling they were protesting because they knew that Graham was building a replica or something reflective of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent. So they had been marching in the downtown. They had been carrying on their thing at the council meetings. They had been sending letters. They sent me letters and told me that I had been essentially bewitched by this pagan god, and they felt sorry for me—

**Moon:**

Oh, my gosh.

**Alvarado:**

—That I should be prayed over. I mean, it was so bizarre and it was so outrageous. And then they sued the city, saying that we were putting in place a religious icon that violated the principle of separation of church and state, right? So they took it to the courts and, uh, Judge James Ware heard the case. I mean, I've got a whole file, and it's fascinating stuff. It totally is fascinating stuff. But James Ware, Doctor—I mean, Judge James Ware ruled against the lawsuit. And he says, “No, this is a symbol. It's a symbol only. It is not a religious icon. It is symbolic of the ancient history of a people that now represent a great part of San Jose and Santa Clara County and California.” So he denied them their petition. And if I can ever find that file—

**Moon:**

Interesting, that's really a—

**Alvarado:**

Oh, yeah.

**Moon:**

That's a great, you know, that's a great story about just the contest that people have over, you know, public art and—

**Alvarado:**

Oh, it's a wonderful story. Well, you know, and since then—and public art is always controversial.

**Moon:**

Yeah, it is.

**Alvarado:**

It's always in the eye of the beholder. But we came out of that feeling very strong in having invited the community to be a part of deciding what kind of art we'd commemorate in the public arena, those things that were important to San Jose. Um, and there was just a great deal of sensitivity-raising, you know? I think it was the one of the times when talking about the richness of our diversity was more than just a spoken word. It was really reflected in the kinds of actions that the council did that really spoke volumes about culture and respect for—I mean, you know, we all know, for example, that the Ohlones were here way before anybody. We also know that the Mexican descendants of the Mayas of thousands of years ago are very much a part of us today. And because the plumed serpent carried within it such a beautiful message of liberation, of freedom, of equality, of sensitivity, beauty, and we thought one of the things that we would do eventually was to create a public education program that we could take to the schools, you know, to teach the kids not only about the plumed serpent and the symbolism in our downtown, but that we could talk about the founding of the pueblo, and the agricultural



history, and the Ohlones, and the other public art pieces that were commemorated. Uh, but I don't think that that public education program ever went anywhere.

But you know, sadly, uh, after the plumed serpent was installed, you know, the Mercury News and other people had denigrated that piece in some very, very disrespectful ways. You know, they call it a piece of dog turd and, I mean, there's always—whenever the plumed serpent is mentioned, it's always mentioned in a very derogatory way.

**Moon:**

That's a shame.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, it really is. Uh, and it may not be the most beautiful piece in the world, but if people could only understand what it means symbolically. I'll tell you, the kids have a ball on it. You know, they're always climbing all over it. Um, and some day, maybe I'll write a book about what the plumed serpent really means and why its place in history is relevant and significant. But, for now, it's abused all the time. People make fun of it. I'm not saying all people, but it's really a lack of knowledge in that—and pure ignorance on the part of those who make the comments that they do.

**Moon:**

Yeah, well, the right wing certainly—the fundamentalists right here certainly had a very vocal voice in city government just going back to the gay rights issue.

**Alvarado:**

Oh, did you see that?

**Moon:**

Yeah.

**Alvarado:**

Oh my God. And that was in 1980, when I was first running for office. Oh, yeah.

**Moon:**

So that doesn't surprise me.

**Alvarado:**

Not at all.

**Moon:**

Well, let's just go a little bit forward and talk about, you know, your—how you came to—

**Alvarado:**

My God, do you realize what time it is already? Wow, this is taking—

**Moon:**

If we could just—

**Alvarado:**

Well, if you talk about seventy-five years of history going back.

**Moon:**

No, I know. Well, we could do another interview, too, if you're open to that. But I just wanted to touch a little bit on your work here at the board of supervisors and just get you to explain how—why did you decide to run for the board? And then think about it more—and thinking about more broadly why didn't you decide to run for a higher office, like in the assembly? Or, what were your—were there opportunities that were presented to you and you made a certain local decision?

**Alvarado:**

Well, first of all, when I was termed out in 1994, uh, I had been in the—and Don Edwards had retired from Congress, and I had been asked at that time if I would run for Congress. And, you know, there was speculation about who would run. And there was a press conference and when Don announced his retirement and, you know, everybody says, Well, Blanca, you should run, blah, blah, blah.

And I think, Congress? You know, who wants to go to Washington? It's so far, for one thing. And I said no, I had no interest. And in fact that was a very interesting episode because by then, uh, former mayor Tom McEnery and Zoe Lofgren were running for the seat. And talk about bullish politics of the time, oh my Lord. Ron Gonzales was holding out, wanting to get some—you know, and this is kind of irrelevant, but he wanted to hold down some concession—He wanted to get either Zoe or Tom to agree to endorse him when he ran for mayor if he endorsed one or the other. And I didn't want to play that game. I really didn't. I had nothing to ask of anybody and so when I chose to endorse Zoe it was because I felt that she had, um, the feminist instinct. I felt that Zoe, who had already demonstrated capacity and presence and leadership here at the county, would be a much stronger advocate for us in Washington than Tom. Uh, and, you know, I like Tom a lot and we get along. We had our ups and we had our downs, uh, but most of the time I didn't think that Tom would be an effective voice in Washington because he would be one of four hundred and some people, right? I mean, it wasn't that—he wasn't going to have the same place of prominence that he had here as mayor. And on the other hand,

Zoe is a worker, and she was going to work with everybody. So I endorsed her, and, of course, she won. Tom didn't talk to me for five years after that.

**Moon:**

Yeah, I guess he's really held that against other people.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, I'm sure he has. But she radically campaigned. And, you know, she—it's interesting when you look back at Zoe, um, she's really made her mark. And one of the things that comes to mind is when she was here on the board and she was breastfeeding her child. I thought that was just so courageous, you know?

**Moon:**

Yeah. And controversial, too.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, it was. But it was the right thing to do, yeah? Uh, and she and I, when I was on the council and she was on the board, we talked—we worked on some issues. And I worked with Dianne McKenna on a very interesting issue: that was our trash. What were we going to do to reduce the amount of trash that went into our landfills? And Dianne McKenna and I were together on a committee. It was a state mandate, and, oh, she was wonderful to work with. And Zoe was wonderful to work with. And I really admired these women. I mean, for me, they were on a pedestal. I mean, I thought I was a lower echelon being on the city council, but it didn't matter because they always made you feel so welcome. And do you know that Susie Wilson was just a tremendous help to me when I first decided to run. She took me out one afternoon and she mentored me for about four hours. And, you know, I remember that, and I recall it often, and I mention it

to her that she was the first big political leader that took time to take me under her wings and—

**Moon:**

I think she's really good at that.

**Alvarado:**

Oh, she's great.

**Moon:**

She does that—she's been doing that with, um, Cindy Chavez and other—and Linda LeZotte was saying the same thing. She's really great.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah. Well, she helped me a great deal, too. But anyways. So anyway, Zoe wins, right? And I'm out of office and the Board of Supervisors then decides that they're going to have an interview to appoint, uh, Zoe's seat. And so that was in January of 1995 and it was the scariest thing I've ever gone through. I had been in politics for a long time but it is so different when you're interviewing, you know, four board members in a public forum with six or seven other candidates, and I was scared to death. I don't know why I was so nervous that night, but by then Dianne McKenna and Ron Gonzales had already publicly stated that they were in support of me. So I knew that I had two votes, right? But I didn't know where Jim would be, because even though we were colleagues on the council for fourteen years he would never tell me what he was going to do. And I never knew until that night. And I had been taken out to lunch several times by Mike Honda. You know, in retrospect I think he thought that I was going to be a clone to Ron Gonzales, so he was hesitant to give me public support. Anyway, we go through the

interview and I didn't know where Jim was going to be, and so when Ron made the motion and Dianne seconded it I was stunned when Jim voted for me. Uh, and then—so I won, right?

**Moon:**

Uh-huh.

**Alvarado:**

And then they did another vote, and Mike voted against me initially but then he made it unanimous with his vote. So here it is. I was seated immediately and—because Zoe has gone. She's already in Washington. And it's an experience. County government is so different from city government. I mean, different like night and day.

**Moon:**

Like more complex?

**Alvarado:**

Complex, complicated. I mean, real heart of the soul issues. You're really dealing with life and death issues. So by the time 1996 came around and I had to go out and campaign, um, God, there was this guy, young Mathieson, who ran against me in '96. He was put up by Tom McEnery, I know. And, you know, of course he brought up the plumed serpent and it was a very nasty campaign and really hard campaign. And, you know, I had never run citywide and this was a very large district. But, um, I think I did the worst in Willow Glen, which is a pretty quiet enclave—

**Moon:**

Very.

**Alvarado:**

—of the district. But nonetheless I won. In the primary it was just Mathieson and me. And there was money that came into Mathieson from, you know, the David Pandoris and the Tom McEnerys and others of that ilk. But I won. And so, having won my first four-year term in 1996, I really got serious because I'd never, never, never had an interest in going to Sacramento. For me, politics is really here at the local level. I love being able to be here where the folks are. I like going home at night. You know, I like having my family around. And I never had any desire to go to Sacramento. Besides, you know, all they do is run every two years and raise money.

**Moon:**

Right.

**Alvarado:**

And so there was no interest to me. So then it was kind of interesting how after my first term—and then there was something that was put—we had a charter review committee who put some things on the ballot which included term limits for the board. But instead of two term limits there was a three term limit. So suddenly I find myself with the possibility of spending twelve years on the board. And it was exhilarating because I thought, oh, my word, this is such an opportunity to do a lot of good things, uh, in the social service arena. So once I was established with my first election, there was no doubt that I would run for a second and I was unopposed then. And I was unopposed when I ran for the third time last year. Um, but—so when I finish I will have served fourteen years on the council and fourteen years on the board. Uh, and it's been a magnificent, magnificent journey and a place to be at, not only because it's a place where you have really direct impact for the good or for the bad of people's lives, but probably, for me, the

thing that I have relished the most has been my ability to change institutions, at the county level, that deal with families and children in particular.

**Moon:**

Right, I was looking at your bio on your website and the number of projects that you have been involved in are incredible.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, it's really quite extensive.

**Moon:**

Some of the programs that I was particularly interested in and thought maybe you could talk about just briefly—one is, um, the Girls for Change.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, Girls for a Change. You know, Danelle, can we revisit this? Um, it's 12:15. And I think that the—my history here on the board is so significant. I consider it so. Not only Girls for a Change, but there's the whole thing on pension reform. I think that is, I really—

**Moon:**

Well, there's so many things on this list I would just like you to talk about more in detail, and maybe what we could do is schedule another appointment if that would work out for you.

**Alvarado:**

Yeah, if we can give ourselves another hour I'd be happy to do it.

**Moon:**

Yeah, that'd be great.



**Alvarado:**

Would that be okay?

**Moon:**

Yeah, that would be terrific. And thank you.

**Alvarado:**

Oh, you're welcome, yeah.

**Moon:**

And I think—

**Alvarado:**

It's hard to cover, you know, twenty-five years of activism—

**Moon:**

No, it is. It's impossible, really. And you've done so much and there's so many things that I could ask you about that we, you know, wouldn't be able to cover, you know, in this short period of time. So what I'll do is, I'll reschedule another appointment with you to talk about—

**Alvarado:**

Okay. Yeah, I'll work with Kent (??) to look at a date.

**Moon:**

Okay, that would be great. So I'll just shut this—

*end of interview*