

Paula Crisostomo interview  
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I grew up in a housing project in Boyle Heights in a family of eight kids, I was the oldest girl. So, in many ways I became an assistant mother. My mom was a community leader, she organized the local mothers' club and would plan events and meetings for the neighborhood. And basically because of my birth order, I was a very obedient daughter. I had a lot of responsibilities, cooking and cleaning and babysitting for my younger siblings.

I went to Lincoln High School. There were no political groups or anything. There were clubs. They weren't political at all. I was just a kid going to school. Besides meeting my mentor, Sal Castro, he was one of my teachers. And he invited me to attend what was called then, the Mexican American Leadership Conference that was sponsored by the County Human Relations Commission. There were students from all over the county that attended. And that was a real mind blower to me, because my world was very, very small. Meeting kids who lived in places I had never heard of, like *Pomona*, I had never heard of that place! To me it was like on Mars.

So it was really eye opening, and also, meeting college students who had gone to my high school, or high schools near me that were listening to me and encouraging me. I was a junior, 1967. And being part of discussions where we talked about leadership and what that meant, and how you change a community, how you change people's minds and how you build coalitions. That was all really eye opening to me but also really empowering. Being mentored by these college students—I can't tell you how much I learned from them. And I'm still friends with them.

After the conference, a few of us got together, both high school and college students, and we formed an organization, we called ourselves the Young Citizens for Community Action. We all had similar concerns about our communities and that was our mission, to do what we could to make our communities better. We helped the then-burgeoning United Farmworkers Movement, we protested the Vietnam War, we protested police brutality. But soon enough, we got around to talking about our individual schools. And we realized we had the same complaints. Our buildings were falling down. Our classrooms were overcrowded. There weren't enough books to go around, the libraries had no books. Our teachers say mean things to us.

Q: You mean, racist things?

A. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And, we had gone to school hearing that stuff all our lives. We internalized it. It seemed normal to us.

Mr. Castro took a few of us to visit a high school that was also part of the district. It was just a freeway ride away, but to me at that time it seemed so far away. Then it was Fairfax High School, it had just been built. Now the demographics are totally different, but then it was known as the white Jewish school.

Q: OK, so it was brand new, was it, like, insanely unequal?

A: Insanely unequal. Insanely unequal. It was in the same district, and this school was so nice.

Sal was at our school, at Lincoln. He helped to organize the college students, and the college students worked with us. The college students really, really guided us and advised us along the way.

We had several meeting places. One was the coffee house. One was the Church of the Epiphany, the Episcopal Church. And one of the students from Garfield High School, her father was also supportive and he managed an apartment complex, when apartments became open he said, you guys can use this to store your boxes and your stuff, and that was really helpful.

What's important is the organizing, and that's the hard work. With YCCA, we started talking about our schools, and the college students said, there's a way to go through this, to air our grievances, that's not the words they used then. It became a conversation about, *are we the only people who feel this way about our school? Let's find out. How do we find out? We take a survey.*

And so, we came up with some questions, and it was mostly the college students who distributed them at different youth organizations, they took them to the Teen Post, I think it was federally funded, it was part of the War on Poverty. We tabulated all the different surveys and realized that most students felt the same, that they weren't being recognized in school. They didn't feel like they were being encouraged to be better students. Teachers were regularly saying racist things to them and about them. And where they came from. And where they lived. That became real eye opening, right? So, it became like, now what do we do? Well you've got to tell people what you found.

We talked to our parents, talked to our teachers, talked to our counselors, talked to our principals. And we got patronized. My mother was very supportive. My father was not. He was like, *just go to school. Just get good grades. Why are you bothering with that?*

When we were planning and organizing, we were not getting support from anyone. No one supported us. We tried. We talked to everyone we could. It wasn't a surprise. That's what really kind of blows my mind, the walkout wasn't a surprise. Just no one ever expected us to do it.

We met with our school superintendent, we met with our elected congressman, we met with our city council people, on and on and on. We were presenting them with the results of our survey and then at some point we came up with a list of demands based on the survey, so we were peddling that around too. And people were patronizing us. They said, "Yeah, you guys are really smart kids, you should just go back to school." And, of course, "Where do you expect us to get the money to do all of this? You're just kids."

And parents did not support us, because they were afraid of what could happen. Three years earlier was the first Watts uprising or riot. It was the first time that it was televised live on TV, and where 35 people were killed. And so there were parents who thought, oh my God, if they

walk out, take to the streets like we saw these people in the streets, you could get killed. No one knew how anyone was going to react.

We were asking for better schools, a better education. Isn't that what we should be doing? Like I said, we went through the proper channels.

Q: At what point did you guys realize you had to do something more dramatic?

A: When we got tired of being patronized and ignored. A while. One of the things that we did do, Julian Nava was going to run for school board and he was the first Latino, Chicano to run for LA School board in contemporary times. And so we thought, if we can help him get elected, he'll help us. That was my first political campaign, I was 16 years old. I couldn't vote, but I went precinct walking, I made phone calls, I stuffed envelopes, I did anything a volunteer does—except vote.

I was a kid, I was politically very unsophisticated, I was naïve, I was idealistic. He was only one voice and one vote, and the first. So, he probably wasn't getting very much respect at all from the other school board members.

We didn't start out planning a walk out. We started out making our educational system better. We started out demanding educational justice. But when we weren't getting it... we could have just said, okay, we give up. Let's go home. But we decided that we needed to do something.

And I don't know how the conversation started or who came up with it, but we knew that it had to be something that would catch the media's attention. It caught everyone's attention. We knew that the schools got money for the number of students who attended every day. So we thought, okay, none of us can go to homeroom, then. Hit them where it really counts.

Q: So if you're not counted in homeroom, LAUSD takes a financial hit for that day?

A: Exactly.

Homeroom was at 10 AM, at my school. So if we go to first period from 9 to 10, and the bell rang at 10 AM, instead of going to homeroom, we walk out. They knew kids were in school, but they weren't there to be counted. So that became the strategy.

Q: So what percentage of your homeroom walked out, you think?

A: You know, that's a tough question, it's been 50 years, I'm thinking around 85%.

Q: Most kids walked out?

A: Most kids walked out.

Q: Was it almost all Latino kids?

A: Everyone. In a lot of ways it was just a class thing, too, because we were a bunch of poor kids on the East Side of Los Angeles, we were a bunch of poor kids in East LA. They didn't care about us.

It was exciting, it was scary, it was empowering. My first fear was that no one else was going to walk out but me.

The college students were actually running the hallways yelling “walk out”. When I first stood up I thought, am I the only one leaving? When I turned around there were students behind me, and I opened the door and I heard “Walk out!” And I recognized who it was and I thought, Okay, this is really happening. And I felt empowered. And protected too.

The first day of the walkouts we didn’t have a plan. So we picketed the school, we marched up and down in front of the school (with signs we had made.) And then we went home. Well, I went home.

It was hard to become a student again, especially during that first 2, 3, 4 weeks afterward. It was like a rolling walkout.

Q: Did other kids just get to school and they wouldn’t know if there was going to be a walkout or not, and they’d get the word from you guys?

A: Yes, right, exactly.

We had meetings all the time. We met every 10 minutes I think. There was a large coalition from all the different high schools, and then each high school had its own strike committee. So each individual high school strike committee would meet, and then the strike committees would all get together and meet, but it was very individual because it all depended on what was going on at school.

Immediately after the first walkout, the community leaders and parents and clergy all got together and formed the educational Issues Coordinating Committee, which became our adult support group, and they pledged to work with the Board of Education to implement our demands.

Q: Did that make you guys feel more safe?

A: I felt more safe. Yeah.

At the other schools...there were female leaders. There just weren’t very many of us. There were some girls who would come to the meeting, but only because their boyfriend was there. I remember talking to them, saying, how come we haven’t seen you before? Come to another meeting, and they said, *Oh no, that’s ok, I’m here because David comes*. That was the times.

That was part of it. We were forcing the school board to meet in East LA: Come see our conditions. It went through March at least, but it wasn’t every day.

Q: Was it almost always coordinated, all the schools at the same time?

A: Almost always. There were other individual schools that went out on their own, for whatever reason.

Q: It must have been much harder to organize than today because you didn't have social media?

A: Right. You actually had to talk to people. And see them.

I knew that, damn I was busy. I had a lot of balls in the air and I was trying to keep them all up and keep everyone satisfied. I actually had a part time job, too. The reason I was working, I was supplementing my father's janitorial job. And like I said, we were meeting every 10 minutes. There were a lot of times when I didn't go to work, which meant that the check that I handed him, was smaller. And that got me into some hot water with him.

Our first demand was that no one would be punished, whoever participated, no students would be reprimanded or expelled from school. My father was afraid they weren't going to let me graduate—none of that happened.

Q: It's hard to not compare because of what's happening this week (with the #NeverAgain movement) and those guys are media savvy but also, they have a giant apparatus of support behind them that didn't exist then.

A: That we didn't have.

Q: Did you have a sense of what a big deal it was?

A: We couldn't have. And that wasn't why we were doing it, either. I was flabbergasted, shocked when I heard of the 13 being arrested. How could this be against the law? We were asking for a better education.

Q: You had rights, and you had no other way to express them...

A: And we tried. We went through the right channels to do it. No one wanted to listen to us. They just expected us to: go home, continue to be good students, stay out of our face.

Q: So did it reinforce your feeling that your voice did matter, both as a person under 18 and as a Latina?

A: Yes, it did help, but of course it was a much slower process, being 17 years old, than I had wanted, and when the 13 got arrested I was just so disappointed. I thought, Oh my God, what did we do? [They were charged with] conspiracy to disrupt a school system. They were each facing 66 years in jail. Many of them were in the courts for 3 to 4 years.

Q: Were you politically active in college?

A: Yeah, I was in MEChA, UMAS at the time, and I worked on the campaign to elect the first Chicano student body president at UCLA. And you know, we did the farmworker thing.

I think overall, having high expectations of students of color, and respecting where they came from and what their possibilities are. You know I recently retired as an Assistant Dean of Students at Occidental College where I had oversight of all programs, services and policies for students of color and first generation students. What I did in the walkouts really gave me a solid base and an interest, I found my passion. I think that's what students struggle with. Everyone tells them. Find your passion. How do you do that? It's just trying things on, you just try.

Q: I feel like that's one of the things I want to ask you, how was this a life-changing experience?

A: That's how it was for me. Just seeing and experiencing the unequal treatment and seeing the inequity of how systems work.

Q: That made you want to be in a place where you could grow up...

A: Where I could do something better.

I graduated with a major in English and a minor in Chicano studies. I had a number of jobs mainly in the nonprofit world, where worked for social service programs that helped to improve the quality of people's lives. I happened to stumble across a job at Occidental College that needed community relations work and I knew that world really well. Applied for it and even though I didn't meet the first criteria, which was experience at an institution of higher learning, but they called me, I interviewed, they hired me...and 15 years later I retired.

Q: How did the grassroots organizing prepare you [for more top down organizations]?

A: Going to a lot of meetings! I became very adept at meeting people face to face, and some contentious meetings which I had gotten used to.

You're going to run into people who don't agree with you. So, you just move on. Forget about them, because eventually you will find people who support you and agree with you.

You have to understand, following the walkouts, those of us involved, were not regarded very highly. Because of the 13 being arrested, because it seemed like most of our demands were not going to be implemented, so things did not change in the schools. So we were not regarded really highly. Sal Castro even told me, "You know, we're pariahs. We're pariahs." It wasn't until the movie was made.

For me, and for many of my friends, we held each other in high regard. We knew what we had done, and why we had to do it. It wasn't just a fad or a trend. We knew, this had to be done. It didn't seem like it worked, but it was what we had to do. If the schools didn't change, we knew that we had changed.

And because the Walkouts are known to have sparked the whole Chicano Movement, we changed a community too. Following the Walkouts, college acceptance rates of Latinos really started to spike higher and higher. College recruiters actually started visiting the East LA Schools, they never did that. There were more military recruiters on our campuses than college recruiters. So we knew.

You don't go onto it to be rewarded, really. You go into it because that's the only thing to do. You have to. That's how I felt about the Walkouts, I had no choice. We went through all of the proper channels.

Organize. Work. Talk to people, put the phone down and actually talk to people. And if the first 2, 3 people disagree with you, keep going on and talking to people. You have to be that committed, and that passionate.

The real work was in the meetings.

The fight continues and we all have to be vigilant and do whatever we can, in our own little world, to make things better. And we know how much we're willing to risk, because there will be risk. There's always risk. The fight continues. Obviously. Things have gotten better, but they're not good enough. So: Fix it. Things have gotten better. But they're not good enough.

Teachers that look more like them, we didn't have any of that. That was one of our demands, that all racist teachers should be fired. We have new schools, that was one of our demands, to ease the overcrowding. We have more Latino administrators and teachers, and look at all of the elected officials we have now. Some of us are convinced that it's because we increased college going rates. So many of us were able to go to college, join the middle class and have these different options. We weren't just cheap labor.

We were looked at as the next generation of cheap labor. That's who we were to them. The Chicano Youth Leadership Conference, we're still involved with it. Sal Castro, his widow, and a couple of his students, we formed the Sal Castro Foundation, and we put on the Chicano Youth Leadership Conference with the help of the LA School Board, twice a year once in the Fall and once in the Spring.