

Carlos Montes interview

February 18, 2018, El Sereno, Los Angeles, CA

Background

My parents came from Mexico, I was raised in Juarez, I was born in El Paso but then I went to school in South LA, Miramonte Elementary School, Edison Middle School. I got into music. And then we moved to Boyle Heights from South LA. In Boyle Heights I went to Hollenbeck Middle School. I went to Roosevelt High School for about a year, and they moved farther east. I finished up at Garfield High School. I was kind of a quiet guy in high school, I did like music. I got into the marching band at Garfield. That saved me, because I wasn't like a so-called "good student".

There was tracking, but I didn't know what it was. I wasn't into activism.

I went to work at a factory with my dad, and it was hot. I was actually 18 when I graduated from high school. When I came from Mexico I was held back a year in school. I remember them trying to sign me up for the military. I thought to myself, I don't like this. I got insulted by teachers, because of my accent, my name. I always tried to speak up for my heritage and they kind of made fun of me.

I grew up in East LA with a lack of really social outlets. So what we would do is, cruise Whittier Blvd, it was real famous, the Chicano urban cruising sounds. There's been books written about it. We would get harassed by the sheriff all the time.

I saw police harassment, police brutality, the racist comments in school. All those experiences kind of sunk in, it wasn't till I was at East LA College that I kind of burst out.

I think I started in the winter of '67 at East LA College. I got involved with student government. You know, East LA College was majority white. They had the frats, you know, really weird. I ran for something. I wanted to try it out. When I went to ELAC I remember I wanted to do stuff, get active. I saw student government as one way. So I started organizing like a car show. We had cars on the campus.

It wasn't political. The thing about the draft and Vietnam was around. I also remember my parents getting disrespected whenever we would go to institutions, my mom didn't speak English. At ELAC, I felt freer to do things, I started experimenting. All this stuff was in me, these experiences.

As soon as we got to LA we got a black and white TV. My dad got a car. I remember watching on TV, the eviction of the families at Chavez Ravine. I never forgot it. I could see it vividly, they were carrying out the Chavez families and I told my mom, in Spanish, hey, this is how they treat Mexicans in LA, what are we doing in LA? The experience of coming to the big city and facing the discrimination, the racism. My parents always tried to improve themselves. Let's get out of

Juarez, come to El Paso. Let's get out of El Paso, come to LA. She kept telling my dad, let's buy a house.

Chicano Activism and the Walkouts

All that was in me. I saw on TV, the Black Liberation Movement, the rebellions. We lived in South LA, it was black and Chicano. So I went to student government, I went to a meeting and I saw a white flyer and it said MASA meeting and room number and date, and I was like, what the fuck is MASA? I think I was vice president of the student body. So I go to the meeting and there are these older Chicano guys who were going to school on the GI Bill. They were all kind of like, preppy. They had been in the military so they were using the GI Bill to go to college. I went to MASA.

The Brown Berets, we actually ran in there and started yelling "Walk out!" It was UMAS that came later on to be more like monitors. And I know Sal Castro really well and I worked with him and we spoke at a lot of events together. So like for example, the Grand Jury indictment, that's at Cal State LA, it showed you who did what in the photographs because the police were monitoring, they had undercover cops, and they had people taking photos. After Wilson went, David, Ralph and Fred from the Brown Berets went over to Garfield and started getting the walkout started. They didn't go there as security monitors, they went in and said Walk Out! Walk Out!

For the 6th, we had a meeting the basement of Epiphany Church, me and Richard Vigil a couple of Berets, Eliezer Risco, who is the editor of La Raza, and they said, "We've got a plan."

And I said, "Cool, what's the plan?"

And they said, "Tomorrow, we're going to do the walkouts."

I said, "What are we gonna do?"

"Tomorrow at 10:00 I want you guys to run in at Lincoln, and start yelling 'Walk Out.'"

You're 20 years old, you know, why not. Me and Richard Vigil, his Movement name was Mangas Coloradas, Red Sleeve, from the Apache leader, we ran up to the front gate, ran into the main building, go right up the hallway, start yelling "Walk Out!" banging on the doors, the walls and the lockers. And then people start coming out. The other students, they knew ten o'clock March 6 was the plan. So then people started walking out. The principals came out and started yelling at us.

We went to those high schools, and it was the beginning of the Chicano Movement. We had taken on the issue of police brutality. We were having meetings. We had our own coffeehouse, La Piranha coffeehouse in East LA, where we organized youth against police brutality and then, I don't know how, we started bringing up the issue of education, everybody did. Nobody ever had a meeting and said, "OK, you know, we're going to take up this issue." At least I don't remember it.

I remember writing articles, making flyers, going to the schools, raising up these demands. At the same time, there was an organized effort, Young Citizens for Community Action, YCCA. They

became Young Chicanos for Community Action, and they became Brown Berets. I joined them when they were Young Chicanos for Community Action and we became Brown Berets.

We would meet at the coffeehouse and at the church, we talked about everything: our culture, the beginning of the Chicano Renaissance, the cultural movement, raising the slogan of being Brown and Proud, Chicano Power, reading about international events, Vietnam, Cuba, the Black Liberation Movement. The beginning of the Chicano Movement is what it was. Some people say youth movement—most of us were young.

Q: What was the most important demand?

A: There walkout demands, there were over 20. Open campuses, Bilingual,

Q: Mexican food in the cafeteria?

A: No, no, no, that was the last demand! You know what, everybody always brings that up. I remember back then people would make fun of me, “You guys want Mexican food?” “Now wait a minute, what about-- we want another school, we want culturally relevant education, we want Chicano teachers, we want open campus and access to the bathroom, parent involvement...And then, we want Mexican food.”

After we hit Lincoln and got it going. Did you see the one where we busted the door open? After Lincoln, we run over to Roosevelt. They were all on the same day, March 6. And by the time we get to Roosevelt they locked up the gates, it was 1:30 PM. Lincoln was 10 am. So we get over to Roosevelt, the thing's locked up. The street side, it's called Mott. There's a gate and there's a chain on it. The students are trying to push out the gate. So we get to Roosevelt, the students literally have a big rope, the kind you use on gymnastics. And they threw it out so we wrapped it around inside the gate and we said, we'll pull, you push. We're pulling from the driveway on Mott and it finally pops open. The gate flies open, all the students rush out and I'm huffing and puffing, and I turn around and I look and there's a guy taking photos with a big old camera. A cop. I didn't know but a cop.

The East LA Chicano Walkouts was a mass movement involving thousands of people. Parents, students, teachers. We met for months, having meetings, doing a survey of the conditions in the schools. Asking students, what do you want changed?

We were victims of what they called corporal punishment, I remember getting swatted, I remember getting hit just because I took a drink of water after the bell rang during lunch. In elementary school they swatted my hand with a three foot ruler. You never forget that kind of stuff.

The Fight Continues

The fight continues, because every generation comes forward with new young leaders but the thing is, we're always under attack. When we really feel the pressure of being under attack, like Prop. 187 in 1994-95, we come up with 100,000 people marching. But the challenge is continuing the resistance by building organizations. A lot of our young Chicano leaders got

involved later on in unions, as teachers, administrators, lawyers, politicians. They became union leaders, progressive politicians, and active in the community.

I got radicalized because of what I faced in the community, and the Black Liberation Movement.

Generally, in the first few years, there was a lot of unity. We formed this thing called the Congress of Mexican American Unity, where you had the Brown Berets, the parent groups, the student groups, UMAS which later became MEChA, we had La Punta, Lucha, East LA Welfare rights organization, Women leaders, so we did unite. We would meet periodically and take up major issues, we took up education, we took up police brutality, then we took up the whole issue of Poor People's campaign. We were there for 2 months.

Then we took on the issue of the Vietnam war. The Brown Berets did the first Chicano Moratorium march against the war, it was December 1969. The big one was later on. The issue was the high casualty rate of Chicanos in Vietnam. We had a higher casualty rate in relation to our population in the Southwest.

By the way, they still do it now, the Marines. They have a recruiting center in Boyle Heights where they target the schools, they put them in the gunnery crews, the most dangerous positions.

Black panthers, other communities, we would support each other. In late 67 or 67, Bunchy Carter and John Huggins, the founders of the Black Panther Party in South LA, came to the Pirhana coffeehouse to meet with us to talk about working together. Black and Brown together. And you know, me and a couple of the others accepted it, welcomed it, we said, "Yes." There were some Brown Berets who were against it because they were racist. And we went to the meeting of the Black Panthers, there were some Blacks that were like, "Hey what are these Mexicans doing here?" But we broke down those barriers. So yeah, we worked with the Black Panther Party.

We did the East LA Free Clinic, we had it on Whittier Boulevard, primarily supported and organized by the Brown Beret women, I'll give them credit. The guys took a lot of credit for it but the women did all the work. We actually rented a place on Whittier Boulevard and we stocked it with medicine, examining tables and offices, and then we recruited doctors to volunteer their time. Doctors, counselors. I remember one time I went to another clinic and loaded up a whole cart full of medicines that they donated. We brought it back, we had to organize it. We actually had a clinic going. People would just walk in, we would publish what kinds of doctors were going to be there and they would walk in and see the doctor. We had the Hollywood Free Clinic.

The women did a lot of the work in the antiwar movement, the Black Civil Rights movement, the Chicano movement, but they weren't recognized. That was a problem with SDS, and SCLC and Black Panthers. The women did a lot of work but they didn't get the recognition.

You need to get together, organize, social political, cultural activities, you know through art, through music, protest. You've got to find an outlet. The school provides an outlet in clubs and organizations. I always promote organizations. Get together, unite and do something. And if you want to organize, pick an issue and take it on, you know?