

Roberta Martinez Interview
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I had been involved with friends who were active and interested in social justice and social change. This whole idea of social justice was something that was bubbling a little bit in East LA Catholic circles. I went to Our Lady of Victory, I think it was a mission church. Also in Girl Scouts: the idea of treating everybody the same.

When I got to high school, many of my friends were involved to varying degrees with more radical social kinds of approaches. I know that we would sometimes talk about, we had a lot of time that we would spend philosophizing and what we thought should be, what should be achieved. And also, because I had been involved in various sort of leadership kinds of situations, I ended up going to, I think it was, the California Youth Leadership Something in Orange County, we were from all across the state. This was connected with Girls Scouts.

What I recollect more than anything else that morning was being in the hallway, either right before class or in a crossing period. I remember the tiles on the floors and all of the lockers as we're walking. I knew somehow or the other that the Walkouts were going to take place and I wasn't sure, of those people who were going to walk out, how many of them were doing it as a point of their philosophical belief rather than just, getting out of class? *Oh yeah, I believe in the Walkouts I think I'm just going to go out with everybody else.* Because there were some people that were really serious, and some people that had the giggles about this.

And I can understand looking back on this, that sometimes when you're nervous about something, you get giggly. Sometimes when you realize the magnitude of what you're doing, if this was something that was really meaningful to you, that you rejoice a little bit about whatever was taking place. But there were also people, I'm sure, who were just saying, "Shoot, I don't have to go to second period!" You know? For me, I don't remember talking with anybody about it but I did wonder, so all these people that were going out, how many of them really cared and how many were just looking to get out of class.

People were shouting. It was a little bit like, when people are getting ready to go to a game. Big adrenaline rush, big gestures.

Q: Did some kids stay in the classroom?

A: I don't know. It's entirely possible, I don't remember them. My strongest recollection is seeing grass.

I remember a kind of deliberate pace, somehow or the other. I don't remember a lot of people, which makes me wonder, so did I stay in the classroom a while and then go out? Because I had not been part of the planning, and my own personal situation, my parents would not have let me out of the house to go to any planning meetings or anything.

My family, they were Republicans. Mexican Republicans in East LA was just kind of unheard of. I think what was happening to me in going through this was some kind of metamorphosis of trying to figure out.

I had friends like Harry Gamboa and John Ortiz, who I had known through junior high school and high school, we didn't hang out all the time but I knew them, and they were leaders. They were profoundly committed to bringing change. I looked up to their commitment to what they were doing.

I don't remember being in any place where I heard the statistics about dropout levels or some of the other issues that folks like John and Harry and others knew....and that our walking out would be a means to an end.

My own inclination I think is to kind of weigh things as they're happening. I think that's what was happening with me. I was at a point where all these elements were coming together. Within a year of that, I was arguing every night with my parents about things. I had become radicalized. I had become politicalized and they were very much old school conservative Republicans.

Q: So they knew that you walked out of school?

A: Probably not (laughter.)

Because my parents had me so late in life and because my mom had been so independent as a woman, I think there would have been part of them that liked the fact that this was an expression. And I think there was the conservative part of them that would have been mortified if anyone learned about that.

Knowing that my friends were being chased by the Sheriffs, with intention to harm them...it wasn't just intention to stop them, it was intention to harm them so they would stop. That was when it became very, very clear.

These are really concrete examples of philosophical...all those things we use to talk about. Every lunch we would sit there and talk about, truth, justice and the American way...We would talk about Smothers Brothers and whatever else was going on. And this was talking all of that from philosophy to concrete experience.