

The Beginning of La Casa de la Raza Santa Barbara, California

In the year 1968, I was a young man of 26 who was living the American Dream. I was happily married with two little girls, ages 2 and 4, and owned my own home. At age 21, I had put a \$1,000 down payment on a \$17,500.00 house in Summerland, California. I was the business agent of a construction union, Lathers Local #379. I worked on the job site in the lathing trade, and had a place at the business table negotiating for the benefit of union construction workers. This gave me the opportunity to learn how to negotiate and see how things get done in the political world.

My involvement in Chicano politics came at a lunch break where Luis Urzua was talking to a group of us Hispanics about the Chicano Movement and the "Brown Berets". The "Berets" were a group of militants that were based in Los Angeles. One has to remember that the 60's were volatile times - Vietnam War, student uprising at universities, and environmental consciousness which came to the local level with the oil spill in Santa Barbara Channel. While all this was going on out in the larger world, I was very content being a family man with an Anglo wife and two small children in a home that I owned.

I remember my first Chicano meeting at Luis Ursua's house. Both Luis and his son were involved with the Brown Berets. I listened to their oratory and was impressed with their knowledge of the subject, which was the mistreatment of Latinos or La Raza. I realized that what was happening on a larger scale in America was also occurring locally in Santa Barbara. Why were Latinos at the top of the school drop-out rate? Why were they not succeeding in education and the job market? Basically it was an eye opener for me. I had achieved everything on my own, having been brought up that way by my parents - why and what was different for other Latinos?

I remember meeting Ross Castro at one of these meetings. A family man with three daughters, Ross was about ten years older than me. Soon he and his wife Cheila were my good friends. I looked to Ross for guidance in the beginning of my involvement in the Chicano Movement, going to rallies in Santa Barbara, Oxnard, Los Angeles, and Belvedere Park. Anywhere there were Chicano marches, I was there along with Ross and his family.

I was soon to find out that my involvement in the Chicano movement was to bring criticism to myself and my family. This criticism came not only from others but also from my family members, who did not think "good Mexicans" took part in such activities. One friend said I used to be a "good Mexican", but because of my involvement in the Chicano movement, I was now a "dirty Mexican."

I have learned that in standing up for what you believe, and what you have been brought up to believe is right, that in so doing, you will be criticized. So before you choose a path of life or a position on an issue, be sure you look at all sides of the issue before moving forward.

I was living the American dream in Summerland, California, in a little house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I had a wife, two children, Karrie and Susan; and a German Shepherd dog, Bullet. Basically I had it made. Who knew what the future held?

I began to have meetings at my home, inviting Latinos who I knew - Ben Cheverez, Frank Banales, Tom Castelo, Luis Urzua and his son Steve Urzua, who were in the Brown Berets, (a Chicano militant organization). Ross Castro's nephew, Danny Castro, would also attend. We would discuss the injustices against the Mexican Americans. Danny Castro, who at the time was attending UCLA, was very instrumental in motivating people to action. These injustices against Chicanos were very awakening to me, since it had never occurred to me that I had experienced racism.

At that time many of the people involved in the movement (as it was called) were single. I felt that there should be an organization for families who wanted to do something positive for our community. Chicano Positive Movement was established to provide a positive meaning to what we were doing in the Chicano movement. We would hold rummage sales, bake sales, and have booths at local carnivals and fairs.

Ortega Park was used as a meeting place for Chicano groups. In a discussion of how the park could better serve the needs of the Chicano community, the idea for a community center was brought up.

As I was business agent of Lathers Local 379, I was in contact with contractors and business people. One of those people was Ken James, a plaster contractor, who also had a building material business housed at 601 East Montecito Street. It was on the corner of Montecito and Salsipuedes Street. Ken and I had been friends for a long time. He was going through some rough times financially and had to close his business. He offered to let our group Chicano Positive Movement use the building for meetings.

During one of the Ortega Park meetings, Ben Cheverez and I took a group of people from the meeting to see this beautiful structure, the future home of La Casa de la Raza (Home of the People). From that first visit to see an architectural jewel of a building, sprang many ideas on how this building could become a real cultural center. We were a group of regular everyday working people who were ready to work for our dream.

I remember Tom Castelo, who at that time was attending UCLA. He had stopped by my house in Summerland, California, a few miles south of Santa Barbara. I suppose he was going through this change, the Chicano Movement. He was all excited about starting a group of people. I told him that a group of us had already started Chicano Positive Movement, a group who wanted positive change. Because of his real estate experience, Castelo became instrumental in the process of purchasing the building that was soon to be "La Casa".

At that time, the building was called "Coleman Building Material", after the owner Mr. Coleman. Ken James of El Sol Plastering Co. was buying it from Coleman and was behind on the payments, and also owed the government back taxes. We were at the right place at the right time, as Ken James had to get out of the building deal, and Mr. Coleman needed a new tenant. He was very sympathetic to our cause and eager to close a deal with us if we had the money. Where could we get the money?

1969 was a dramatic time of riots and unrest across the nation based on the war in Viet Nam. It even came to the University of Santa Barbara and its neighboring community, Isla Vista. In what came to be known as the "Isla Vista Riot," radical students who viewed the Bank of America as a symbol of imperialism, burned the bank to the ground.

I saw an opportunity to approach the Bank of America. I called the bank's head office in San Francisco and was put in contact with the president, Joe DiAngelo. At that time, Bank of America was looking for ways it could improve its image with the public through community involvement. Mr DiAngelo flew to Santa Barbara to meet the newly formed Casa de la Raza Board of Directors. The founding Board consisted of myself, Ben Cheverez, Ross Castro, Tom Castelo, Richard Vargas, Dr. Michael Lemus, and Dr. Carlos Ornelas. Mr. DiAngelo was impressed with what we were doing and was very interested in aiding the development of our dream for a cultural center. Bank of America agreed to loan us \$150,000.00 if we could raise \$30,000.00 for a down payment. Some people in the community were not in favor of us doing business with Bank of America because of their so-called imperialistic activities.

While we were working to get La Casa de la Raza started, there was already an existing group called La Union Civica, which had been in existence for quite a few years. When La Casa de la Raza formed, La Union Civica saw it as a very real threat to their very existence. The Union was comprised of mostly higher class Mexicanos, such as Dr. Lemus, a family doctor and a very nice person. There was also Richard Hidalgo, a real estate agent who hated the Casa because we were in his "space". La Union would have queen contests to raise money, yet we never saw any of these funds benefiting Mexican causes or concerns. In 197? they had the funds for a down payment on a building to be their center, whereas the Casa was still working to raise funds for its own site.

We would raise money through dances and food sales of burritos and tacos. One time we had a carnival at La Casa. For the dances we would charge one dollar and the people would come in and buy food and beer. The Banales family, along with their friends, would donate their time to help La Casa. Many community people volunteered to see the dream of buying La Casa come true. I remember a young artist, Manuel Unzueta, who offered his talents as a muralista. He painted many murals at La Casa which are still there today and are famous throughout the Southwest. People from the University of Santa Barbara began to show up to help at La Casa, but we later realized that they were doing it for their own agendas, which included taking over the community center for their own use in order to have influence over the local Chicano Movement. In their eyes, community people were not ready to lead themselves but needed to be led. Despite initial resistance by the community, a respect grew between both groups. A fiesta de la comunidad was born.

Every year La Casa would have its own fiesta concurrent with the City of Santa Barbara's Fiesta, which takes place at the beginning of August. The City's Fiesta celebrates the arrival of the Spaniards on the shores of Santa Barbara. Some liberals would criticize us for celebrating the fiesta but it was a way of making much needed money for the down payment on La Casa. Many thousands of people would attend these fiesta events and also attend La Casa de la Raza events which would feature bands and mariachis. Everyone would have a great time and we would benefit by making money for the Casa. We would also have a food booth at De la Guerra Plaza, which was a center for Fiesta activities; this was very profitable for us. In those days we had plenty of community volunteers to help at both locations.

Every weekend there was a fundraising event manned by volunteers. George Huerta from the University developed "El Teatro de Esperanza," a

traveling theatre group which went throughout the Southwest doing shows about the struggles of Chicanos. They were proudly housed out of La Casa. I remember many of our youth going door to door with pledge envelopes, asking people to donate to La Casa. We could find a pledge of a few dollars on up to one thousand dollars in the envelopes. My fond memories are of the hundreds of volunteers that would donate their time-gardeners, construction workers, doctors and lawyers. Many people still thought we were militant because they had never seen Chicanos organize themselves to do something positive. I remember events at La Casa when my wife and my friends' wives would come to help. Ben and Margret Cheverez, Frank Banales along with his wife and parents, Richard Vargas and his wife, Tom Castelo and his wife and mother in-law Betty Rodriguez – these are all people who were there in the beginning and without whom there would be no Casa. There were many, many more people that gave of their time and wish I could remember them and for this I apologize. Jess Torres who worked for Coleman Building Materials would say “that he came with the building because he worked there for twenty years.” He would do maintenance work for us on a volunteer basis. Betty Rodriguez from the beginning did our dances, she would organize dates for the bands and set them up at La Casa -she did a great job. The university students at that time were a great help with fundraisers. Bill Villa, who convinced me to return to college and finish my education after being out of school for ten years, was especially helpful in supporting La Casa. Patrice Drolet and her friends were university students and members of the Communist Revolutionary Party. They came to help and at that time any help was welcome. I remember an incident that happened at one of the dance fundraiser. A Latino individual asked Ben's wife, Margaret, what she was doing helping in the kitchen because she was not Latino and she answered, “because you're not back here.” We had some great times at fundraisers with the help of entire families working together.

One of the great things that happened at La Casa meetings was that a monthly financial statement would always be put up on the wall for all members to see. Transparency was essential when dealing with community volunteers it would stop chismeses (rumors). The members could see if their fundraising efforts had been profitable or not. I think that is what kept the members coming to meetings - they knew that they would always have that financial statement there. There were many things going on in Santa Barbara in the late 60s and early 70's. The Community Health Task Force, now known as Zona Seca, came into existence. The News and Review newspaper, forerunner of today's Independent,

was getting started on Nopal Street. They were a big supporter of La Casa de la Raza. El Concilio, a group on Haley Street run by Ida Cordero, offered a place where different groups in the community would gather to discuss community problems. Recycling was becoming a reality through Paul Relis. Environmental groups were becoming the norm in Santa Barbara after the 1969 oil spill as they should have. La Casa De La Raza was a supporter of these endeavors. Santa Barbara was bustling with activities by youth organizations such as Mecha, a student group in the junior and senior high schools, that Louis Orzua and his wife and family championed. The Raza Libre at UCSB was a college student group that promoted Chicano studies for the University. It was a time that I hope comes around again.

We are now at the crossroads of history 40 years later. District elections are once again on the horizon. Organizers of the 1991 elections are older but have the same resolve for representation throughout the city for everyone. Representation where one can go to their neighborhood councilperson and really be heard and where one's vote really counts. Where getting things done in one's neighborhood is a reality rather than a promise to do something "someday." The same old arguments will be heard "You people are not ready to govern yourselves," "Don't we do enough for you people." Give me a break. It is time for interested people to take up the challenge to bring back that fervor of the '60s and '70s and to make real social change where all people are counted, where their vote means something, and where neighborhood meetings to meet their candidate from their district is indeed possible.