

**Oral History Interview of
Alfredo H. Benavides**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Sanchez
September 28, 2015
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Hispanic Interview Series***

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Interview Series Background:

The Hispanic Oral History 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 Alfredo Benavides, who discusses his family history, growing up in Texas, things that made a mark on him growing up, his college career, and his time spent in Michigan. Benavides went to Texas A&I university for undergraduate school, then pursued a Graduate degree at Michigan state, originally in Spanish, but later transferred to education.

Length of Interview: 01:36:15

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Keywords

Chicano, Michigan State, Education, Discrimination, Guitar

Daniel Sanchez (DS):

My name is Daniel Sanchez, and we're in the education building on the campus of Texas Tech on September 28, 2015. This morning we're going to be interviewing Alfredo H. Benavides. Alfredo, thank you for being here.

Alfredo Benavides (AB):

You're welcome.

DS:

And please start off by stating your complete legal name.

AB:

Alfredo Horacio Benavides.

DS:

Could you spell that middle name?

AB:

H-o-r-a-c-i-o.

DS:

Okay. And where were you born?

AB:

I was born in Robstown, Texas.

DS:

What date?

AB:

September 29, 1947.

DS:

You've got a birthday coming up.

AB:

Tomorrow.

DS:

And tell us about your parents, the same information.

AB:

My mother was born 1928 in Runge, Texas. My father was born in 1924 in Hebronville, Texas. His father was born in, I think 1903 in Lockhart, Texas. Well, I can't tell you when everyone was born and what year they were born, but my sister—one of my sisters-in-law has, you know, retired recently, and she's done a lot of digging into the family, boneyard or something, and she's come up with the fact that I am the sixth generation Mexican-American born here, and my daughter then would be the seventh. My son would be the seventh. And we have—I have a couple of nephew that are eighth and ninth, so we've been around awhile. We were probably the welcome wagon when the Pilgrims showed up. [DS laughs]

DS:

So do you think if—you might be able to convince your, you say sister-in-law—?

AB:

My sister-in-law, yeah.

DS:

—to give us a record of that, that way we can—because for our genealogy records that would really help to put something like that, if you have a document.

AB:

You know, I was thinking of calling her and asking her, just for more information, and I will. I will talk to her and tell her that you guys are doing some research, and it would help to at least give them some information. I'd read some things—on my own, I can't prove that they were related to me. For example, there's a priest, a priest named Fray Alonso de Benavides, and he was in New Mexico in the 1620s. He was evidently writing letters to the king of Spain protesting the military's treatment of the Indians, and I thought, Wow, that sounds like me, or my family or something. And a few pages later, there's the military commander writing letters to the king of Spain protesting the clergy's treatment of the Indians, so—you never know who did what to whom back then. But it's interesting that the name is not a common name, but it's been around for a long, long time in what we consider now the new world. There were two Confederate Benavides who were—I think they were colonels who were on the Confederate side. There was also another Benavides, this is difficult for me to admit, but I found him in a book somewhere, I think Arnoldo De León, famous historian, I think it was one of his books. But there was a Benavides who was running around capturing runaway slaves, here in Texas. I mean, I thought, Well way to go. And I don't know about—there's a Benavides, Texas, I do know that. I don't know if there's any relation there to us or not, but it's the way it goes.

DS:

You know, and you mention you're from the valley—

AB:

Well, Robstown is sixteen miles due west of Corpus Christi, so it's not really the valley, but it's like the gateway to the valley, you might say.

DS:

Did you ever talk with your parents, either one of them, about what it was like when they were kids growing up in that area?

AB:

Yeah, I—my mother was fairly poor. Her father was a sharecropper, and which meant you were on the low end of the economic spectrum, you didn't get much. But he was also a barber. He began to barber before there were state exams for barbers. And he developed into a barber. From the—I would say the age of about twelve, thirteen maybe, and he barbered all the way until he died. He died at eighty-six, I think, and he had just quit barbering three or four years before, I think. So he was barbering for a long time; I'll put it that way. And I guess he got grandfathered into the system. I remember that he would do a lot of cutting with scissors, it was the old fashioned way that you could tapper a man's hair that way. And on my dad's side, he was born on a ranch in Hebbronville. But there were like three brothers born like right after the other, and I think my grandmother sort of gave him to her parents, and they—he sort of was raised in their household, which was two blocks away, and maybe two blocks, maybe it was only one block. His father was a mechanic, truck diver. I think he told me once—because I worked for him picking watermelons—I didn't have to, but I wanted to. I wanted to find out what it was like to work out in the fields. But he told me a long, long time ago that he had been part of the last cattle drive from South Texas to I think it was Dodge City, Kansas, the old Chisolm Trail or one of those trails—

DS:

So this is your grandfather?

AB:

Yeah, my grandfather. And they went up to a certain point, and then they herded the cattle into cattle cars for the railroad, and they took part of them up that way. Then they unloaded them again and took them the rest of the way. It was kind of interesting, you know, when you see movies like *Lonesome Dove*, and all this stuff. I'm going, Was he there? Is this really true? I don't know. But he was a very colorful, colorful individual. And so he had—my brother—I mean my father had ten brothers and sisters, okay? They were all born from I would say in the 1920s on. My father passed away in 2003, in June of 2003, and my mother's almost eighty-eight, and she's still living by herself and fairly self-sufficient. She doesn't drive anymore, so people have to take her here, take her there, but she's still there. She wants to go to everything. She wants to—every time there's a family reunion, she has to be there because I have a feeling she's

one of the oldest that will be there so—there's a lot attached to being the matriarch or the patriarch of a family, in our culture anyway. I don't know, my father, when he was young, he was—he worked—his grandfather, the one he was raised by, his grandfather was kind of like a business man. He had a little grocery store, and my father would deliver, you know, they would deliver groceries. But he would deliver it with a horse and buggy, okay? Evidently, when he was young, the men in the group there wherever, they would make moonshine, or they would make beer. I think it was prohibited in those days, so he'd have a little jug with him, you know, while he was making deliveries, and then I think he would kind of like have too much of the juice, and the horse would just kind of like wander back to the store all on its own [DS laughs]. So I thought that was kind of interesting. But I admired my dad because he was so honest. He was really honest and honorable, and I'll tell you a story. We were all young, young kids, not young, but I was in college, and some of my brothers were just getting out of high school and stuff. A couple of them worked in a grocery store in the neighborhood there. My father would go in there to shop occasionally, and he had some money that was rolled up or folded up in his pocket, and he thinks he must have dropped it. So he dropped this money they're these bills, and there was eighty dollars, like four twenties. And he went back and looked and he couldn't find them, so he figured, yeah, somebody's going to pick them up and it's their good fortune. So he called the manager, and he says, "Hey, I was in the store this morning," or whatever and he says that, "If anybody finds eighty dollars rolled up or folded up, give me a call." And the manager kind of laughed and says, "Sure. Okay. We'll give you a call." Well, the next day I think, he called him, and he said, "Mr. Benavides, one of my boys was sweeping, and underneath one of the store shelves—" you know they have this little lip, he says, "When he swept under there, he swept some money out, and there were four twenties, all folded over. So I have your money." My father was like, Wow. He said, "You know what? Give the kid the money. Let him keep it. The way the world is going today, it's not worth anything. But what he did is worth a lot, so give him the money." And my brothers were like, Dad we work there; give us the money. [Laughter] Like you don't give us eighty dollars, you know. And that's true. He never just hand over money to you just like that; you had to earn it. But when you think about it, honesty is sometimes never rewarded. And so he knew what he was doing.

DS:

Yeah, I'm sure that kid got a lesson that he carried for life after that.

AB:

I'll bet he did. I'll bet he did. Yeah. So I hear those kind of lessons. Another one was, evidently I was an infant. When I was born I guess, they used to travel to Hebbbronville every weekend to go see the grandparents and all this other stuff. We would always come back like Sunday night. There was a border patrol station right outside of Hebbbronville a few miles, and my father pulled over, and there was a pickup in front. The pickup had a German couple, and maybe a couple of kids, and they didn't speak English, and so they were—and the border patrol just waved them

right on through, said, “Oh just keep on going.” And so my father pulled up, and this guy comes up to the door and shines a flashlight in his face and my father recognized him. He had gone to school with him. And he said, “Hey Jack. How are you doing?” He says, “I need to see some I.D.” My father says, “You do? We went to school together, you fool.” You know, like what’s wrong with you? And the whole thing turned into “I need to see I.D. and I don’t know who the hell you are,” et cetera., et cetera, et cetera. And my father was really angry—he was really angry, says “You just let a whole bunch of Germans that we just had a world war with, and you just let them walk right through here, and now you’re questioning me?” And he was out of the car pounding on the hood. My mother was crying in the car, and I’m totally fast asleep in the backseat. So that story was relayed by my mother. I thought, Yeah that sounds like dad, you know. That sounds like something he would stand up for and fight for. And later, you know, when my father took over and bought the family ranch, right outside of Hebronville, he would get people coming through the ranch that were on their way north. He always kept a refrigerator with food and beer, and he would come across the men as they were having a sandwich, or having a snack there, and he would say, “Well, can you help me out a little bit?” And they would stay two or three days and work around the area there and clean up weeds and around the corrals and stuff. He would say—he would take them hot meals, my mother would cook, they would take them hot meals, and they would eat, and he would take them more beer. And so they would have a couple of, two or three days of nice partying I guess, and then he would help—he would drive them in the truck. He would drive them another twenty, thirty miles closer to where they were going so they could pick up rides or whatever and keep on going. You know, I never saw that as being a bad American or anything. I mean, this is a veteran we’re talking about, World War II veteran, and not only was he a veteran, but he was a good human being. He was being helpful to somebody else. I’ve learned from that kind of experience too. Things are a little different now I realize, but I don’t see why we have to stop being human.

DS:

Yeah, and we’ll get back to that because it kind of seems that’s what’s happened. But back then, when you were a child growing up, what kind of activities did you get involved in did you notice out there?

AB:

When I was young, I mean, when I was little, I didn’t have to go outside the home to get involved. I had five brothers, you know, I mean—I didn’t have them all you know when I was little because we were all two years apart; we had a lot of reeling there.

DS:

Where are you?

AB:

I'm the first. I'm the first born, so—you know, by the time—and I think the last one was born when I was eleven. So in a period of eleven, twelve years, I had five brothers, or my mother had six of us. But I remember joining the Cub Scouts when I was fairly young, maybe eight or nine. I remember being a Boy Scout, but none of these things really seemed to hold me or attract me to something. I spent time with my uncle, my aunt and uncle, out on a ranch, and he would take me hunting and things of that nature, and so I learned to appreciate and to know about weapons—how to carry a rifle, how to be careful around rifles and weapons and things like that. But you know, it's really interesting I think because I see youth today, and like, they're lacking, you know, I don't know why, but when we were young, we were told, when you go before a group of older men, or women, whatever, you present yourself, *De Presentus*. You go in and you say hello, you acknowledge them; you shake hands with the men in particular, and then you excuse yourself and you're quiet the rest of the time, okay? You don't interrupt unless you're asked to participate, and today I see kids that my daughter has grown up with and that I've known for years like in schools and stuff. They can walk right by you and not even say hello or, shake hands, nothing. It's just like, Huh? Are you from Mars or what? Well, I don't know, maybe Mars has life on it, you know, this morning they were reporting—

DS:

What did they report? I didn't hear.

AB:

I didn't get to hear it all because I was busy trying to get out of the house, but that there might be life. I think there's going to be another report on it later on, but who knows. Life, what is life? Oh microscopic something in a little ounce of water or something, so—I guess the earth had to start somehow, too, someday.

DS:

Yeah. But, you know—and this is kind of off subject—but to me, it's like, how can we define what life is? It's not always going to be in the form that we think it is.

AB:

No, I think that the whole thing is very open to conjecture as well as other things, you know, so who knows.

DS:

Well anyway, back to your life here on earth. So you mentioned some of those instances when you were a kid that were relayed to you. How about you? Did you experience anything growing up that stuck with you as a young child or as a young teen?

AB:

In terms of discrimination?

DS:

In terms of anything that really made a mark on you.

AB:

Well, you know, being the first born, there's a lot of expectation, first of all, and then there's a lot of you go through the first of a lot of things. For example, there was an elementary school in our hometown that was the closest one to my home, but it was not the Mexican school. The Mexican school was further down. So my father decided the I'm going to go to that particular school, Hattie Martin Elementary School in Robstown, Texas. So I remember that my mother took me. We didn't have kindergarten in those days, so it was first grade. And so she went and enrolled me in first grade, and I was not put into first grade, I was put into a grade that was known as zero, zero grade, okay? And so my mother said, "Why? Why are you doing this?" And the principal said, "Well, all of our Mexicans go to school," like we belong to someone, "All our Mexicans start in zero grade because they have to learn English." Now this is my mother talking, speaking in English, and she's talking to the principal, and she's speaking to him in English. And she says, "He already knows how to speak English. As a matter of fact, he can read and write in English." And he says, "Well, we'll have to see. We'll have to see." So I spent about two months, all of September and I think almost all of October in this grade, and it was seventy-five kids, one teacher, probably the one that they didn't like very much the year before, said, "This is your punishment. You get seventy-five kids." And it was chaos; it was chaotic in that particular classroom. But it was very normal; this was part of policy in those days. Finally—and my mother would go every day, all through September and October, she would go everyday to the school and have a little chat with the principal about why I hadn't been moved yet. And finally, towards the end of the month of October, this teacher came, her name was Mrs. Frich, very nice, very nice teacher. She came in, and she put her arm around me, and she says, "You're going to go to my classroom," and I thought, All right. Fine. Save me from the chaos here. So I go to her classroom, and I notice that there's three or four Mexican-American kids there. I look, and there's Luis Gonzales, and Luis was nine years old. I see Ruben Torres, I think his name was. He was ten years old. Ariel Rodriguez, ten years old. And I'm think, What is going on? In my mind, I mean I'm seven, and that's why—my parents were very scared that I would be, like age grade retarded. What that means is that I would be left behind because here in Texas, you had to be six by September the first. Well, my birthday was September the twenty-ninth, so when they tried to enroll me when I was still five, they said, "Nothing doing. Come back next year." So here I was almost seven, and they put me back in zero grade, and that's what happened to these other kids, they stayed in zero grade sometimes two or three years before they were moved to first grade. So they were like—by the time they got to fourth grade, they were shaving, you know, and stuff like that. But it was really interesting because Bobby Hunt was there, too. And I looked at Bobby,

and when I said, “Bobby,” and the thing was, Bobby Hunt was seven years old or six years old or whatever he was supposed to be, and they didn’t know he was Mexican, you know, so—that was interesting, they were just going by—

DS:

Yeah, Hunt.

AB:

—Garcia, Gonzales, Benavides, whatever, and so Bobby was in there, but I’d go him, and both his mom and dad were Mexican, sort of like Linda Ronstadt, you know, nowadays. I didn’t know that Linda Ronstadt was Mexican-American until I heard her sing “Blue Bayou” in Spanish, and I thought, Oh my god nobody could sing it like that unless she was a real Mexican, and she was. Turns out I saw her many times in Tucson, it was very interesting. So other things that happened. To me that was a real big thing, you know, being able to go to the first grade, even though it was under fire, and it was like a protest of some kind. I was the first to do a lot of things. So I got used to it, you know. You’re the first, and you’re leading the way. My father always emphasized this, “You have to do well, you have to do this, you have to do that because you know your brothers are looking at you for—” he didn’t say leadership, but they’re looking for the example. That’s the word he used. “You have to set the example for your brothers,” so I said okay. So I didn’t have a choice. I was exemplary I guess.

DS:

You know, you talked about not a lot of things—or what didn’t interest you—how about what did interest you when you were growing up as a child.

AB:

Well, I was interested in football like every good Texan. I was interested in football. I wasn’t very big, but I was interested in football. I played football in high school until I got hurt, and then I looked elsewhere. I played baseball when I was ten, eleven, twelve years old. That’s another interesting little chapter. When I was eleven, my father was transferred to Pensacola, Florida, from Corpus Christi Airbase there, naval airbase, to Pensacola. And I immediately found a Little League team, except that it was Little League, it was little boys’ baseball. So one day, I just thought it was interesting, Why is this little boys’ baseball, why isn’t it Little League? So I asked my father, you know, I mean, you always ask your father. And Dad said, “Well, I’m not really sure, but I think this is what it is. Little League is a national organization, okay? And what that means is that if you join Little League, then they have to treat everyone equally, and that’s why you would have black kids playing on your team,” because I’d noticed that there aren’t any black kids on any of the teams. He said, “Little boys’ is local, so they can discriminate all they want.” It was 1959, so it was very blatant discrimination, so I didn’t have any black kids on the team or anything like that. It was all white kids, and I thought that was interesting. But I played baseball.

I played football. Those are the kind of things that we did. We played a lot of sports, and I always did my homework, had to do your homework, so I did that. Very interesting things in Florida, in the Florida schools. They used to have, next to the elementary school that I went to was a big junior high, and in the summer, the junior high was open. I mean not all the hallways and all that, but the big cafeteria was open, and they'd set up—I mean it was huge—and they set up like lots of ping pong tables in there, also a couple of badminton sets, courts. And of course, they had the stage, and they had an area where you could sit at some tables and have a lunch. It's interesting how we would take our lunch, and it would sit there all day without being refrigerated, and then you'd eat it, and you'd still live. Now, if it's not refrigerated or blessed by someone, then you're going to die probably, but not in those days. So there were a lot of activities at—it was called the rec center or the recreational program, summer recreational program, and there was tetherball outside and there was shuffleboard and there was the shop—the shop teacher, I guess they got paid, some of them, they got something. I mean in those days teachers didn't make very much money. But shop teacher had—here I am working these big saws, you know, electric saws, I could have cut my arm off probably, but we would make like, I made a shoeshine box, which came in handy later. I made a gun rack, you know, for my uncle who had a lot of guns out on the ranch, just things like that, and then they would bring in the busses, like every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or Tuesday, Thursday, something like that. They would bring in school busses, and you would sign up for a trip. They would take you, one bus would go to a museum perhaps, but most of the time people wanted to sign up for the ones that were going to the beach. So here we are in Pensacola, Florida, and we would drive an hour almost, and they would take us to the beach, and we would spend most of the—can you imagine the—what would you call it now? The insurance liability nowadays, I mean that was kind of nutty but nobody drowned, nobody got hurt. Everything went well. We would all sing on the bus, and everybody behaved; nobody was fighting. No one was—the school bus driver was not texting or anything. I mean, this was good, clean fun. I don't see why schools can't do more of those kind of things in the summer, other than now, it seems like all kids just do is go to the mall and text and text and text some more. And then because they're texting, they forget manners and they don't know how to say hello to a grownup. [Laughter] “Excuse me, I was texting.” Those things were a lot of fun, and then we moved back to Texas. And so I got back to Texas, like, in the ninth grade, and I wanted to play football, and I did. I played football for a couple of years, and I actually, my claim to fame in football was that I played with the Upshaw brothers, okay, Eugene Upshaw and Marvin Upshaw. Eugene went on to a lot of glory and a lot of fame as the president—well, he played for the Oakland Raiders, but then he became president of the National Players Association, or whatever it is, and their union I think. And he died just four or five years ago, six years ago, maybe. And Marvin, I lost touch with him, but I think he's still around. But these guys were huge, and here I am, in those days, I was five-six, maybe five-seven if I stretched a bit, 120 pounds, okay? I was a quarterback, and I was a defensive back, and we'd have to run interference for somebody intercepting a pass, and the first guy I run into is Eugene Upshaw, and he's just standing there like the hulk. I mean this guy was huge. I mean in high

school, Eugene was probably six-foot-five, 250 pounds, 245 pounds, and that was in high school. So they were huge. When we did drills, like the coach would toss you a ball, and you had to do one-on-one head on, we would count to see where the heck Gene was, [laughter] so I mean, “No I don’t want him.” You’d take another slot. “Yeah, you can go in front of me. That’s fine.” It was kind of crazy that way. High school was not—I thought it was interesting, my mom and dad emphasized school even though they didn’t—they had—my dad, yes, graduated from high school in 1954. My mother never did. But they emphasized school, and that’s why my mother would go up there and fight, every day when I was trying to get into the first grade. And so, I wanted to do well in school, okay. I remember coming in, it was ninth grade, and we were taking a general science class or something, and the teacher would ask a question and I would raise my hand. And all of a sudden, I started noticing that every time I raised my hand, some of the guys in the class would look at me and say, “hora le, scavato,” [?] [32:34] like, he must think he’s really smart because he raises his hand every time. I got the distinct feeling that you weren’t supposed to do that, you weren’t supposed to raise your hand, you weren’t supposed to think of yourself as being really smart in science or in anything for that matter. So I think I was faced with a real decision. Do I just put my hand down and not answer anything, Or do I put my hand up and say to hell with you? And that’s what I did. I said I don’t really care about you guys. So I went against the tide you might say. And I’ve been going against the tide a lot for the rest of my life. I went to Texas A&I University. I went against my counselor. My counselor was this lady who didn’t really know me in high school, she says, “Oh, you took the ACT test, and you did well in everything.” I was offered honors English, and I’m thinking, Honors English? Me? I said, “No, I don’t think so.” I didn’t take Honors English because I thought they were going to make me work really hard, and I didn’t want to do that. So I just took regular English. I didn’t take the honors class. I didn’t know back then that when you were in honors anything, they said, These people are smart already, so we don’t have to work them very much. And so everybody in Honors English got A’s, you know, here I am struggling to get a B. So anyway, evidently, on my ACT, I did well in three areas, and then in social studies, I didn’t. The only thing I can figure out is I must’ve missed—like if you get off line or something with your bubbling, you’re just bubbling everything wrong, and I thought, How can you get a twenty-something in math and science and get a 16 in history basically, in social studies. It didn’t stop me. I went to Texas A&I in those days, A&M now, and I’m going yuck. A&I until I die. So I went to A&I, and I got a degree in history because of my ACT scores I guess, in history and Spanish literature, so I double majored. Then I had this little incident—well, we had several incidents when I was in college. One was, the Chicano civil rights movement really had started to heat up, and one day, the kids decided in Kingsville, some of the K-12 kids, decided that they were going to walk out of school because they were asking for things like more Mexican-American history classes; they didn’t have any, so one would have sufficed. They needed bilingual education definitely in the primary grades. They wanted to have more about their language, their culture, their history, et cetera, and school administrations in those days didn’t pay any attention to any requests from Mexican-American kids. So they were getting angry, and they had started the Mexican-American

youth organization, MAYO, and a couple of other kind of organizations that were kind of clamoring for reform. And so these kids needed help and they came to some of my friends, and they said, "Can you help us?" And we kind of looked around and said "Yeah, you know, I think we can." So in the old days, they had the mimeograph machines in the secretary's offices, so we'd make friends with the secretaries and go in and run off a lot of leaflets for these kids, and we would pass out the leaflets to them, and we were helping them in that way sort of I guess, rabble rousing maybe. I don't know how you would consider that. One time they walked out of school, and they had this protest down at the courthouse in Kingsville. And from the courthouse, back towards downtown is basically a one-way, and what these kids did is they marched against the traffic and they snarled traffic for about six blocks. And I was there, and some of my friends were there, and at the end of the street, where the street ended, it was only about a block to the police station, and so the police captain stood there with a blow horn, and he announced to all the kids that were protesting and marching and whatnot. He said, "All of you follow me." And it was a scene right out of the Pied Piper thing, where all these kids, I mean I'm talking about little kids, kindergarteners, first graders, second graders—well, no it wasn't kindergarten because we didn't have any. But you know, elementary school kids, early, early elementary grades all marched right into jail. They followed the police chief right into jail, and he put them in cells. He arrested 110 kids, and a couple of my friends got arrested too because they were standing there, and the police just walked up and said, "What are you doing here? You go too." And so they threw them in jail and I just got lucky, I think, and I didn't have anybody grab me. But I remember calling my father a few days later, and I said, "Dad, if I called you and told you I was in jail, what would you do?" He said, "Well, I'd want to know why you're there. If you're there because you stole something or some stupid thing like that, you can just sit there and rot." And I said, "No, you know I wouldn't steal anything, but what if I were protesting like what these kids were doing?" He said, "Well, I'd be down to get you in half an hour." Another little life lesson. So one day, I'm walking across campus, and one of the campus leaders there, he was a graduate student. He walked up to me, and he says, "Hey man, you want to go to graduate school?" And I said, "In what? Where?" He said, "In Michigan." And I said, "So what would I be doing?" He says, "It's in social work." And I said, "No, I don't want to be a social worker. Forget it." So I kept going. Well, a few days later, another friend of mine was standing around one day, and I walked up to him, and I said, "Victor do you have any—" I mean, this is a dumb question, just out of nowhere, totally out of context, to walk up to a guy and say, "Do you have any applications for graduate school." And he said, "Yes I do. I have some to Michigan State." Michigan, Michigan State, hey, there all the same to me. I had no clue. I said, "Let me have several because I'll give them out to the guys at home, the guys I was living with." And so I took them there, and we had this—I mean, I was a senior in college already, and we had these discussions that were very interesting. I mean, we had Vietnam raging every night. This is the early fall of 1970, and, wait—no, I'm sorry '69, 1969. And so we had—Vietnam was raging, and we would have these discussions, and we knew—all of us were in ROTC, another one of those things like, we're not very patriotic, well, I beg to differ. At one time, my father and mother had three of their six sons in uniform at

the same time. And some of the discussions around my home, with my friends, was “Well, you know, I’ll go to grad school. If you go, I’ll go. I’m not going to go if you don’t go. We either go together or we don’t go. Or I don’t go.” And I would do the same thing, “Yeah, I’ll go if you go.” So we were all content to—we needed company to go to graduate school, have a good time, and meet some young girls maybe. But we were not afraid to go to Vietnam. We knew we were going, as soon as we graduated we’d go to Fort Benning and boom, after that it was straight to Vietnam. I mean, that was a given. And we were not afraid of that, but we were afraid to go to graduate school, and I thought this is a real interesting paradox. So I got accepted to Michigan State—actually it was weird, I didn’t get accepted. But I was told, Come on over anyway, come, come. There was a guy there—there was a guy who was working for Michigan State who was recruiting undergraduate students. And somehow he took a phone call from me I think, or something came across his desk, but it was graduate education, and he was not supposed to be doing graduate. But all of sudden, there was a phone call at the house one day, and he says, “Hey this is a guy named Treviño, and he wants to talk to you.” And I said, “Me?” He said, “Yeah, he said Benavides.” So I said, “Okay,” so I took the phone, and I was very like, Yes sir, no sir, Mr. Treviño. I didn’t know he was a _____ [42:26], you know. I mean, he really was _____ [42:29]. Anyway, and he said, “Is your name Benavides?” And I said, “Yeah, it is, sir.” “Do you know Andreas Benavides from Robstown?” Because he said, “You’re from Robstown?” I said, “Yes.” I said, “Yes, Andreas Benavides on Avenue B. That’s my uncle.”, “Oh man. I want you to know that you don’t have any problems. I’m accepting you to the grad school.” And I thought, Okay. That sounded fairly official to me. This guy worked there; he’s accepting me. It turns out that this guy was a—like an orphan. Had been an orphan. And my uncle and his wife took him in, was part of their family. And so he grew up with them, went to work with them in the fields and this and that. And then found himself in Michigan, having dropped out of the migrant field, I guess, or the migrant stream. And so, it was his way of paying back, and I’m going, Wait a minute. This is extremely interesting. I had never worked in the fields except with my grandfather picking watermelons, and that was just for two years because I wanted to see what it was like. And you know, it was kind of like a right of passage in a way for a male. Well, can I handle this? Because they were always saying, “You’re skinny. You can’t do anything. You can’t life a twenty, thirty pound watermelon and throw it around,” and I showed them that I could. I could catch them with one hand. So it was like, òrale? Soy trevanon [?] [00:44:16.] So anyway, there I am in Michigan, and well, we get there. There were four or five of us, and we get to the airport. It was dark. It was a night. I think the airport was already closed down or the station there was closed down. And there was a guy with like a Columbo coat, I mean this is July, and he’s got this Columbo jacket on, and he’s like leaning over, he’s a little drunk [laughter]. He was asleep on the bench. And so we walk up to him and we say, Excuse me, sir, excuse me. Are you Josè Treviño? He kind of opened his eyes and looked at us. He says, “estas no ochavos de Tejas?” [?] [45:14] And I hear one of my friends in the back says, “Shit. I think I’ll go up to Traverse City and pick cherries and just get some money and go home.” We weren’t expecting that. But anyway, yeah, Josè was kind of like—I didn’t know this at the time, but

because he had gone out on a limb and brought in six—there were six of us eventually—six graduate students, okay? He lost his job. He was not supposed to do grad students. I'll say something here that is kind of interesting. But it's—the way I saw it, it was the truth back then. We were in—I didn't know this—we were in competition basically with African-American students. I didn't know that. So for every Mexican-American student that was accepted, that meant one less African-American was going to get a scholarship or a fellowship or a something, financial aid of some kind. So the guy who headed up the center there, he got really ticked off at Trevino and fired him. Trevino never said anything about it. And I—well what I did, when I got to the airport, I was kind of like feeling like my Wheaties. I was feeling like, I'm going to grad school. Not only that, I'm going to Michigan State. I'm going to a Big Ten school. It's not some punky little school somewhere like Alpine or something. So I'm going to this Big Ten school. There were forty-five thousand students on the campus at the time. I thought, forty-five thousand, man that's scary. I came from a school that had less than five thousand. So I brought my guitar. It was my pride and joy because when I was low on money, which was all the time, I would take my guitar and go to bars in Kingsville, and I'd play money for the guys that were drinking a lot of beer, and they'd buy me a beer and they'd give me a buck or two, and I'd make money, okay? So I had taken my guitar to Michigan, and so the first thing I did was grab the guitar because I had checked it. You know, then you had all these images of the gorillas throwing your luggage around, and I thought, Oh my god, I shouldn't have done that. So I went and got it out of the case, and I started fingering it and playing it and this and that, and it sounded good. And right about that time, this older—I mean I was twenty-two years old, what do I know? This older black gentleman walked up to me, all in a coat and tie and everything. And he said, "Excuse me, son, do you play the guitar?" And I said, "Yes sir, I do." And he said, "Great. Why are you here?" I said, "I'm coming to school. I'm coming to Michigan State as a graduate student.", "Wonderful. Do you speak Spanish?" I'd been playing some Spanish riffs on the guitar. I said, "Oh yeah, it's a very easy language. I've been speaking it since I was this high," and I held my hand down to my knee, and I thought, later, I'm thinking how arrogant of you. This guy's trying to be nice to me, and I'm just like, Yeah, I speak Spanish, so what. I play the guitar, so what. And he says, "This is great. We need more Spanish speaking students and we need more professionals here in the community, and if there's anything I can do for you, please give me a call." And he handed me a card, and I didn't even look at the card, I just stuck it in my pocket. I said thank you very much, and he went on his way, and I had landed in Michigan with eighty dollars in my pocket. That was it. I was going to start a career with eight bucks. So the next day, the other guys who had preceded me, they were like all broke. [Laughs] They were really broke, and they said, "We're hungry." I said, "All right. Let's go to the store." So we went to the store, loaded up a basket of steaks and whatnot. We were going to have a cookout, and we bought beer, and fine there goes the eighty dollars. I didn't have any money left. So Sunday night I guess, or maybe early Monday morning, we're sitting around going, "What are we going to do now?", "Do you have any money?", "No. Do you have any money?", "No." I said, "Do you have a job?", "No." I said, "Well I've got to go and find out about my acceptance to school." But they

said, "But we need to get money first. We need to do something." I said, "Well, I have this card." And I pulled out this business card that this fellow had given me, and I looked at it for the first time. Richard H. Austin, Secretary of State, state of Michigan. I'm going, I couldn't believe it. I'm blowing this guy off like, Yeah, I'm this, I'm that. And this is a guy trying to be nice. He gave me his card and said call me. He said to call. They said, "Well, call him." So I did. I called him, and he came on the line, and I said, "Sir, do you remember me? I was the one who was playing the guitar in the airport the other night." He says "Oh yeah. I remember you. What can I do for you?" I said, "Well, I'm here with some of my friends, and we're all kind of looking for jobs, and they all speak Spanish, and they're all this, and they're all that." He says, "Okay. On the north side of Lansing, there's a community center called Cristo Rey Community Center. There's a guy named Tony Benavides who was the director. Go down there. Tell him I sent you, and see what happens." So we had to find rides, and we didn't know where we were. So we finally made it down to Cristo Rey, and Tony Benavides turned out to be no relation as far as we knew, he was no relation to—we were not related. But they held a lot of—they were doing other things there. They had youth programs and all kinds of stuff, and there was a program there called United Migrants for Opportunity, UMOI. The director was an older man named Valdo Patiño, and he says, "How many of you have experience with kids?" Well, I had five brothers, number one, but number two I had worked with some kids in college. I said, "I do." He says, "Well, can you put together a daycare program for children of migrants? Can you speak to their parents and can you speak to the kids? Can you speak Spanish?" I said, "Yeah, sure." So I got hired immediately, two dollars an hour, with a college degree. I thought, Oh man, I hit the jackpot. So they gave me a car, a big old station wagon, and I thought, Why do I need this big station wagon. Well I also was the bus driver. So I had to go out into the camps and pick up these kids, and I had to set up a school, and so it kept me busy all summer, all summer long, all the way through mid-September. One of the guys, one of my roommates, was going into medical school, and so I said, "Pretend you're a doctor." I said, "Why don't you come out to the school and look at the kids and maybe just give them a little check over or something." And so he came out, and he played with the kids a little bit, and he said, "You know what? I'll do something even better." He had met some of the doctors in the healthcare center for the student—you know, the student health center. And so, we arranged for full physicals for all these little kids. They were like anywhere from four years old to about eight or nine. So we took a whole busload of kids down to the health center, and they all got their ears checked and their toes, and they counted their fingers, and their lungs and everything, and all the kids were in great shape. Well, I didn't expect anything—well, you never know what to expect. But I just thought that was a really neat thing, so I made him an honorary doctor. I said, "You're an honorary doctor." So that's—and so I went in and found out that I had not been admitted to graduate school. Had not been admitted to anything. So I said, "Oh my god, what am I going to do now?" I went to the department of Spanish and I talked to a guy from—he was Arabic speaking and he was the department chair and I said, "I want to, I want to get a master's degree in Spanish." He says, "Well why should you come in?", "Well, I don't know, why shouldn't I come in?", and you see, I think normally, a

lot of people my age maybe would not have said things like that, okay? And he, I had my records with me, my transcript and he looked at it and he said, "Well you don't you have, you don't have the number of hours that we require of our students." And I said, "Yeah, you require of your students a lot of hours because they don't Spanish to begin with. So they take all the freshmen and sophomore class, I didn't take those classes. I took nothing but upper division courses and I still had 24 hours. Look, you don't have to admit me, just give me an opportunity, that's all." He says, "Okay, I'll admit you conditionally" and I said, "That's fine." And the condition is that I do well the first semester, or the first quarter in those days, and stay above a three-point, et cetera, et cetera. I said, "Yes, fine." Well, I spent two quarters in the Spanish department feeling totally like a fish out of water. Spanish departments, I don't know if you're familiar with this, but Spanish departments, even today, are very anti-Mexico. They're anti-Mexican American. They are very Spanish, peninsular Spanish, like if you don't speak like the King with his lisp, you are speaking incorrect Spanish. And we have people who still believe that today. And that your Spanish is not any good. And I'm thinking, I don't know why. I took Spanish along with some of your confederates. So I was very unhappy there for two quarters, and one evening, because I was, I was involved in—what was I doing? Oh, one of my friends had a course with this professor in the College of Education, and he was a very nice older fellow, and he invited José and my friend and all of us to his home for dinner. Meet the family kind of thing, and I think we were a curiosity because they'd never met any Chicanos, so we were a curiosity. So we went, we had a lovely dinner, his wife was very nice. He had three grown daughters that were in college or—I think the youngest one might have been like a senior in high school and two or three other girls that were in college and maybe out of college by then. So—and I took my guitar, I was told, "Bring the guitar," so I took the guitar. So we spent an evening of a little wine, a little dinner, and a lot of singing in Spanish and he was just very, "If there's anything I can do for you, call me. It was really nice meeting you." Okay. So I had an incident in one of my Spanish classes where a professor told me, told us that we had to write a paper on a certain topic. And she looked straight at me she said, "And if you can't write it in Spanish, it would permissible for you to write it in English." And I thought, This is strange. So at the break I went up to her and I said, "Excuse me, why do you look at me and say that's it's permissible for me to write this paper in English?" And she said, "Well, my experience with Chicanos—" the way she said that—"is being that y'all, you don't really pay attention to the language and you don't really speak it correctly, and so you have trouble with it and therefore it's okay is you write it in English." And I said, "Well, you know what, I didn't get to graduate school because I'm so good looking." And I thought, What are you saying? Ah! You're talking back. Something that we were ingrained, you don't talk back to your elders. And here I am talking back. "I didn't get here because I'm cute. I didn't get here because I'm so good looking. I got here because I have a degree. You know what, I'm sorry, but I'm dropping your class." And then she got all like, defensive. "Oh no, please don't drop my class", "Yeah, I'm going to drop your class. It's not worth it." So I did, I dropped her class, but the very next day I called Dr. Johnson, whom I had been at his home a few days before, "If there's anything I can do for you, call." So I called him and I said, "Dr.

Johnson! This is Alfredo Benavides”, “Oh yes, Alfredo, how are you?” I said, “I’m fine but I have an issue that I need to deal with” and he says, “What can I help you with?” Says, “I want to change majors, I want to get in to the College of Education.” And he says, “Well, I don’t think we can do that right now.” And I say, “Why not?”, “We have a freeze on admissions.” And I said, “You have to be kidding? You have a freeze on admissions? I mean you’re always talking about admitting minority students and you want qualified students, well here I am. I’m qualified, I speak the language, I’m qualified as a graduate student. What more do you want? What kind of students do you want?” Silence. And then he said, “You have a very good point. Can you call me tomorrow?” I said, “Sure.” So, the next day I called him and he says, “Alfredo, I want you to come down to the office and meet your new advisor in the College of Education.” And I met Dr. Judy Henderson who later became my master’s—she later became the Dean as a matter of fact. But [coughs] that was interesting, you know? And I look back on things like that and I said if you’re not willing to stand up for yourself, why are you here? And I did another thing, I left out another whole year of schooling and that was—after the migrant season kind of came to an end, I was out a job, my whole two dollars an hour went out the door. And so I needed a job and somebody had recommended me to the school system and they had a position available for a counselor. A counselor who was going to work with Mexican American kids, of course. So I said sure and I got—I was making almost four thousand dollars a year, not quite. But I do remember that I was getting, what was it? Ninety dollars every two weeks. That was my paycheck, my take home. Because I had gone to the credit union when I first got the job, the Director of Counseling, I told him, “I need money.” And he said, “Well let’s go to the credit union.” So he took me down and he enrolled me in the credit union, he must have been a board member or something, he enrolled me in the credit union and I got an eight hundred dollar loan, just like that. And I paid my tuition. I was paying out of state tuition, et cetera. You know, in many ways, Treviño did us a favor. I look back on that whole situation when he was sitting there, kind of laying there drunk. And he lied to us, he lied on the phone, “Come on over, you’re in, you’re going to—” and he had told some of the kids, “You’re going to get a scholarship, a fellowship, and assistantship and free transportation home for the holidays, your going to get plane tickets.” I thought, Wow, this is unbelievable—it was unbelievable. It didn’t happen, but later, many years later, I look back and I said he lied, just to our faces, to our ears on the phone and I thought, Why not? He knew the psychology of Chicanos. He knew you’d be too proud. Because the first thing you do when you have all this good luck, supposedly, is you go and tell your parents, “I’m going to graduate school. It’s a big ten school, it’s Michigan state” and then you go tell your grandparents and then you go tell all your friends and, you know, you become a chingón [someone who is intelligent] in the community or in the school, wherever you are. So you get there and none of it is true. You’re not even accepted. Do you turn tail, you come home like a whipped puppy or something? No, you say hell with it, I’m going to get a job, I’ll do whatever. And that’s what we did, we clawed, every one of us. Rene Jasso became a doctor. José Ganez was a civil servant for the State of Michigan for many years. Another guy from Del Rio became a counselor at the community college. Juan Ramos from Laredo, he didn’t finish his doctorate but he went in to

business and did pretty well, very well as a matter of fact. I'm trying to remember. Rene Carbajal, he got a degree in counseling, was getting a doctorate in counseling and he took a position in Fayetteville at the University of Arkansas and passed away before he finished. And then me, I got my Ph.D. in education, in higher Ed. So some of these things turned on, twisted or whatever you want to call it, on making decisions on the spur of the moment, like talking to Dr. Johnson and saying, "What do you mean you have a freeze on admissions?" I'd never heard of such a stupid thing, you know? And the deal was that, well, if you—when you're coming in to the school, if you choose a certain field, you're let in. But once you're there, you can't just change fields because they want new blood or whatever. So I said, "Well, I'm old blood." So anyway, I—there were a lot of things that—I was still hungry, I was only making, like I said, only ninety dollars every two weeks. Ninety dollars is what was my share of the rent. And the other ninety dollars was, how do you get to work? How do you eat? So, grabbed the guitar, go down to this little—not this little—this really nice fancy restaurant—that's where I met the President of Michigan State, for the first time, I met him in the restaurant. It was a night club and I went in and I asked them if they needed people to work, "I sing, I play the guitar and I sing." And they said, "Nah, it's just, we've never done that. I don't think it would work here" And I said, "Okay", and then I stopped and I turned around and I said, "I sing in Spanish and English." And he thought about it and he said, "No, I don't think it will work." And so I got to the bottom of the stairs because it was a basement kind of thing, you had to go—it was called A Cave of the Candles and going down the stairs you had all these stalagmites [SIC stalactites] and stuff hanging from the ceiling and so it was very, very, very interesting. The owner was a real young guy, he was like twenty-five, twenty-six years old. And he had been on a USO [**United Service Organizations**] tour in Europe and gone to some place in Spain and it was like this themed, Cave of the Candles kind of thing and he was a very good guitarist and he wasn't there at the time, so I had been talking to the manager all this time. And so when I got to the bottom of the stairs getting ready to leave, he called out to me and he said, "Hey, are you any good?" So I think about it, you're asking a starving man if he wants to eat [laugh]. And I said, "Hell yes I'm good, I'm damn good" And so he says, "Why don't you come in tonight and play the dinner hour from six to—" no, he said, "We have a string quartet." They had a quartet that was there until seven o'clock. "Why don't you come in right after them and just, we'll set up a little stool here on this wall and you can just play your music." And I said, "Okay." So, what did I do? I went to the fancy store right down the street, Jacobson's, which was, I guess, like a Dillard's or something today. And I went down there and I bought fancy clothes. I mean, I was going to perform, I can't go in blue jeans. Although I probably could have. But I went in and I had a vest, sort of like José Feliciano, you know, and his fancy shirt, and bellbottom pants and Velour I think. So I spent a ton of money before I made any. You have to look the part I guess. So I went in and business was sparse, it was maybe four or five tables with people. And I just sat there for two, about two and half, three hours, and just played music in Spanish and English. And so when I finished, there was a guy sitting over in the corner by himself and this manager came over and he said, "Mr. Rayfeld would like to talk to you." And I said, "Who is Mr. Rayfeld?" He says, "He's the

owner.” And I said, “Oh, okay.” So I go over and he’s really friendly, you know, he says—you know and I keep mentioning people who are really friendly. A lot of that has to do with—it wasn’t—I wasn’t in the southwest. I mean, they didn’t know a Mexican from a Puerto Rican from a Cuban from a Hispanic from Argentina, they didn’t know that you were supposed to be a bad person. As Donald Trump would say, “A murder and a rapist.” They didn’t know any of that, they didn’t have any of these preconceived ideas. So he’d say, “I like your music! This is, you’re really good! You know, I play too. Have some dinner with me.” And I’m starving and I haven’t had dinner at all because I was out spending money, and I said, “No, that’s all right.” He says, “Well have a glass of wine.” And so I said, “Okay.” Now, I’d never—I didn’t know much about wine in those days, so he says, “I have a bottle here of Grande Chez Vous, 1967.” And I said, “Okay.” [Laugh] I mean, my experience with wine was Pagan Pink and Coco-Cola. Because it was cheap, like Thunderbird wine or something. And so I have a little touch of wine with him and he says, “I want you to come back—” this was like, I don’t know when this was but, “Can you come back on Tuesdays and Thursdays?” And I said, “Sure” And then he says, “No, matter of fact, you can come back every night. Just wait on Wednesdays—” it was Wednesday, because Wednesday is when the quartet was there. He says, “Just wait until they’re done and then you just come in after them.” And so what happened was, I started singing there and I was up against the wall with a little barstool and I was playing music and people would come and give me tips and stuff, so I started making money all of a sudden. So I was doing a lot more of that than I was reading books, and what happened was that, he—all of a sudden the place started filling up. And one day I remember walking to the place, it was November, like right after Thanksgiving perhaps. And it was snowing hard. Matter of fact, it was because we got a whole bunch of snow that night and the next day we had to, we were having fun—you know, South Texas kids, never seen snow, not like that anyway. And so I’m coming in and there’s a line coming up the stairs and outside, people standing in line. And it was kind of funny. I mean I walked in, “Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me,” and I walk down and I got to the bottom and I said to one of the waitresses, I said, “What’s going on?” She says, “Well, they’re here to hear you sing.” And I said, “What?”, “Yeah, all these people are here to have dinner and to hear you sing.” And I said “Okay.” So I started filling up this place, every night. Until they came to me and said, “Look we need the space on the wall, so if you don’t mind, can you just kind of stroll around, table to table? Because we need the space, we want to set up a table there.” And I said, “Okay.” I mean, I was making good money on tips and stuff, except for the one guy who gave me a quarter once. I said, “It’s all right, you can have it!” [laugh], I gave it back. But I think he was a student, poor guy, I probably should have kept it. But I was having a lot of fun all of a sudden and then they restored the restaurant and they opened up—they knocked down a wall in the back and they opened up another room back there for a long bar and it was more of a drinking area over there and you could sit there and have drinks and then come in to the dining areas. And so I was told, “Why don’t you start and stay over there and maybe later you can come through the dining areas.” So I started singing in this club, basically, and then from there I went on to other clubs. The Faculty Club at Michigan State University was my domain for a couple of

years. I made a ton of money. I used to make like a hundred dollars an hour, I'd play parties for the people who owned the largest Oldsmobile dealership in the world. It was Story Oldsmobile, and I met the Story's, I even bought two cars from them eventually. But he had me out to his house to sing for a party and he would pay me a hundred bucks an hour. They were such wonderful, nice people. And then I met my advisor, my eventual advisor there, I met him, his name was Joe Spielberg Benitez, and he always went by Spielberg because he was in "Gringo Landia" as he called it. And finally he says, [with an accent] "I want you to sing, you know, like all the songs from the Revolution" and stuff like that. So we would start having a few drinks ourselves and we'd have fun and then when I became his graduate student, I went to—I'd go to his house a lot and that's where I got all my advising and mentoring, I got from him after dinner. And I had taught, I taught at a College of Education because I had lost my job as a counselor, because basically our principal believed in "might makes right" and what that means is that if any of our kids, any of our Mexican kids got in to trouble, it meant an automatic suspension. And I would always tell him, "Look, why are you doing this automatically? Why don't you try to find out what these kids have done or what they did?" And he says, "No, they need to be thrown out." And I said, "Well they're never going to get out of high school if every other week they're being thrown out of school for truancy or for whatever." And so in January of that year that I spent there, we got a new counselor, his name was Gilbert, Gilbert Dominguez, from Mercedes, Texas. And Gilbert was a really great guy, thirty-three years old, ten years older than me, and he had four children and a wife. Did not have a college degree at all but, like me, needed a job. So there he is, you got to keep these kids in line, sort of. So he and I worked on what I would call [cough] excuse me. What I would call self-concept. I said, "Look, these kids are not producing in high school because they don't think they can. Nobody has ever told them that they could. They're just here marking time until they're sixteen, and then they want to drop out because they can see going to work for Fisher Body or Oldsmobile or somebody and make good bucks on the line." And so Gilbert and I started doing things like, "We're going to start a Hispanic club and we're going to start this, and we're going to do that." And so we started doing these things and these kids started getting involved and they had little dances and they charged and they had money, and with the money they could do other things for the school and whatever. And when I first started there in September of 1970, late September, out of 178 kids assigned to me, okay, you could get a hundred of them absent on any given day. I was just—they didn't come to school. And so I was wracking my brain, trying to figure out, how do you get these kids to school if they don't want to come? If they feel there's nothing here for them. And when Gilbert came in we started brainstorming and I would say, "Gilbert, take your wife out." Mary, "Take Mary to dinner, go see a movie, I'll take care of the girls for you." And I would babysit four little girls it was the time of my life, really, it really was. And Gilbert and I worked out all of these little like, "Let's do this, let's do that." And all the sudden these kids were taking leadership positions and they were coming to school. In May, out of 178 kids, we'd have a 168 present. I mean, all of the sudden school was important. School was good. School was something they wanted to do. And so—but, that whole semester we had to devise a salt-and-pepper attack routine. When one of our

kids got in trouble, for whatever reason, it didn't matter to me, it was my job to run in to the principal's office, cuss him out, and tell him what a horrible person he was, what a racist he was. And then Gilbert would be five seconds behind me, and when he came in, I would leave. I would just storm out, angry. I knew that this was going to cost me my job, and it did. But it worked. Mr. Johnson was so scared, "Oh, Gilbert, I don't know what to do, he's a hot-head, he's a liberal, he's a radical, he's a hippy radical!" Yeah, sure, I was a smart hippy radical, man, I knew how to get your goat. And so, I lost my job but all the kids got to stay in school because the next thing he would do is say, "What should we do Gilbert?" Well, Gilbert and I had already figured it out, it was his job to present to him, "Here's what we do with the kids." And so we did that, it kept the kids in school, it kept them motivated, and it showed them that they were important and that there was somebody that cared about them and yeah, it cost me my job, so what. Because of that, I think, when I was sent on this crazy mission sort of, to the model cities, they had a Model Cities Project. And I went to a meeting downtown, I was a representative of the high school. And there was this professor—there were a lot of professors there, a lot of people with Ph.Ds. and I'm the only one with a bachelor's degree [cough]. And so there was a woman who was presenting [opening wrapper] a new way of preparing teachers for urban settings and blah blah blah. And so she went on and on and on about her model for the schools and then at the end, she said, "Are there any questions?" And I looked around and all these Ph.Ds. Nobody raised their hand, nobody said anything. So I said, I raised my hand, she said, "Yes!" she was very eager. She said, "Yes?" and I said, "Will it work?" And she just kind of looked at me with a little smile and she said, "I don't know. Would you like to help me make it work?" And I said, "Yes, sure." She says, "Okay, can you come down to Michigan State?" So I went down, they interviewed me, and the following September I was teaching at Michigan State. *El que no habla dios no lo oye* [He who does not speak, God does not hear], okay? So you got to speak up. I was helped a lot by good people and if Michigan weren't so damn cold, I'd be there right now, you know? I really liked it there. But six years in Michigan and then twelve at Iowa, oh boy, I was really, I'd been frozen enough, for enough years. But I met my first wife in one of my classes, and actually I didn't go out with her until she was no longer my student. But even when she was my student, I never even thought of her. It was just one spring break and I didn't have anything to do so I went to the old rolls of enrollment, like all my class rolls, and I said, "Oh, there's a person who's from here so more than likely she's in town because she lives here." And so I called and she was there and we started talking and I said, "Let's—can we go to a movie or something?" So I took her on a—my first date with her was to see Dirty Harry, crazy [laugh]. But anyway, we were married twenty-two years and then got a divorce and I've got another wife now so, that's history. Um, what else did I do in Michigan? Or, I don't know, I was, like I said, I was singing—

DS:

Well, in fact, I want to kind of—

AB:

And teaching, I was doing a lot of things.

DS:

Well, I find that fascinating. I didn't know about you, about your singing and all that, you know.

AB:

Well they wanted to take me to Detroit, you know?

DS:

Where were your roots in that from? How did you start—

AB:

Well my grandfather, you know, who was a barber, he played the guitar, the accordion, I don't know what else. And I think, because times were so hard back in those days, he was barbering by day and playing musician by night and his daughter, my aunt, my mother's sister, she played the piano like you wouldn't believe and she had the voice of Linda Ronstadt if you could believe that, I mean, her voice was just gorgeous. And so there was always music around us, and my mother would sing. I even, my mother visited one spring and I took her down to the club, you know, I introduce her to patrons and she actually sang a couple of songs with me. She and Linda—not Linda—she and Rita Coolidge, you know, she sat there and sang with me one night. Anyway, that was a long time ago. So this music—and my dad would laugh about it all because he'd say, "Well"—because they'd ask him, "Do you play an instrument? Do you sing?" He says, "No, I just play the jukebox" [laugh] he would say. "I put a nickel in the jukebox and play that."

DS:

We know our strengths right? [laugh]

AB:

Yeah, we have to know our strengths, that's true. So anyways, yeah. And I did that a lot. And I haven't played—now, I have four guitars now, four classical guitars, and I play a little bit when my daughter was here. Now she's off in college. When my daughter was here, I would make it a point to play at least once every three or four months or something and she would sing with me and she would, you know. So I taught her to sing some songs with me. But now, I haven't played in forever. But I enjoy it, I really do. I don't know, my voices is getting—the older I get, the raspier my voice gets. I'm going to wind up like Kris Kristofferson or something, you know?

DS:

Well, it opened so many doors for you though.

AB:

It did, it did. In Kingsville, I even went out and the guy who had the Lonestar Distributing company, who distributed Lonestar Beer? He hired me to go play for his guys, the ones who load the beer on the trucks. So I—we spent a night drinking beer and playing music, you know, in the warehouse. And I mean, back in those days, if they gave you twenty bucks it was a ton of money. Twenty dollars? Hell, a lot of money in Kingsville. I mean, my dad would—could give me money. He had a really good job, he was an aircraft electrician, but he also had five others besides me. But if I needed money, all I had to do was pick up the phone and call him and he'd say, "Well"—I'd have to hear some admonition or something first, and then he'd say, "Okay, I'm going to put twenty bucks in your checking account." But I'd rather do it on my own, I just didn't want to go through that. And so I always worked in college, I had ROTC money, fifty bucks a month. That didn't last. I was paying my own rent and everything. My father would help with tuition, which tuition was fifty bucks a semester, you know. And then—but for example, there were times when you, in Kingsville in particular, I was really broke. And you want to drop a dime and call home. I just wouldn't do it. I'd walk down the alley I lived in a little house, a little, I don't know what it was, sort of a house, a little hut. And near it, next to the alley, and I would walk down that alley and maybe another block or two and I'd look for coke bottles. Any kind of bottles. And you'd pick up some bottle and take them down to the Maverick Market, in those days, and sell them. You know, three cents, five cents, whatever it was. And then you'd go and you could buy two eggs for a nickel, and you could buy a loaf of bread for real cheap, you know twenty-five cents, thirty cents for a loaf of bread. Or you would just get some tortillas or something like that for ten, fifteen, twenty cents, you had food for a week. You'd buy a potato, yeah, you'd buy like two potatoes for a nickel. Two eggs for a nickel. There's lunch, dinner, breakfast, whatever. And then of course we had to string the bread up from the light fixture because of the roaches. The roaches in Kingsville, they're huge, and you could hear them at night, they fly. You know, we would brag about, "Our roaches are better than your roaches," [laughter] different apartments and stuff. And we would hear them at night, they would go [simulates the sound of roach wings]. And you'd hear them, "What was that?", "That was a roach flying from somewhere and landing on the loaf of bread hanging from the light fixture." And then they'd eat through the plastic and then get at the bread and then you'd have to throw the bread away. It was—you know, I'd rather do things like that than ask my father for ten bucks or whatever. I worked at C.R Anthony when I was in Kingsville. And one Christmas, it was after Christmas, I asked the boss—I had asked him before—"Can I have two or three days off?" And he said, "Well, it's after Christmas, yeah, it's real slow", and I was going to go to my father's hometown, I knew it very well, and visit my grandparents and I had a friend there who was starting student teaching there. And so I was going to do that and all of a sudden, like the day before I was going to leave, he says, "No, you can't go. I can't—you can't have the time off" and he got real bossy with me. So I said, "I really need to go." He said, "Well, I'm telling you, you can't go. Either you work, or you just don't come back." I said, "Okay". So I called home and I

said, "Dad, the boss is telling me I can't go all of a sudden." And he said, "Okay, look, tomorrow, pack your car, like you're going, go to the store, tell the boss that I told—that I'm telling you to tell him that I sent you to Kingsville to get an education, not to work for C.R. Anthony." And I said, "Okay." So I did. I walked in to the store, I said "I need to talk to you. My father has a message for you. He didn't send me here to work for you, he sent me here to go to school." So te guacho [see you later]. So I left and didn't look back [door closes, keys jingle]. That was the way my dad had my back, and I always felt that. No matter what happened, I always had my parents to fall back on if I needed them. And, you know, they came through for me in times like that. All the time. But I tried not to put them in those positions very often.

DS:

What is it about your character that made you, at such a young age, not worry about making that change? I mean, because you've talked about several things where you've gone to do something and you've had a change, just to be able to take that leap of faith, that it's time for the next, next thing.

AB:

Well, you know, earlier I think I mentioned something about talking to administrations [microwave door closes, beeps] and talking to people that are higher up. And there's a way of talking to people and presenting your views that are not necessarily confrontational. Sometimes you need confrontation, but usually you don't. And you have to figure things out, for example, I think that people, for the most part, are okay. Years, hundreds of years of let's say of racism, you just don't get rid of, overnight. But, you go to people, educated people, like Presidents of Universities, for example, and you lay before them a plan, "This is what we need to do sir." And you become part of the solution. You're just not saying, "You need to do this and you need to do that." They don't need to do anything. The way I see it, and a lot of my friends and I felt this way, if they knew what to do, it's a lot easier if they just do things, but they don't know what to do, so if they knew what to do, they'd do it. So it's up to you to say, "This is what needs to be done because it helps the institution, it helps you look good [microwave beeps], it helps us, it helps everyone, everyone's a winner, see?" And they look at that and say, "Yeah, you're right, everyone's a winner." So you can recruit faculty, I know how to do it, you can recruit faculty that way because this is a place that people want to go to. Faculty don't want to go somewhere where they're always fighting with administration. Faculty want to go somewhere where they can be productive and they can show that they can contribute, and they can be appreciated for their contributions. And sometimes that doesn't happen all the time. You do have to tell people off. You know, I was gone from Texas for thirty-two years. I left in 1970, I didn't come back to live here and work here until 2002, and there's been a lot of changes. All of a sudden, I go to a Mexican restaurant and have to stand in line because all these Anglos are in there having dinner. That would have never happened forty-two years ago, let's say or forty-five or whatever years ago. It just, wouldn't have happened in the 1950's, it didn't happen in the sixties, that's big. And

there's a lot more where our culture and our language is integrated more in to society. I don't think everything is hunky dory, necessarily [cough]. I don't think that everyone is totally understanding of one another, on both sides, but there has been some amazing changes. There have been some amazing changes. But there's still a long way to go. So never give up, you know?

DS:

How are you doing on time?

AB:

Well, it's a little after twelve.

DS:

[Laugh] so we've gone about probably an hour—

AB:

Hour and a half at least.

DS:

Hour and a half. Well, I was thinking, we kind of stopped talking right after you had finished your degrees and we're getting in to the work force. And you want to pick that up on another day?

AB:

Yeah, we could, I—we could pick it up where I finish my doctorate. I tell you what, we should pick it up before I finish my doctorate. When I went to do a study, an ethnographic study in a Chicano community in Michigan, which everybody here thinks, What? Chicano community in Michigan? Yeah and it's an interesting story and then I graduated and went to Iowa. Iowa, of all things. Why the hell would I go to Iowa? Well, Iowa, was good to me, Iowa was a very good place. But yeah, we can stop there and pick it up—when do you want to meet again?

DS:

Whatever your schedule allows.

AB:

Where is my—

DS:

Let me stop this right here.

[End of Recording]



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