

Dr. Cynthia Olivo interview

February 9, 2018, Pasadena City College, Pasadena, CA

Her mother

"She shared stories with me about her youth, growing up for part of her youth and adolescence in Santa Ana California. She experienced racism. She would tell me how she would fight back and protect herself.

The one story in particular I remember is, she was getting on the bus, there was an empty seat next to a girl. She sat there and the girl said, "What are you doing sitting next to me, you dirty Mexican?" And my Mom just felt so shameful, I mean the girl made her move.

She went to my Grandma and she told her what happened and my Grandma said, "OK, listen, you're going to need to punch her in the mouth until she bleeds, just punch her one time. I give you permission to do that because you have to defend yourself. And this girl can't think she can do this to you again."

So, my mom went and did it the next day. Her friends said, "Juanita, we'll do it for you." And she said, "No, I have to do it myself, my Mom said." So, she did, and the girl complained to the office, the Vice Principal called my Mom in, and my Mom said, "You know the Vice Principal, what a *vendido*, a sellout, he was Mexican and he was like, why did you do this *Jenny*." Because back then they would change Juanita to an Americanized name. *Why did you do this Jenny*.

And she was like, "Hello, she didn't let me sit there because I'm Mexican. She called me a dirty Mexican. You're going to allow that?" And he said, "But you don't know what happened. Her dad was jumped by a bunch of Mexicans last year." And my Mom told him, "But that's not me. I defended myself."

My Mom fought back so hard that she didn't get in trouble for hitting the girl. No suspension, nothing. I have tons of stories like that, from my Mom to me.

She did also ingrain in me that she fought with her fists. She was teaching me to fight with my books. It was just like the analogy she would always use. "*M'ija*, I grew up fighting with my fists, you're going to fight with your books and words." And I was like, that makes sense. I'm going to use tools that are not going to get me in trouble. Like a petition.

I also formed really good relationships with my counselor, and I would go to her when I had a concern and I would describe it in my words, calmly, so she could hear what I was concerned about and help me figure out how to address that issue.

High School Petition

I wrote up a little paragraph at the top of a page, and then I wrote numbers, and I lined it and took it to my peers. My peers just trusted that something would happen if we all worked together, and they signed it. That was my senior year. I recommend that as a strategy.

Because, I had created that close relationship with my counselor that was years in the making. And I will say, she got to know me because my 9th grade year. My Mom was really pissed off because I was getting a C in English, and I was getting an A in English in 8th grade. I got an award for English in 8th grade and then I went to a C in 9th grade. And I was so afraid because my Mom requested for my counselor to meet with my English teacher. And I distinctly remember the meeting, my Mom meeting with my English teacher and she says, “Why is Cynthia getting a C? I don’t want her to slip to a D or worse, because she’s going to college.”

And Mr. Idiart said, “Well, Ms. Olivo, college isn’t for everyone. Not everyone goes to college.”

I was in 9th grade, and I remember my mother saying, “What are you trying to say? That my daughter’s not going to college?” I mean I just kinds of shrunk in the corner like, *Oh My God, my mother’s yelling at Mr. Idiart*. I got embarrassed. Now I see, my Mom was fighting for me and telling this man, he had an underlying assumption of why I wasn’t going to go to college. And my Mom said, “The problem is the books that you’re picking. She doesn’t like *The Old Man and the Sea*.” And he said, “Is that true Cynthia?” And I said, “Yeah, it’s kind of really boring.”

And so then, we talked about strategies and how I could, even though I found the material boring, how I could still survive this class. My high school counselor got to know me because my Mom had stood up for me. So, my high school counselor recommended me, I think in my 11th grade year, to be on a community block grant committee.

Another point of my activism was understanding that when you build relationships with people, like my counselor, like the superintendent, then when you need to have a collaboration for activism to work, that it helps you tremendously. It’s helpful to have these relationships. I think for teens if they understand participating in opportunities and being a voice for your peers, that’s really important to be a voice for others when you’re invited to do so. And if you’re not invited, you maybe utilize relationship building to help people understand you’re value added.

Chicano Youth Leadership Program, 1994-5.

It wasn’t Hess Kramer, it was the Inland Empire version of Hess Kramer camp. Sal Castro and his contemporaries created these programs in different parts of California. I went to the camp. I knew about gender inequalities—my filter for understanding injustice at that time. I was sexually harassed being a waitress. I had a case and a caseworker, and I won my case. By that point I knew how to speak up for myself and go through a process to defend myself.

Sal Castro and Prop 187

[He was] putting so many references out there that I had not really studied ever before. I remember going to him at the end of his speech, which I was moved by. I said, “Excuse me sir, would you happen to have a bibliography for any of the information you mentioned in your speech?” And he said, “Why yes, Senorita, I do,” and he pulled out a folder, and he had a 3 page bibliography. And I remember looking at all of the citations and I cried. I immediately cried. I cried because I thought, *how in the world could all of these citations exist, which are facts, they’ve got a date, an author and a source. That means this is real. This is not just people*

blowing hot air. And somebody was trying to keep this from me. There's been an approach to systematically make sure I didn't know about this.

Sal Castro told us about these propositions that were coming up: Proposition 187, Prop 209, Prop 227, and so Prop 187, how it was treating Mexican Americans in California. And can it deny us our basic rights, for medical care, for participation in schools? I was shocked. I was a changed person, just that one, 2 hour meeting with Sal Castro, changed me.

I went back to the University the following Monday, and I wrote memos to all the Latino organizations and said, there's a proposition coming about that's attacking our community, and we should get together to organize to do something about it. I was working in outreach so I knew how to write a memo. I was not a member of any of the organizations. I knew people would maybe be skeptical. Nevertheless, I still called a meeting and they showed up. I said, there is a proposition, we should do something, do you have ideas? The idea that emerged that all of us agreed upon was to do a march, to organize a march against Prop 187 in the city of San Bernardino and include as many community organizations as possible.

By the time the following week occurred, we had already had our route, the map, flyers and t-shirts were in the works. We had a date, everyone had a task, everyone was working. It was the moment when my activism was most meaningful, because I knew there were injustices against us as women. But to know that there were injustices that were rooted in historical racism against my people, from my race, that seemed more painful. And it made me angrier. My activism regarding my race and culture, it meant more because there was a law being proposed to deny us our basic human rights.

When I was organizing for that, the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs reached out to me because he heard the march was being organized. He said, "Cynthia, can you tell me a little about this demonstration that you're organizing I heard that you're leading it, is that correct?" I said, "Yeah," and I told him about it, I said, "It's so wrong, this law that's being proposed, we need to fight against it with everything possible." And he said, "How can we help you?"

I said, "We need more money for t-shirts, water..." I just started thinking of all the things we didn't have—he provided it. And now I know, being an administrator: he also offered security to keep us safe. He said, "We'll make sure campus police are there, we'll reach out to the San Bernardino Sheriffs to make sure they're there and that everyone's supportive of you and doesn't give you trouble."

So we had a wonderful march, very successful, hundreds of people participated. And what was devastating was: Proposition 187 passed. But what that did to me is, it just made me an activist forever for my community.

It was devastating to wake up the next day and see that prop 187 passed. It hurt, I didn't understand why the general public would vote in favor of a law that was so divisive, and

insensitive to the needs of hundreds of thousands of people. It felt like people were going to target any Mexicans, just take them off the streets.

It didn't make me stop, only because I thought about Sal had been at it for such a long time and things like Prop 187 were still happening. So one can't stop being an activist just because one thing doesn't come in your favor. You have to keep going. It strengthened me, it did. But Sal, knowing that he had done the walkouts 25 years prior, made me think, this has been a long fight and we have to just keep at it.

Sal Castro pushed her to get Masters and then Doctorate.

What I learned from him is that you always have to keep at it, never give up. Widen your circle, make sure everyone's working with you. As a leader, never be afraid to confront an injustice. No matter what, in the Civil Rights movement, you put in your effort and sometimes you're not here to see the fruits of your labor. It doesn't mean you don't do it. You have to keep doing it. You just have to.

I was 30 and I had just gotten accepted to the Claremont Graduate University PhD program. My activism to this point had been very grassroots, you know, organizing a march, organizing the Chicano coalition that created the march. Support for undocumented students was our next issue. At that point, I had been leading future leaders at the camp for several years every summer. I said, "Now I'm going to embark on being a scholar and my goal is to prove through data and research that what we experience with regards to racism is not imagined. And that it truly does impact negatively the outcomes for us in education, and poverty, and health. "

I currently oversee from 18 and 21 administrators and they create programs and services to support the students. I started to work on equity issues directly and desegregating data by race and ethnicity. Having an equity lens means when you see that the outcomes, let's say for White, Latino, Asian and Black students, are different, then you understand from an equity lens that it's the institutional and individual practices that lead to that—it's not that the students come in with deficits. I'm not trying to accuse folks of being racist. It's just an opportunity and an invitation to work together to improve the conditions for our students.

I kind of feel like I'm still doing the work of Sal Castro just in a different way.

I would hope that our youth understand that their voice is important, whether it's putting it on their social media account, or creating a club at their school so they can all commiserate together, or writing a petition and taking it to the school board. That's important. Their voice is important. I know our school settings don't create the conditions where they feel important. Our students are the most powerful voice in the room. They can make adults reflect on what we're doing, and see that what we're doing's not right. And sometimes we don't know that what we're doing's not right.