

Ernest Saenz Interview  
April 17, 2018 (phone)

In Pasadena, they were telling me I couldn't function in college, that they weren't setting me up to fail because my people did better with their hands not their brains. All this negative stuff.

This happened way before the walkouts, like in 1967. I was acting out. I told my parents, "They've got me in these, they called them 'bonehead classes.' I'm pissed off, I'm not going back to school." And I didn't. I actually ditched for about 3 months. It took me almost 2 years to catch up. I was the only nonwhite student in a lot of my classes.

My family had brought me up hearing stories of political activism, we were high achievers, we strived to educate ourselves. We admired college. I was always prepared to be sort of an intellectual, to appreciate knowledge and education and all that. But at the same time, I was also taught to stand up for myself.

My frustrations kept growing, I kept getting lied to and frankly, I still had my friends in East LA. The Watts riot happened and my parents took me to see the aftermath. They told us this is what racism causes. The riots were in '65.

Experiencing a lot of civil unrest, I'm seeing all these things going on, I'm hearing about all these people protesting. And in my mind, it's slowly building: *You've got to organize a protest.* My friends in East LA walk out and they tell me, "We walked out of school, we did a 'blowout,' we called it." A couple of weeks after the East LA blowouts I began talking to all the kids at John Muir.

What we did was, it was sort of what they called the North Side Gang of Pasadena. The north sides were the ones who were going to Muir. It was a social thing, we weren't a criminal gang or anything like that. One day we had a meeting and some of the older guys who had already graduated in high school and some of us who were still in high school, about what was going on in East LA, the Brown Berets, this political wave that was hitting the Mexican American neighborhoods, we called ourselves Chicanos at the time.

From these meetings, we decided at Muir, we were going to protest the "bonehead" classes by showing unity among all the Mexican Americans. There was a school regulation that you could not wear jackets of a club that was not sanctioned by the school. So, we decided we were going to call ourselves "The Casuals" and we got some beige jackets, and in Old English font, we had the name "Casuals" across the back of the jackets. It was sort of like a 1950's style jacket? So we ordered a bunch of them for all of us. We decided, on a specific day, we're going to walk on campus with these and do a sit-in.

We all walk in wearing our jackets. They called the cops on us for wearing a jacket with the name on the back, "Casuals." The cops came in and that was my first political encounter with the Pasadena police. It was just a sit in. We said, the reason we're doing this is, we're protesting

the “bonehead classes.” We don’t want to be in bonehead classes at all. They shouldn’t exist. It wasn’t just the Mexican American students who were being put in these. Also the African American students were sent to bonehead courses. It was mainly meant to stop us from going to college. You couldn’t get into college with the low grades they would give us. The type of remedial classes, just basic English, they didn’t even tell you what a verb was in these classes.

They sent us home. Everybody got suspended.

So when we got the suspension, we went back with the jackets again.

I know it was before the walkouts, but not by that much, like maybe 3 weeks to a month.

I had my pocket of friends at Pasadena High School who all agreed to pass out the flyers. It took us about 3 or 4 days to get the whole thing going. The first day didn’t pan out, it was just a few of us. And then finally it just hit perfectly: Boom. I’m in a class and I’m like, “What’s taking so long, I thought we would have been able to walk out by now?” and I hear yelling in the hallways, “Walk out! Walk out!” And everybody gets up and the hallways are full of students screaming walk out “walk out” and boom, it takes off. But it did take a couple of days to get everybody psyched up.

At least 80 walked out, it seemed like everybody.

We wanted a fair representation of minority instructors on campus including counselors. We wanted a program that would gear us to college, and we wanted to end the channeling of all minorities into remedial classes and not giving them first chance to learn anything. We weren’t being taught anything.

Your freedom is in the books. You want to have a free life, you want to enjoy life, get an education, learn. Your friends are your best resources.

Q: How did you guys go from, kids with some complaints, to the force behind a walkout?

A: What got me to that level was, hearing stories about my ancestors and actually seeing people on the news taking charge and being political.

I had this indignation when I saw things that were unfair. A lot of it too was, I was angry about what was happening to me. I didn’t want my life to go the way it was going. I wanted more, I wanted to enjoy going to school and I wasn’t enjoying it. I was pissed. I spent more time in the library than I spent in classrooms. It was stuff I’d learned in the third grade in East LA.

Q: So they’re almost like an insult?

A: Yes, exactly, and I didn’t know why because I didn’t understand racism.

Q: I know there was a high dropout rate. What inspired you to fight back instead of just drop out? A lot of people in your situation might have just given up on school.

A: Because I thought it belonged to me. I thought they were stealing from me, that's how I looked at it.

Q: When you guys walked out and you saw that a lot of people supported your movement, did you feel powerful, empowered?

A: The first day, I was kind of disappointed because not that many people reacted. But by the following days, the participation kept growing until we actually just blossomed and boom, everybody was out. I felt a sense of freedom. I didn't feel powerful or like I had accomplished something great, I just felt relief, like, Oh, God, finally. Finally, something's going to happen. I saw the beginning of the changes that we were going after. I saw that this was going to turn into something good.

Q: Did you feel hope?

A: That's probably what it was. More than hope, it's hard to explain but I did feel a sense of freedom, like change had been awoken, I could grow now, I'm free, this is it, this is it!

For me it was like, my pursuit for happiness. Sometimes when I look back and think about it, I get extremely sad. It brings me to the point of tears sometimes, because I feel like I failed. I thought society would end up different. I think, I could have done more and I didn't.