

Peter Ochoa Interview  
March 19, 2018 (telephone)

During the time of the walkouts in East Los Angeles, Pasadena had its own type of prejudice. And over there what I saw wasn't as bad, but I still remember in second grade being sent to the back of the class because of my name. I went to Pasadena High School, West Campus which is now John Marshall Fundamental School. Graduated in 73.

The riots had come on over to John Marshall Junior High school. A lot of us were chased off the campus.

We did have a walkout. Because we were, basically a lot of the students, the seniors at that time, we were upset about the fact that there were no Chicano teachers, there were no classes on Chicano studies, we weren't able to identify with who we were as a culture. We walked out in 1970 also. This one wasn't like the riot they had in 1969. It had calmed down a little bit and I was involved in that one. Where we had confronted the administration and we told them our demands, we said, "We're walking out and we're going to continue this again tomorrow until you meet our demands." And they said, "No, no, no, no."

We were quite vocal. During the summer after I graduated from Marshall, I started hanging out at Pasadena City College with the kids from MEChA. I learned a whole lot there that I never would have learned in high school, about the leadership and what we needed to talk about.

Lack of identity. There were no clubs. Well, they did have UMAS, United Mexican American Students, but it wasn't a group that was there for action, that was going to create change, that was going to make a difference. When MEChA was started, that's when the change was made. We said, wait a minute, we need to have these classes here. We need to identify who we are, where we came from, and we want these classes taught in our school because there's nothing there.

We wanted to identify with our people. Because of our walkouts, and confronting, not only the principal of the school and the superintendent, and the Board of Education, we confronted them with meetings and we had the backing of the parents too. It was after the riots that had happened in '69, we continued the walkouts. We wanted to be vocal, we wanted to be heard. The principals and the teachers were saying, "We don't want to have what happened last year happen again." Because of that, we made it a more peaceful one, it wasn't the rioting. We tried to do it in a nonviolent way and that seemed to work out for us.

Pasadena Unified School District, they went to UTEP, they went to Texas and they hired five teachers and brought them to Pasadena Unified School District to teach classes, and they told them that they were going to teach Chicano studies, some sort of Mexican American cultural class. Something that the kids can identify with so they can learn their history. Which I guess you could say, was kind of a pacifier? But it did work because the fact is, we did do something.

We got something accomplished. We got teachers here and not only did they teach us of our culture but they spoke Spanish also.

We did walk out. It was probably the first week of the school year. I remember walking into the school the first day of school and there were TV cameras there. But the TV cameras were there not because of walkouts but because of school busing. This was when they instituted the busing. They were more concerned with what was going to happen with busing than anything else. This was the first year that they had dropped the dress code, also. Girls were wearing miniskirts. That was one of the ways they were going to be able to calm the White parents.

There was talk of it the week before, but there was actually no meeting that I recall. We started school right after Labor Day. There was talk, *OK we're going to be walking out in a couple days.*

That time, I was culturally retarded. Even though I was subjected to discrimination in the earlier years, I didn't realize that skin color made a difference. It wasn't until the summer of '69 when I had my cultural awakening, at that time I was hanging out with Eddie Van Halen, he was at Marshall Junior High, a lot of the White kids, some of the Mexican kids, Black kids, Dutch Indonesian, I hung out with everyone, it didn't matter. As long as they treated me fine, I was OK with that, I would still talk to them.

The Black kids were separate, we did this on our own. We wanted to have instructors who would teach us of our culture. That's why when I heard "walk out," I was like, *OK, I'm getting in this one.* There were Black instructors there but I can't recall if they had any African American studies classes at that year. We were left out. That is why we had walked out. We wanted to have classes and teachers that could identify with us and our history.

It wasn't until '72 when we had more walkouts. It wasn't a walkout, it was a coalition, we tried to get from the student body and also from the school district, money to help out with our cultural weeks. We had been fundraising. We had formed a coalition with the Asians, with the Blacks, and the Chicanos had all gotten together and we not only confronted the student body but the school district on giving the group some monies so we could put on our cultural weeks. That group was successful and nonviolent, in fact there were no walkouts, we wound up doing it the way that probably the school district would like to have seen, avoided any walkouts or any disruption of the classes.

We brought in Folklorico dancers, Mariachis, the Blacks had brought in groups that had done African Dance, the Asians had brought in groups of dancers, they had the foods that we all had people that cooked the food of our cultures and put it out in the quad for students to enjoy.

It wasn't just for us. We wanted the other students of Pasadena High School to know what our culture was, who we were and what we did. Like with the dancers, in every group, they were all so colorful, the students couldn't believe it, they said, "Oh My Gosh, look at this." The Asian dancers, they brought in a drum group, the Black groups had people who were studying African Dance and they did dances of different tribes. They were amazed at what they were missing

and we showed them, we were like, "This is what we want to learn more about, we want our kids, the kids that don't know, to know what their culture is, and we want you to know it also." This wasn't just a thing for us. It was for everybody.

When we walked out we told them, "We're going to keep walking out, we're going to continue this walkout and boycotting of classes." We weren't going to be going to classes until we got our demands met. I would say the majority of the Chicano kids had participated in it. There was a room that was in the Library that was just packed, I remember sweating in the room from all the body heat that was in there. The principal would come in, "What is it that you want?" and I remember getting on up and saying, "We want classes that are going to teach us about our culture, about us."

That's when Danny Tejas, he was the leader at that time of MEChA that had started up, he was like, "Who is this guy?"

And when they had the first MEChA meeting he said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Peter Ochoa, that's all I am."

He said, "You're really vocal, we may have to calm you down."

I said, "You don't want to calm me down, that's the thing. They're going to react more to the loudness because they're afraid, the number have got them afraid, and if we start going in there yelling and screaming they're going to be even more afraid."

The aftermath of the walkouts from Pasadena High School was, they brought in the college kids from PCC to act as Chicano Student advisors, the Superintendent brought them in. It took them a year to get the students who had graduated from UTEP on over to Pasadena. I guess as a pacifier, I call it a pacification to calm the students down, was to bring in someone that they could identify with because there were no counselors that were Chicano. There was no one to guide us and say, "Hey, you can go to college, did you know that your grades are good enough that you can go to college and you can get a scholarship, you can get to go to school for free if you keep your grades up." We never had that.

We started learning about our culture from these kids, they instituted a tutorial program for us, for knuckleheads like me that were having a hard time with classes, so that we would be able to do better in our classes. I was terrible in math and still am basically to this day but because of the tutorial program that the college kids, these student advisors that were brought in, they instituted tutorial classes and were able to help out the kids, raise their GPA's. That was the aftermath from the '69 walkouts.

A group of us had gone into the principal's office, I remember I was involved with that one, and the principal said, "Listen. I'm trying to avoid a walkout." We said, "Well, we're going to walk out if we don't get something going here, because we feel that the school should be helping us in providing knowledge to the students here about our culture. All we want to do it have a cultural week so that way we can tell people who we are."

Believe it or not the principal told us, "I'm trying to avoid a walkout. Why don't you do it this way. Why don't you get together so this isn't just a Chicano thing, why don't you get together with the Blacks and the Asians? And have you guys go up to the school council and the Board of Education and talk about it. I don't want to see a disruption of the classes."

And we did and it worked. We got money not only from the school district but from the associated student body. We brought in a Mariachi group and a Folklorico group for lunch hour. The kids, they brought in Pan Dulce, we had hot chocolate.

Anything can be achieved if your heart is set in it. Going the nonviolent way, going about it in a nonviolent way is the best answer, where no one is actually hurt and there is no damage to buildings or disruption of the educational system. It can be achieved through nonviolence.