

**Oral History Interview of
Juan Manuel Chavez**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Sanchez
January 25, 2013
Muleshoe, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Hispanic Oral History Project***

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Interview Series Background:

The Hispanic Interview Project documents the diverse perspectives of the Hispanic people of Lubbock and the South Plains. These interviews and accompanying manuscript materials cover a myriad of topics including; early Lubbock, discrimination, politics, education, music, art, cultural celebrations, the May 11th 1970 tornado, commerce, and sport.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Juan Manuel Chavez, county commissioner in Muleshoe, Texas. Juan discusses his early life and how he became interested in politics. He recounts the Hispanic political activism of the seventies, and discusses the current issues for Hispanic Americans today.

Length of Interview: 01:39:44

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Daniel Sanchez (DS):

My name is Daniel Sanchez. Today's date is January 25, 2013. I'm in Muleshoe, Texas at the Bailey County Courthouse interviewing Juan Chavez who is a county commissioner. Juan, thank you for sitting down this morning.

Juan Chavez (JC):

Thank you.

DS:

And for the record, let's start off with your complete legal name.

JC:

Juan Manuel Chavez.

DS:

And where and when were you born?

JC:

The first, the first, 1949. [01-01-1949] I was born in Manzanola, Colorado

DS:

And who are your parents?

JC:

Leo Chavez y Anita Chavez.

DS:

And, the same information on them, when and where were they born?

JC:

Anita Chavez was born in Walsenburg, Colorado and Leo Chavez was born in Tres Rios, New Mexico.

DS:

Do you know any of the history of your grandparents?

JC:

According to my dad, his parents were born in Las Cruces, New Mexico. And my mom's side, they were born in Trinidad, Colorado.

DS:

So what took everybody to Colorado? Do they talk about how they wound up being there?

JC:

I think their parents were born there too, so when I came to Texas and they used to say, "When did you cross the border?" Never crossed the border. "Well, your dad, your grandparents, your great-grandparents?" According to us, the river moved and we stayed behind.

DS:

So your ancestors are all from the Colorado area?

JC:

New Mexico on my dad's side and Colorado on my mom's side.

DS:

Oh, and what were their occupations?

JC:

According to my dad, they used to go to California, Wyoming, Nebraska, North Dakota. They were farm workers. According to my mom, on her side, my grandfather was a mine worker, somewhere there in Trinidad and Walsenburg. But in the strike in the thirties, it got a little ugly and one of the strikers was killed and so my grandfather decided to move to Manzanola and became a farm worker.

DS:

What did your parents do?

JC:

Farm workers.

DS:

Farm workers, okay. And, did you do that as a child also?

JC:

A little bit. I was one of the youngest so I didn't get to do much.

DS:

How many siblings did you have?

JC:

Twelve.

DS:

Twelve! Wow.

JC:

Twelve. Six girls and six boys.

DS:

For the record, let's get their names.

JC:

The first one is named Juan Roberto Chavez. Second one is Leo Chavez. Third one is Beatrice Campos, for her marriage. And then deceased is Simone Chavez, deceased Cecilio Chavez, and then me, Juan Chavez. And then Benny, Benito, and then Josie and then Barbara and then Rosanne, that passed away, and then another Rosanne, and then Rachel. And the reason the first one is named Juan Roberto Chavez—back then you would have the child at home and then the doctor would say, “How you going to name this kid?” Well my mom said, “Leo Chavez Jr.” Well, that's what the doctor took. Three days later the godfather and godmother came and took him to be baptized. My mom decided, “Well, I'm going to put my dad's name.” So she named him Juan. Their godfathers knew my dad and knew that my dad's mom was name Roberta, so they named Juan Roberto Chavez. He was always called Roberto.

When I was born, fifteen days later, my grandfather died. My mom complete sense. That kid was “Robert, Robert, Robert. Roberto.” She called me, Juan. And my godfather and godmother took me three days later to baptize and they wanted Manuel, so they named me Juan Manuel Chavez. Yeah, I mean people say, “Why are there two Juans?” Well, my mom's dad was named Juan and she wanted a Juan in the family. Later we found out that really, on his birth certificate, he was Leo Chavez, and the second one was Leo Chavez, but on his baptism he was Juan Roberto Chavez. Anyway, he always ran for [went by] Juan Roberto Chavez, so, I mean, since he grew up. When he was little, everyone knew him as Roberto, Roberto, Roberto.

DS:

Did that cause him any problems later in life?

JC:

No.

DS:

Because I know, my mother, there were a lot of mistakes on her stuff. When she tried to do things like Social Security and stuff, it was a headache trying to get everything figured out.

JC:

And that was the funny part. When he went to get his Social Security, or apply for it, he said, "My name is Juan Roberto Chavez and my Social Security number is so and so." And the guy knew more than he did (laughs). And he had ordered his birth certificate, but never looked at it. Well later, when Leo became of age, he was looking for his birth certificate, and Robert said, "Well I got one here that says Leo Chavez, maybe it's yours." So, they looked at the age and that's when they found out that really, on his birth certificate, there was two Leo Chavez. And, so he had to order his birth certificate. And no, Social Security knew who was who and—nothing, no problems.

DS:

Well that's good. So what was it like growing up in such a big family?

JC:

Hardship. I mean, in the winter we would—there was storage, a lot of beans and things that they could—a lot of harina and that would get us by in the winter. Because there wasn't very much work. We came to Texas, I think, in 1953, I was five years old. Late '53. We moved here about fifteen miles outside of town in a little farm and my dad would find work during the summer. In the winter, very little. So, that's the way we survived and it was not easy. When I started school, we still lived in the farm and my two oldest brothers were going to school. So when I started, I didn't know. I got on the bus and I wanted to sit on the front, and my brothers said "Oh, no, no, we got to sit back there."

Well, I came to find out that the driver's side, in the very back, there were three black kids. On the passenger's side, it was us three, and that was the only place we could sit. I don't know who made that rule. Anyway, when I used to get out of school, as soon as the bell rang, I used to run to the bus and sit on the front seat. And then, the kids would start climbing in the bus, and then, just any little kid would say, "Hey, you get back your own seat." So I would go back there and I would tell my brothers, "I sat in the front seat for a little while." Well, the bus driver started making my brother and the black kid fight, and whoever would lose would get a whipping. So my mother said, "No, you guys aren't going to go to school anymore." So for three months we didn't go to school.

Finally, she couldn't put up with us anymore. She said, "You guys are going to school." So, I don't know why, she picked me, and she made a note. She knew how to write in English. Speak English. My dad did too. So she wrote a little note saying that we hadn't attended school because the bus driver was making my brother and another black guy fight. Well, they put it in my back pocket, so when I was going to get on the bus, I saw the bus driver and got scared and I thought

he knew that I had the note. So, I started running, and my brothers got on the bus. And boy did I get a whipping for not climbing on the bus.

So the next day they sent me again with the note. I got on the bus. When we got to school, I went to my old class, and the teacher said, "Well, you need to sign in to go to school." And I said, "Well, I signed in. I was going to school and this was my chair." "Well, when was that?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, I used to come here, but then we stopped coming to school." And she said, "Well, let's go to the principal's office." Wow. I thought, now you're really going to get it. So we went to the principal's office and the principal said, "Well, what's your name and where do you live?" So, I finally explained all of that and then got the note and gave it to him. And he said, "You sit, right there, I'll be back." And he told the teacher, "Well, go back to your class." So, I sat there for thirty minutes, and I thought I was in big trouble. Well, no. Like thirty minutes later he came and he said, "Go to your old class. You probably won't get the same desk, but they'll fit you in."

So I went back and the biggest surprise was that when I went on the evening to get on the bus, we didn't have the same bus driver. Later, we found out that he got rid of him. So my mom said, "Maybe we should have spoken earlier instead of you guys missing three months of school. Maybe there was somebody that would have listened to us." Well, I guess there was. Because, the bus driver—and the principal asked me, he said, "How many times has he hit your brother with a belt?" and I said "Never, because he hits the one that loses, but it's the black guy that always loses. But the black guy does get whipped with the belt." So that was the end of his career as a bus driver. But, we still kept riding on the back. And later we moved into town so we walked to school. But I always thought, why did I have to ride on the back? Why couldn't I ride in the front, if I was the first one in the bus? And little things like that that I used to see during my growing.

So, in 1970, when Chicanos Unidos started here in Muleshoe, which is a Hispanic Organization. Chicanos Unidos-Campesinos. I, right away joined and we started going to meetings in Austin, San Antonio, El Paso, Houston, and listening to people who had more education than I did explaining things like why it shouldn't be that way. Well, that got me more into—I wanted to find out more. And I wanted to know why I thought all those thoughts and I found out that I wasn't the only one that wanted to know and that we wanted a change. Later, I thought, Well remember when that principal fired that bus driver, or got him fired? There were people who would listen. The only thing that we didn't do right was speak out.

So from there on, I said, What I need to do is speak out. Things that you don't like, let people know that you don't like them. And there is people that agree with you and there's going to be a few that don't. And later, you'll find out that those people that don't, a lot of times they don't even know why they don't agree with you. Because somebody told them to disagree, and they disagree. But if you really ask them why do they disagree, they don't have a good answer. They just disagree because maybe their parents told them that or their uncle or whoever they hang around with. And then you find out that there are a lot of them that say, "Well, I don't blame you, you shouldn't put up with that."

So that got me more into—and finally, now, there are other organizations around the country. And we started attending their demonstrations, their marches, their meetings. That opened my mind and said, you need to do something. And like five years later I became the president of Chicano Unidos. And then you can speak with authority. And I would come out with things that I needed to say. And everywhere I needed to say them, I let them know. And I would always speak for my community. And later I—well, when we heard that Cesar Chavez, we'd never met the man but knew what he was mainly doing and then found out about Corky Gonzales who was from la Cruzada por la Justicia (The Crusade for Justice) in Colorado. Then found out from Reies López Tijerina from New Mexico. Then found out from José Ángel Gutiérrez in Texas. So, we would get involved in all those.

Later, Ramsey Muñiz started running for governor and we started joining Ramsey Muñiz, Mario Compean, José Ángel Gutiérrez. And they started talking about ideas and how to get into politics and what you needed to know to make it and get there. You needed the numbers. Well, back in the seventies it was very hard because they had it at large schools, counties, cities. So we knew we couldn't win. So somebody came up with the idea of a single man per district and we joined the lawsuits. They went all the way across California, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado. I think all over the United States, suing the county and the school. And we knew that it was kind of hard, you needed two signatures to sue. It was very hard for somebody that was working for a farmer or working for someone daily making his living. For him to sign, he might not have a job the next day.

So me and Alberto Daniel, decided, we'll sign. So, I used to work with my brothers, they had trucks. So the farmer wouldn't see me, I was just a truck driver. And they had nothing to do with the hiring and firing of the truck drivers, so I kept my job. So we sued, and we sued the hospital, the school, the city, and the county. Later, it came for a single member districts. And they showed us, this is what you got to watch for. Remember that the Hispanics got 4.5 kids verses the Anglo has 2. They would try to put all their kids into the—so you have 51 or 52 percent, but you're still not going to win because you got too many kids underage that don't vote. So, that's when we start drawing the lines or petitioning that that's not the line I like because that only gives me 53 or 56. I need, like, a 65 or 68 percent because of the kids or the young citizen, Hispanic that lives there.

So when I seen the opportunity to win, I ran for city council and I won. And that's a three-year term, so I had the position for four terms. On my fourth term, our county commissioner from our precinct passed away, so I seen the opportunity to run. But since he had passed away, the rest of the commissioners could appoint, they appointed his wife. So, then I done my homework, for the possibilities of winning – they weren't very good. But I remember that Ramsey Muñiz, José Ángel Gutiérrez, Mario Compean would tell you, It's not going to be handed to you, you need to work for it. So I said, Okay. It's a small percentage, but I'm willing to work it.

So when it came up that she had to run, I registered and I worked very hard and I beat the Democrat, she was a Democrat. But they had put a Republican—and they had never done that, put a Republican to run against that precinct. But, when they figured that I might win, they put a

Republican. So, I won in the primaries, and then when the general election came, I again worked very hard, and I beat him. So it was a two-year term. So I had to barely win and then start running again. So I said, I'll just work as hard as I did. Well later I found out that nobody was running against me, and there was a lady here at the courthouse that had become sort of friendly with me and she said, "There's nobody that's going to run against you." And I said, "Well, it's only like three days from now that the end of the signing." And she said, "Well, I asked the guy that ran against you last time and he said, 'If I can't beat a non-patriotic damn Mexican, I can't beat anybody.'"

So that's when I found out that nobody was going to run against me. So nobody ran. I got it a second term for four years. Then the third time I signed in, and again, nobody ran against me. So I'm on my third term as county commissioner. These are four year terms, except I had one that—unexpired, the city is three years. So I served there almost to the twelve years. It would have been in May, I resigned in November, but to run for county commissioner.

DS:

Yeah so they almost have the same rule that Lubbock has where if you announce another position and you're on the city council you have to resign?

JC:

Right. So I had to resign from that. And that's—you know, we used to talk about this. If you're a city councilman and you want to run for another position, that position, in most of those little towns, it's a non-paying position, right?

DS:

Right.

JC:

Okay, but you've got to leave it to run, for example, for county commissioner or county judge or any other position. And here they are, the senators, congressmen, state representatives, that can get like three or four months off, run for president—if I don't win, I've still got my senator or my state representative job, right?

DS:

Or the governor.

JC:

Or a governor, right? And so, it's kind of funny that you have to resign a non-paying position, but here you got a paying position and you keep drawing your salary while you try to become governor or president. But, when I started with Chicanos Unidos in 1970, because of everything that had happened to me when I was a kid and I wasn't satisfied with the answers that I had.

When I became a member of Chicanos Unidos and there was an opportunity to meet people with different ideas, more educated than I, because I only went through the 7th grade. And I thought I was doing real good because my mom and my dad had only gone to the 4th grade. But anyway, when I met José Ángel Gutiérrez or Ramsey Muñiz or Reies Lopez Tijerina or Corky Gonzales, that had had school, and they were not satisfied. That encouraged me more to get involved and stay involved.

And I have always told everybody, You know, if you volunteer for an organization, try to be active. I mean, I've seen people that join an organization or even churches and then they don't take it serious, they don't—they say, Well, I have to go to my grandkid's birthday party. I have to do—I remember when my daughter was about four years old. It was going to be her birthday and we had bought her some swings. And I was out there in the yard fixing the swings. I was about halfway done, and they stopped there and they said, "Hey, are you going the meeting in Hereford?" And I said, "Hey, it is today." And I said, "Yeah." They said, "Well, you want to ride with us?" and I said, "Yeah," and I ran in the house and told my wife, "Forgive me, I'm not going to be here for my girl's birthday party, I'm going to a meeting in Hereford."

Hereford has always been, ever since the seventies—see Hereford has always had a big majority of Hispanic. They always said that Hereford was a sleeping giant. Well I guess he's still sleeping, because they don't have many—well now I think they have two city councilmen and I'm not even sure if they have one county commissioner. And the sheriff finally became Hispanic.

But I remember in 1972 when I went—my wife was from around Pecos, and we used to go down there twice a year to visit my mother-in-law. And so they were just around thirty miles from Pecos, so I'd go leave my wife over there with her mother and then I'd go to Pecos and try to find out what was going on. And I found out that they were 63 percent Hispanic. And I started asking "How many city councilmen?" "None." "How many county commissioners?" "None." "How many school board members?" "One." "Why?" "I don't know." Well, they started saying like, uh, "Well this man is very interested in, or this man, this man has ran two or three times, he just can't win."

So I started talking to them. And then, they were very interested, and I said, "Well you need to talk to the Hispanics and tell them what's going on. We need you guys to go out and vote. You've got a sheriff here that's been thirty years, mistreated most of your kids, and you still haven't elected there? I mean, it's got to change." So, they got me to go around talking to people. So I got to speak to the school board member who was the only school board member there, and other people and they started getting interested. Well, in 1974 there were already like 68 percent. Still one county commissioner, one school board, and I think none city council. But I used to go over there and rile them up.

Nineteen seventy-six—I think that's when Mario Compean ran for governor. I went back over there and I start telling them, "You need to—" At that time there was a few guys that had gotten out of college. And, they were very interested and since they'd been in college in California or other states, they had been out of Pecos, they said, "Yeah! It's time." So one of them ran for

mayor and the turnout was something like three thousand people came out to vote, and he only lost by sixty-eight votes. That's when the business people started finding out, Wait a minute, if this guy just barely got out of college six months ago and lost by sixty-eight votes. I've been here as a businessman for thirty years or twenty years, maybe I can win. So they started running. Well, let's say by 1990, they had four county commissioners, they had four city councils, the sheriff—a lot of stuff had changed, right. But it took them, if you realize when there were 63 percent, they couldn't win. And then it went up to 68, and then it went up to seventy-something. Which, now, I think they're up to about 90%.

Now they even had a mayor here not too long ago, very young, I mean, he resigned because he found a job. He had came out from some university. But anyway, they had to go all the way up to the 80 percent to start winning. Hereford has been 80 percent for years, and we always say the sleeping giant, but I guess it's still sleeping. Because, it's not a big percentage of Hispanics in city council, county commissioner. I don't know who's the sheriff now, but—what was his name, Brown? He's a Hispanic but with a last name. But I think somebody's got to get active.

DS:

Well, I was going to ask you that, what is the spark that it takes, not only for an individual, but for a community to take action like that?

JC:

Well, here we have two school board members, we had one city, he resigned. We have one in the county—me. It takes somebody that's always talking about it. Letting them know why. When they say, "Why is this happening in schools when 92 percent of our kids are in school?" That's why, because you don't get involved. You need to get involved. And sometimes you need somebody to keep telling them. For example, in Lubbock I think they're kind of behind. The blacks have only had one city council. The only way they got another one is to get one out. I mean, they still only have one position. I think, somebody needs to keep telling them, If you don't like the way it's going, you need to get involved and stay involved. I mean, I hate that when they volunteer for any organization, just, a non-profit, or any kind of an organization, be active. I mean, I hate when they start saying, "Well, they changed the meeting to Lubbock or they changed the meeting to Levelland, I'm not going to be able to attend." I mean, if you volunteer, make your best effort to go.

DS:

Yeah, I think you and I see eye-to-eye on that. Because, I know there's people they go and are like—they sign up but then they don't like the meeting time and want to change it. I'm like, Well, that organization, that's they're meeting time. You signed up. They don't have to change to you, you have to accommodate them.

JC:

Right. I served in the South Plains Health Provider for six years. It was in Plainview. And you know, I had to go to Plainview, I knew that when I signed in. If I missed one meeting, I think that was about it. I've been at the Community Action now for ten years or something like that. Never tried to miss a meeting, and I'm not only a board member, you're a committee board member so you have to go sometimes to three meetings in one month, or a couple a month. But I take it very serious, what I do. And I try to participate and I try to understand and I try to give my opinion. And I remember one time there was a guy from California that came and he wanted people that had been in the Chicano deal. So he called Bidal Agüero, Eliseo Solis, me and Alberto Daniel. And he was like this, interviewing us for about an hour. And he realized that when he would ask a question and we were talking, he said, "There at the end, Eliseo and Bidal and Alberto kept saying, Well, it's just like what Juan said a while ago and it explained. And then Eliseo would say, Yeah, well it's just like when Juan was saying—he said I wanted their own opinion. (laughter)

You know, and because sometimes I come out with—when the Jews don't give the Palestinians their land back, I said, "The only land grabbers is the Jews and the United States, you don't hear about any other nation land grabbers, only the Jews and the United States." And I said, "Remember when they said, Arafat, he's always got a 45 or whatever it was on his side and he's trying to talk peace with his gun on his hip. Later, Arafat left his gun and he still never got the land back." So, the Jews has always had an excuse for "why not" we're giving you your land back. I mean, you always going to have people, I don't care what you do or what—you're always going to have people say the why not. And those, you're never going to change. But I'm glad that the Hispanics have been growing in numbers, but they always need somebody. I don't know why. We always need somebody to tell us that we need to do something. I mean, why are we always crying of things that are happening to us if we're not willing to do anything about it? We need to get up and speak out and do whatever we need to do. Vote., get people registered, get people involved in opinions or why do you think things should change? And sometimes you get a lot of people in your favor. I don't think all the Jews want the Palestinian's land. But you keep seeing these five—he's the prime minister, he's the defense, he's the—and then they change. But it's the same five.

It doesn't seem like they have a wide range of politicians, right? And that's their mindset. We're going to keep the land that we stole from the Palestinians. And they're going to have to die for new politicians to come up and new ideas to come up. And that's what happens with us, right? A lot of—here in Bailey county, I remember when I was a kid, the sugar factory that went into Hereford was trying—probably not trying, but anyway, there was some ideas, Why not build it in Muleshoe? Well, there was a lot of farmers here that would pay you, what, sixty-five cents an hour? They said, "No! If we bring the sugar factory, we'll never find anybody to work. Because they're going to be paid better wages over there." That's not true. If there's enough work, people will come.

They wanted to put Levelland College, an idea, in Muleshoe. "No, unh-uh. People will get smart and go look for another job and who's going to farm my farm?" When they opened the beef packing company in Friona. Somebody brought up, what about Muleshoe? "Oh no, everybody's going to go work at the beef packing company and who's going to farm my land?" Well, the sugar factory opened in Hereford, the beef packing in Friona, the college in Levelland. Nobody's run out of labor force. There's always people. If you open more positions, more people will come to work. But that was their mindset back then. What happened? Most of them died and passed... went on. Other famers came. They're still farming. Dairies came. There's still enough workers for the farm.

But they had a mindset, and that's what I think is going on in Israel with the Jews. They decided they're going to keep the Palestinian's land. Even though they pay taxes, right, to the Palestinians for their land. But what the Palestinians don't like is, "It's *my* land." I remember back in the seventies when I had barely joined, a police officer, asked me, "What in the hell do you guys want?" And I said, "I don't know exactly, but we don't like what we got." And he said, "We stole you're land, but we're giving you a job. We got the Indian's land, but we're giving them a check." And I said, "Well that's just like telling me that I can go to this grocery store and take over this grocery store and I'm going to give groceries to the owner of the store, but I'm going to keep the store." He said, "You can't do that." And I said, "That's what you're telling me. You came and took the Indian's land, but you're giving them a check. So, you know, I'm going to tell you the same thing, I'm going to go to the grocery store and I'm going to take over the grocery store and I'm going to give the guy some groceries every week, but I'm going to keep the store." He said, "I don't know how you're going to do that." I said, "Well, I can't, but that's what you guys did." And you're not going to change everybody's mind.

DS:

Yeah. You know, you're talking about getting people active and getting people interested and they talk about the hardships of getting involved. Can you tell us about, what it was like, in those days, trying to start something like the group that y'all had here in Muleshoe?

JC:

Well, when we started here, you wanted to have a meeting, you wanted a place big enough so people could come. They wouldn't rent to you as soon as they found out it was a meeting for Chicanos, they wouldn't rent it to you. We started renting old houses with no windows, which, later I found out that Dr. Garcia, he was doing the same thing when he was trying to organize LULAC in the east over there. Well, that's what we would do. We would go with somebody and say, "Well, for how much would you rent us the house?" He would say, "Well, that house is not rentable and doesn't have a door and doesn't have windows." "Well, we're just going to use it for one day." "Well, ten dollars and we'll let you." So, we'd get volunteers to sweep it up and clean it. And that's the way we're doing it, or we started.

And later, we found out this building was for rent and a doctor owned it. So somebody went in and asked the doctor if he would rent it. He didn't ask for what, he rented it. So, we rented part of it and then we had a guy writing proposals. So then we started getting federal dollars, so then we extended the rent. And then later, when we wanted to buy it, the doctor said, "I'll sell it to you for eight thousand dollars." Which, in those days eight thousand dollars was quite a bit. So the guy that was writing the proposals said, "Let's organize another organization." In those days, we had a hundred and fifty members in Chicanos Unidos. He said, "We'll make another board, and we'll ask for the funds under this, and then this organization administers the funds and pays rent to Chicanos Unidos and Chicanos Unidos can buy the building."

So that's what we did. We bought the building and then we bought another building on Highway 84. And we asked for a grant from the Presbyterian Church for a store. And they gave us a grant and then they would pay Chicanos Unidos rent and Chicanos Unidos bought the building. So we ended up with two buildings. Most of the organizations in Lubbock and the valley, for the exception of the United Phone Workers, they still got their building. But a lot of the organizations that started back then, they always rented their buildings, so when the organization dissolved they had nothing. If there was a little group that wanted to stay, where would they meet? This is what happened here. Alberto always wanted—if all the funds get cut off and everything, we still have a place to come to.

And I remember when the Presbyterian Church in Lubbock was giving us just enough for light, gas, water, and phone. And I remember a member from Amarillo from the Presbyterian Church said, "Why is it so important for you guys to keep the building going?" and I said, "Do you have a dog?" She said, "Yeah, I have a dog." I said, "Do you have a yard?" "Yeah I have a yard." "Okay, if you put a sign there and you say, "Beware: Dog," nobody will go in your yard." "Well, yeah." I said, "Well here, Chicanos Unidos used to approach the school, the sheriff, the county judge, the commissioners, the city council, the city manager. We were like the dog. This has been thirty years. When they go by there and they see the light still on, they hear the phone ring, they say the dog is still there. But if everything shuts down, turn the lights off, they say the dog has gone.

So, they start up trying to get away with things that they know what they're not supposed to. But, while they see light, the phone ringing—the same with you. If you don't feed your dog, one day somebody's going to find out that there's no dog in that yard. I don't know if you've ever met
Tavita

DS:

Tavita Dorow? Yeah.

JC:

When we got out of that meeting, because she was the only Hispanic Presbyterian in the whole West Texas. When we walked out of that meeting, she said, "I liked your explanation. Even though it looks like you guys are dogs." And I said, "But we do the same thing."

DS:

Yeah. You know, and as I was thinking, because I've been on several historic groups and boards, and one thing, a lot of the places like that they have markers, historical markers. Have you ever considered trying to get a historical marker for your building based on the importance to your organization and what you've done here and designate it as a landmark? Because I think that would be a really good statement.

JC:

Probably. I mean, no, we have never done.

DS:

That's something you should look into. Seeing what it takes to get one in Dawson County, I mean, Bailey County, and—

JC:

Well, there at the—because there were no Hispanic Presbyterians, so at first it was only me and Beto that were members of that group. That group, they came with the intent of doing something for the Hispanic community, but they couldn't find any Hispanic Presbyterians, so they got us even though we're Catholics, to be in that committee. When the Texas farm workers wound up in jail over there close to Pecos, they put fifteen thousand dollars on bond to get them out.

Charge of trespassing, you know how they used to do it with the strikers. They would find a reason why to put you in jail. They never came to court, so the people lost their fifteen thousand dollars. But what they did was, they were getting second year law students to do stuff for Hispanics. Whatever they needed as a lawyer, they were only on their second year law degree. But then they had somebody that would—they would do the research and blah blah blah. But somebody there in Lubbock would do the rest. And they were putting up the money for those second-year law students to do that kind of work.

Well they found out that the only way they could claim their fifteen thousand dollars was to say we donated it to the Texas Farm Workers even though that the Texas Farm Workers didn't have the fifteen thousand dollars, it was a—Pecos County or Reeves County who had the money but the lawyers told them, If you donate the money to the farm workers, which, we think, the county's going to end up keeping the money because they never called anybody down to court. And that's the way they did it. Anyway, these people would try to help any way they could. So they were the ones, when all the funds run out, the building was ours. And for about ten years they would give us thirty thousand, five hundred dollars a year to keep up the water, gas, light, and phone. Well, one day the director came and said, "You know they're going to dissolve this board." Because they only had Tavita, the only Presbyterian. They said, "But, we don't want you guys to go away. So what can we do so you guys can keep going?" And Alberto said, "Well, our center is 45x45. If we could make it 90x45 we could rent it for Quinceañeras, weddings, and we would stay alive with the money we would generate from Quinceañeras and all that."

And he said, "Well, let's write a proposal to Atlanta." I think there's a main office that gives nine million dollars to different organizations and that. So he wrote the proposal for us, and he attached the letter from the committee saying, "We, the committee, love this idea," la da da. And we sent it to Atlanta and something like three months later a letter came in saying, "You guys asked for thirty thousand, and we are almost about out of money, but we love your idea. If you can do anything with twenty-three thousand, that's what we got." So he got on his phone and called me and I said, "Yeah." So we extended our center. Now it's about 100x45. And that's the way we keep the light on. And we've done that for another ten, twelve years, that way.

I think somebody needs to keep the fire burning. I'm getting old and I remember when I was in like six organizations at once and I told my wife, "I'm going to quit some of these organizations." We were watching TV and I was about to go to Plainview. She didn't answer anything. And then like, five minutes later, I said, "Well, I got to go to the meeting." She said "Okay." She said, "You know what?" I said, "What?" "You're not going to quit. Because if you don't do it, who's going to do it?" I'm getting old, I try to put sparks on younger generations or somebody else who could do it for years to come, they say they attend four or five meetings with me. I even get them in the board and they start and they attend four or five meetings and then they start saying, "Well, I don't have time next month. I don't have time next week. I don't have time."

I don't know who's going to keep the fire going, or if it's needed. Like I say, who inspired me was—I never met Cesar Chavez but I would hear—I met Reies Lopez Tijerina, and besides meeting them, I found out a lot about Corky Gonzales and José Ángel Gutiérrez, Ramsey Muñiz, even though he got into the problems he got—later, to me that doesn't mean anything. I mean, I remember when I got in the city council and I would meet people and they would say, "Well, how did you get into politics?" And I would say, "Well, mainly José Ángel Gutiérrez, Ramsey Muñiz, Mario Compean. And then I was in the Texas Farmworkers Union and I used to see Reies Lopez Tijerina, Corky Gonzales.

They had ideas and I thought I had ideas that I could—Oh, Ramsey Muñiz, he was in prison. What he did, that's beside the point. He got me inspired, he got a lot of people inspired. I mean, sometimes you start the fire, somebody else will pick it up and take it on. My wife says, "You're not going to quit, you got to keep doing it." And I felt real good when I was coming back from the meeting and thinking about it. I said, "There's nothing like the backing of your spouse on anything." I mean, I don't care what you do, if you got backing 100 percent from your spouse, I think you got it made. I never left the organizations, I finished my terms. But I thought that that was—when they're both in it, or, think the same way, your excuses—I think a lot of these guys or people that I have tried to—they get into it but then their wife starts saying, "Well, I thought we were going to go to Clovis today." Or "I thought we—" And that sort of puts, maybe I should do something else.

DS:

Yeah. And that's kind of the exact opposite of when your daughter's four, you're putting up the swing set, you go, "Oh, I've got a meeting I forgot," and your wife's going, "Oh, okay." That's the exact opposite.

JC:

Right. Right. I remember when I came back, the swings were put up. And she said, "No, well the compadres were coming. When you left the compadres got here so—the compadre started finishing it. And he finished it. But she would never say, "You can't go," or, "You shouldn't go." I got a little encouragement by her, and I think that helped a lot. And we—or we think that you have to have somebody to keep encouraging you. And the people that I have found don't have that much enthusiasm. And then if their spouse—it gets a little difficult.

DS:

Yeah and I think that's—I know at least regionally it's still like that. They're still—a lot of the organizations in Lubbock, their membership has dwindled as they've gotten older—people have passed on. But now, and for years, we've talked about you know, there's a void there that needs to be filled with somebody younger. And about a year, maybe two years ago, at Texas Tech, they started a young LULAC organization.

JC:

Oh yeah?

DS:

A youth—and the guy that heads it up, he's one of those guys that I think is going to be a new leader that we're going to be looking for. Because he's really involved, and gets everybody else involved.

JC:

I used to tell them, like in Hereford and Dimmitt, they had—it wasn't LULAC, it was—or was it? Dr. Garcia was LULAC right?

DS:

Mm-hm.

JC:

Bonilla was GI Forum. They used to go to the state convention. Like three couples from Dimmitt and I don't remember how many from Hereford. And I used to tell them, "Mijos, there's no use of you guys going on the state convention where you get there and when Ruben Bonilla is there, Tony Bonilla is there yelling and picking up their arm and saying, "We need to change. We need

to change it. We need to change that.” And you get—and you come back Dimmitt and you go, “Shit.” That inspiration, you need to bring it back and put it into practice. Never seen it. Oh boy, when they used to—that week that they would come back from the state convention, they would try to do everything in one week. Because what they didn’t get done in one week, the next week they would say, “We’re just here, six persons.” But it doesn’t take that many to do.

DS:

Or to start. You’ve got to grow from something.

JC:

When Dr. Garcia was telling a story one time when we went over there. He was saying, “When we started, we used to rent houses with no windows and no doors.” Just like we started. And we didn’t even know that they had started like that. But he was telling his story. And he was saying, “The cops would—and you could see people flying through the window because they were scared. That they would kick your butt right then think nothing about it.” I said, Really? I mean when we started, we would rent houses where there was no windows. And we could see cops go by there, checking whose vehicle was there and who was attending. But like I said, when we finally got this building, I remember we had a hundred and fifty members. And what helped us a lot—that was the Hispanic radio.

DS:

[short pause] You had a Hispanic radio here already?

JC:

We had—well, it was something like four hours a day. And even though he was against us getting together at least we would, okay we’re going to have a meeting. Can you put it over the radio? And he would. And that brought a lot of people into the meeting. And then when you had people there explaining what was going on, or people asking—“This is what happens to my little kid in school.” What can we do about it? And then by word of mouth you would get—most of the meetings were well over a hundred. And you would only have to listen to—and I don’t know why, but the women are most outspoken. There was a man, here was a woman saying, “I went to school and this is what they did to my kid. And this is what I told the principle, and this is what I told the superintendent, and I told the teacher—and what can you guys help me to straighten this thing out? Huh honey?” The women has got the—(laughs)

DS:

(laughs)

JC:

And it’s always been like that.

DS:

And even with your mom, she sent the note.

JC:

Yeah. Yep. And—but see, that would encourage someone else to say, “Hey, wait a minute. I have this problem with the police.” Or, “My kid had this problem.” Once one talks, they would pop out. And you only had to have six problems—they would go out, or people that would hear and they would go out and say, “You know what? Over there they were talking about—” and you would say, “Well I had that problem. Next meeting I want to go over there.” I remember Ramsey Muñiz one time saying, “Collect the problems. Hear them out. Then think of one that’s got a solution, an easy one. And then you get the people and go over there and solve it. And that will inspire them. Don’t look for the one that doesn’t have a solution because then you’re going to—find the easy one and go and solve it. Then you’ll have people that believe in you, and saying, We can solve it. But tell them, We’ve got to be together to solve. Then we go over there and then they tell us this—and when you got witnesses saying, That’s what we did. And then in a meeting, more people are going to want to go with you the next time. I’ve—

DS:

So what were some of those easy wins that y’all were able to get done?

JC:

Uh—like don’t speak Spanish in school. You’d get a whipping if they’d catch you speaking Spanish in school. The hair one; your hair is too long. It was back in the early seventies where there were still a lot of hippies. Here in the courthouse if you would come and say, “This officer keeps stopping this lady or her daughter. Why?” And I’m glad the judge we had back then was very understanding. We didn’t have the judge that they had in Littlefield, Hereford, Lubbock. We had one here that I think, that most of the time he was on our side even though he couldn’t come out and say it. But there was a lot of things that he would say. Well, like for example, my nephew and a couple of his friends got a .22 single-shot. And went out here to Rabbit Road 2 and shot—was shooting. And somebody reported them. And everybody would go there. I mean, you could see washers, dryers, water heaters all shot down. I mean, shotgun bullets, big caliber. They had a .22 single shot.

But anyways, somebody reported them, and they got picked up. The judge sent them home and told the kids, “Tell your dad to come. And we’ll return your gun.” When my brother came, the sheriff said, “No we can’t return the gun.” He told the judge, “You told my son that he was going to get the gun back when I came.” He said, “Well you are.” He calls the sheriff and says, “This man came for his rifle.” My brother said, “I couldn’t hear what the sheriff was telling him, but I could hear what the judge was saying.” And the judge said, “Well you’re putting me in a tough position because I told him they could have it back. And I expect those rifles back in the office sometime today.” He said, “So what I can figure out is that the sheriff or somebody had taken

them home (laughs) and had put the judge in a very tight position where he couldn't return them. And I think that goes a lot—on.

You know, I've had—or I've heard of stories here where you get caught with a gun or something and it's taken away from you and you go to court and you pay your fine but you can never collect your firearm back. But the county doesn't have it. So somebody has it (laughs). And I don't think it's only here. I think it's—

DS:

Wow.

JC:

Across the country. But anyway, my brother got his .22 back. But I think that judge more or less—he was here for thirty years and I'm glad that he was the one that was here at the time that we were in the movement, because I think he sided with us in quite a few of the—one time we filled up this place, mostly women, in a commissioners—that was back when—see, Dimmitt and somebody else had food stamps. A lot of counties in the United States didn't have food stamps. So we started picking up a petition to bring the food stamps to the county. Well it just happened that it took us like, four or five months to pick up a petition and then the legislators or somebody passed a law saying, every county has got to have food stamps.

Well we got the credit for it (laughs). They said these people picked up a petition and now we've got food stamps in the county. We wouldn't tell them it was—but anyway, see, the county gave them an office—office space. People would make comments about—so we came to the commissioner's court and said, "We don't like where the office is. We think you guys should rent another office where it could be just for food stamps and not the whole—and the judge agreed with that even though the commissioner didn't.

But you should have seen the way it was with women in this. There was a lady that smoked, always in her pajamas—elderly. The judge said—uh—what was her name? Anyway, the judge turned around there and seen her and said, "I've always listened to you, I've always helped you." And she said, "Yeah." And she was very maldisendo (cursed a lot.) And she walked away, and the judge was barely turning his chair back when she showed up in the door and said, "You son of a bitch! Remember when you—" (laughs) boy he got all red. But that's the way she talked. And the judge knew her. County commissioner didn't say anything. The judge turned red. But, we got the office out of the courthouse to another spot.

There they would have problems because they would hire somebody, and she was trying to handle like if the program was hers. So right away we went to Washington D.C. and then to Austin and said, "You need to hire bilingual because the lady that's there, she thinks it's her program. She decides who she's going to certify and who's not." And boy it changed. Even the—what are they called? The area director, he was Hispanic. They hired here two Hispanics. You couldn't take an application out of the office. Well if you couldn't take an application out of the office, and she wasn't going to fill it out for you, then if you were like me in fourth grade or

sixth grade, how were you going to fill it out? So right away we called Austin, they send us to Chicanos Unidos a letter, you can fill them out. She's got to accept it. The first time they took them down there she said, "I'm not going to accept it." We had already told them, if she doesn't accept them, come back here. As soon as three families came back, we call Austin. That lady was out of here that same day. They said, "Anything Chicanos Unidos fill out" and Chicanos Unidos would put filled out by. There was a lot of things you could do, change. People seeing that, they would say, "Don't fill that out," or, "Don't let your sister fill that out. Go over here and they'll fill it out for you. Over there, as soon as they had seen that it's filled out by Chicanos Unidos, boy they listen to you." So, things like that that you could change, people noticed.

DS:

So you know that was back in the seventies. Let's talk about a little bit of the climate change. I know that, you know, I think it was in the 1990s I think, like *TIME* and everybody was declaring it the "Decade of the Hispanics." Well, you and I lived through it and nothing happened.

JC:

No. I don't—there's not anybody, like back then, when I can say Cesar Chavez—we would all say Cesar Chavez is the leader of California. Corky Gonzales of Colorado, Reies Lopez Tijerina of New Mexico. José Ángel Gutiérrez of Texas. Nobody has emerged—anyone with big ideas or changes that could get an idea and say, "I'm going to push it." I wish that—like now the amnesty—I wish somebody would pick it up and say, "We're going to take it forward." And the president and congress have to act. I mean this is bullshit.

DS:

Yeah. In fact, let's talk about that. You know we had that period where it was basically apathy. There was no growth, nothing changing. And then after Barack got elected in 2008, there was a certain segment of the US population that felt they needed to respond in a negative way. And so we saw all these old rules start coming up to speed. No speaking Spanish, the immigration control, the guns, the voting rights issues. And those are battles that y'all have fought way back when.

JC:

Right.

DS:

And so, what was your mindset when those started to come back up again?

JC:

Losing everything we had gained, (laughs) took forty years to gain and losing them. But I don't know, Texas is a red state, mostly Republican. The Republicans are going to have to change their

ideas. And most of the old Republicans are anti-Mexicans, anti-blacks, anti— they're going to have to either change, or be like the Jews. The old ones die and the new ones come. And I think if it wouldn't have been for this gun bill that they're pushing now, I think immigration would have been at the top of the list. So I'm hoping that in no later than February, they decide a background check and the assault weapons, and that's about all we're going to be able to pass, and pass it. So we can get into the immigration deal.

I don't think Republicans are ready to attack it that hard like they used to. They're thinking about, their party's going to have to change a little bit. And I think that Marco Rubio is in favor of the immigration law. They're picking him, the Republicans are picking him up over there, and I think they're not going to be wanting to tell him no. He's going to have to show that he can do something if he ever thinks—or the Republicans ever think that they're going to rise him to be a presidential competitor. They're going to have to let him do things to show that he can deliver. I think the Republicans—and for Arizona's sheriff he's going to have to die (laughs).

DS:

Yeah. And there is the same problem you mentioned in Pecos for thirty years. Well this man's been doing things for decades and he keeps getting re-elected.

JC:

Right.

DS:

Amazing.

JC:

Right. We got a big group in California—Hispanic. I think we got a big one in New Mexico, and we've got not as big in Texas. I think that's the problem with Arizona—not as big. I think Colorado done beat us. I think Colorado done beat Texas and Arizona on the Hispanic population. I'm not—I don't care if I left Colorado. I think I came to the right state.

DS:

But you and I both know it's not really the number. It's the number of people that are one, registered, but actually vote. You can have a low number, but if you get a high turn-out, you have better chances.

JC:

And you know, a lot—and not only Hispanic, Anglos too, they go with what they hear at the coffee shop. If they say, Obama ain't doing nothing, well then Obama's not doing nothing. I think I'll go back to what do we want? And how can we push it to happen, not just say, He's not doing nothing, and I'm sitting here not doing nothing either. We got to get involved. In a lot of

ways I keep telling them, a lot of ways is vote. I don't care who you vote for. Just vote. When they see—let's say here in Muleshoe, if they would see a thousand Hispanic votes. Six hundred voted Republican, and four hundred voted Democrat. I want to go look for those people. I want to see if I can convince them either way, right? But when they see thirty—so show them you vote. Show them, they'll come looking for you. They find out. That's what I did.

DS:

And not only will they come looking for you, but they'll respond to your needs.

JC:

Right! See, I remember when Ramsey Muñiz was running. He said, "It's very hard now." And even back then we knew it was it was at large. But I remember him mentioning—we were only about eight. We're in a big meeting, but here we were eight, sort of strategizing what could we do in Hereford for Ramsey Muñiz, what could we do in Lubbock and Muleshoe. So when he would come on his trip—and I remember him saying, like over there in the valley, "All you have to do is buy the voting list." And you say, "That's what I did." I could see, boy, this house got five votes in the same address. This one only got one. This one, one; this one's got six! So when I go look for votes, I hit them two houses first, right? If I can convince them to vote for me I've got eleven votes right there. Like these other ones, I've got to visit eleven houses just to be at eleven votes.

That's what you do. I go knocking at every door; yeah me too. After I get all these numbers, high numbers, then I would say, okay, to win I need maybe, no less than three hundred and sixty votes. I have hit these houses and I can count almost about two hundred and eighty votes. And I'm still a month and a half from election. So now I'll go knock on this one, it's got two votes. This one, it's got one vote. This one I know who they are, they don't come home till after five. These don't come back until after six. That's when I'm going to knock on their door. But I was already counting on the two hundred and eighty I already had.

My second term, instead of paying the seven hundred and fifty to sign up, I told my wife, I'll go pick up the petition and we'll donate the seven hundred and fifty to a non-profit organization. She said, "Well how many signatures do you need?" I said, "If I pick up sixty, I'm well off." She said, "Okay." So I hit those big numbers. Three afternoons I picked up two hundred and three signatures. So we donated the seven hundred and fifty to an organization. If you know where the votes are, you go direct instead of running all over town. Because I even know where this address is, and they have no votes, not one of their family. They have three with green cards. They have four that don't even have a card. But that's—if they find out that you vote—and I always tell them, "I don't care what you vote. Vote Republican, vote Democrat, but vote." Because they know where you're at.

But if like in Hereford, let's say there's eight thousand that vote. Back in the seventies, if they had six thousand and only six hundred were going out to vote, well you know what I'll do? I'm an Anglo running, I'll go tell you to vote. But I won't go tell you that you're the majority.

Because then you're going to find somebody to run against me. The more people that vote, the politicians know who is voting. They get the list of who votes.

One thing that I learned very early on: my mom and my dad, they were always voting on election day. And it's always fresh in my mind that my dad would come from work, and my mom would say, "I have the cards right there. What time are we going to go vote?" And my dad would say, "It closes at seven, we better go right now, because if I eat supper I'll get lazy." So they would go vote. When I turned of age, I noticed that my mom would, anybody that was turning of age, she would say, "Go register to vote." She would always keep all of the cards together. And on election day she would pull them out and say, "Simon, voting day. Leo, Robert, you guys need to go vote."

She only did it with me once. Later, she would say, "I always keep everybody's card here to vote: my husband's and all my kids." The only one I don't have is Juan. Juan keeps his. He knows when it's voting day. He knows a little more about who is running and for what and what is their position about. The only we know is there's the card. And you bring them back because you'll lose them." And she would say, "Juan is the only one that keeps his in his wallet. He knew. And when his brothers ask, 'Who's running?' He's the one that tells them who's running, who'll probably be a better candidate and all of that." And I'm glad she showed us. Go vote. Because I know a lot of people that are registered—"Nah, I don't vote." I say, "You think, that because you don't vote, you punish one of the candidates? You don't. You're punishing yourself and your people." Because they find out if you vote. If they say there's six thousand votes in Hereford, somebody's going to go over there and say, I even need tortillas, and tamales. I like them! Vote for me! Because he knows that there's votes out there.

DS:

Yeah because I mean, even recently with these recent hardships, Eliseo went back to those old school ways, and started organizing groups again. And his goal was to try to get a number—I can't remember if it was five thousand or ten thousand, but he was trying to get a serious number, so that when he talked to a politician, they'd go, "Really. Five thousand that you can talk to today, and tell about my platform?" He knew that would make them listen.

JC:

Well that's what you need. Numbers, right? I mean, when the politician knows—let's say, how many people voted in Hereford. Let's say twelve thousand. Eight thousand are Hispanic. As a politician you're going to tell your aid, "Go over there and find somewhere where I can speak and try to get those Hispanics out there because I want to go talk to them," right? Versus back in the seventies when they used to ask, How many people voting in Hereford? Fifteen hundred or eight hundred. Well how many people live there? Twenty-five thousand (laughs). And only five hundred vote?

(phone rings)

JC:

I don't even want to go to Hereford (laughs) How many votes are there? [pause] That was my wife saying, "when are we going to go to.."

DS:

You got to leave already?

JC:

We got to go to Hobbs

DS:

Because it's already after twelve.

JC:

Well I mean—

DS:

We can come back and add some more to it one day, maybe—

JC:

Sure.

DS:

You can introduce me to some people that you can think of that we need to talk with. Like if there's some older people work in the farms around here maybe that need to be interviewed? I know that the Leals I need to touch base with them and interview them also.

JC:

Yeah. I need to go.

DS:

Well while you're doing that I'll put everything up.

End of Interview