

**Ricardo Lafore**

**Interview recorded July 29, 2014**

A: --the employment I've ever done before because I have offices in Brooklyn but my hotel is in Times Square and I remember thinking crossing that Brooklyn Bridge every day, man, what are you doing here this is like surreal. You're doing this, you're on TV and you're getting paid and it was quite an experience.

**Q: Family background, etc.**

A: You do know that I'm not a Vietnam veteran, right?

**Q: Yes.**

A: Oh, yeah, yeah, it affected everybody. It's still affecting everybody. I think it's—I think I've said this before, to me it's like a scar that doesn't seem to want to heal entirely, properly. This never really quite healed quite right and I think until those guys feel like they're welcomed back I don't think like it's going to go away. We just never really dealt with it. It's like okay we did it, we're ashamed of it, now let's sweep in under the rug and just not talk about it. It's like one of those things you just don't want to talk about, yeah, I think it continues to affect us all. That's one of the reasons of my commitment to the GI [] because the vast majority of the people at their chapter that I belong to, the vast majority, ninety percent of all veterans there are Vietnam veterans just because of the age and I think we probably only have three World War II vets left there.

**Q: So let's get started with your name.**

A: My name is Ricardo Lafore, Ricardo Eloy Lafore. I was born in Trinidad, Colorado, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1943. It's actually up above the hills in Trinidad. I was born in a house, I was not born in a hospital. Subsequently, I wasn't really even given a name officially until about seven months later.

If you know anything about the Chicano culture, Mexican American, you know that that was not at all unusual to be born and delivered by a midwife and only to find out sometimes later that your name isn't really what you thought your name was and that's kind of an interesting thing about me. I was named Juan [] but I wasn't—my birth wasn't recorded until seven months later. By that time my padrino and madrina, Diego and Flor Baca had named me Ricardo Eloy but the truth be known I didn't—my birth certificate says Juan [] after my grandfather.

So when I found that out at the records office down here on Cherry Creek Drive in Denver, I didn't know what to do because I was already an adult and so I said, "I can't, I can't suddenly change my name and what do I do?" So for a fee they changed my name to Ricardo which I had always been known as Ricardo so that's just kind of a little trivia thing. But I also found that it's not really wasn't really all that unusual for that to happen in our culture.

**Q: Why did they change your name?**

A: Well, they—they were backward folks back in the hills. Diego Baca that's the name that he wanted for me he was my padrino he was the one who held me under while the priest poured water on my head and they named me—"Well, what's his name?" "His name is Ricardo, call him Ricardo."

**Q: What is the community you were born into?**

A: Jansen, it's about two and a half miles west of—west of Trinidad what they call if you're from that area they call everything west of Trinidad they call it "up the river." And you go up to all the mining towns because it was really a mining community. In fact there's kind of a funny story about white folks would say "Well, I don't know, what cute names, how did you get these names?" There's one called Primero, Segundo and Tercero and what that means in Spanish is first, second and third and what it meant was this is the first mining town, the second mining town, the third mining town but the names stuck.

But there are a lot of little towns all the way up the river all the way to Stonewall and Monument Lake that were I think, I'm not sure, but there may still be the Allen Mine may be somewhat in operation. But if you know anything about Trinidad that was the economy. That was it, you either worked in the mines or you were on some sort of public assistance or you were a merchant; you didn't really—that was the only job really available for poor folks.

**Q: Were your parents miners?**

A: Yeah, yeah. Actually, my grandfather was a union organizer for the United Mine Workers, yeah, so he was involved in that, in that he—my grandfather I never really got to know him because he died when I was still a young boy about five but my mother used to tell me things about him and my grandmother would tell me things. Which kind of looking back on now it I kind of he was really kind of the inspiration for me to become kind of the person that I was. My personality was somewhat for him because of listening to romantic stories about my grandfather's union organizing days.

And like for example my mom used to tell me that she said they used to say [Spanish] the scabs the union busters would come to the house and they lived in an old adobe house and they would shoot up the house. And my grandfather would get on his horse, they still had horses back then he would get on his horse and he'd go further up the hills and behind Trinidad and would come back out when things had cooled down a little bit.

So and she would just tell me things that my grandfather used to say and thinking back on it now kind of makes me laugh like he would say things like a "Communist is any son of a bitch who wants thirty cents an hour when you're only paying twenty-five." Or he would also say "A Liberal is a guy who walks out of the room when an argument turns into a fist fight." Things like that so you could see where little things like that as I'm listening I'm beginning to formulate some ideas about justice and about what's—what is perception and what is reality. I never really cared about partisan politics because I always wondered hey, it doesn't matter who who's—who you vote for, government is always going to get in and we're always going to be the way that we are because we were very poor.

I was very poor I was raised with my grandmother. She made about sixty-five dollars a month on what they called then "the old age pension." And I can recall from my earliest years, I mean, she would—she'd get her check, we'd go to the local grocery store there. She'd buy like fifty pounds of pinto beans, a hundred pounds of potatoes, a big old tin of lard like this and that was kind of it and sometimes, we didn't call it is spaghetti it was macarono, a little elbow roni with just some tomato sauce over. So we lived—we lived right but—I was never unhappy. I don't ever recall really being unhappy although I was poor, I never even knew I was poor until a social worker told me that I was. I remember thinking geez how about that I'm poor, poor me but I never really—it wasn't the kind of poverty that was—made me miserable. I was loved and I just didn't really bother me I was happy. I was just a kid.

**Q: Was your grandpa involved in the Ludlow Strike?**

A: Yes. He was organizing by around that time.

**Q: Did you ever hear stories from him about that?**

A: Actually, I never heard any stories from him because he died before I was really able to comprehend. Most of the stuff that I got was half second hand from my mom who was said she used to carry water and do stuff like that in a little town called [] right out of Trinidad. So my early knowledge of what later came to be known as social justice were

really kind of based on stories that I heard and just on some personal experiences that a feeling like that we were the forgotten people but as long as you had family you would be okay.

Later because, because of my heritage and because of my history I became, I became very interested in things like this. I would read a lot. I was telling you on the way in that when I was like just in grade school teachers recognized that I was kind of a special kid. I would read a lot. I'd read anything I'd get I retained a lot and one of the teachers that liked me would secretly let me take home a volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica, keep it until you finish it and I'd bring it back to the library then I could take another one. And like I was telling Nicky I think by the time I was in the fifth or sixth grade, I'd gone through the whole Encyclopedia Britannica. I didn't retain it all but I sure knew a lot—I sure knew a lot for a kid my age. I was a precocious child.

**Q: My grandmother was born in [].**

A: Oh, well, all of it there you go, there you go.

**Q: Can you talk a bit more about growing up and the formation of your social justice mind.**

A: Well, it, well, okay. First of all I was living with my grandmother. My mother I didn't—I wasn't always sure where she was. I come to find out later she was in a relationship that eventually ended up her marrying this guy and she was out of work and she was a single mom. She really couldn't afford to take care of me; there was me and my three brothers. And we all lived in this one, two rooms, a kitchen and then a bedroom up above Trinidad and we were very poor. I didn't really—my mother would come and see me regularly but I really—I looking back on it now what she was doing she was getting prepared to have us go live with her permanently. That's what ended up happening.

And by then I was about eleven, I guess, or twelve and my—I was very used to living with my grandmother. I loved my grandmother she was like my angel, my protective angel, and then one day when this change was going to occur the sheriff came and decided and the social worker decided that was it. I was going to be uprooted and disrupted and I kind of—I didn't want to go. I didn't see why I should have to go and I ran off and they had to hunt me down, not literally hunt me down. But they had to go get me and I, I think about that time I began to realize the government had a lot of power over people, poor people, that they could compel you to do something that you didn't want to do.

In retrospect it may have been for my own good, my grandmother was elderly. I don't think she would have—if I had continued to live there she probably wouldn't have been able at some point to control me, the older I got. But as it turns out my mother married a veteran who worked at the VA Hospital in Fort Lyon. So we moved and my grandmother came along with us and we moved to Las Animas, Colorado and that's where I ended up going to high school and eventually that's kind of where the seeds of the movement were born for me there.

I was never a real partisan for the reasons that I had mentioned. It didn't seem to matter who was in power, the Democrats or the Republicans. My lot was—didn't change very much and but shortly after, shortly after I guess I was in the eleventh grade and I really didn't like living with my stepfather. He wasn't, he wasn't mean to me or anything. I just didn't really feel—by then my brother, Eduardo, older than me, who was kind of like my hero I looked up to had moved to San Francisco and had married and he was living in San Francisco and he invited me to go out and spend the summer with him. This was in 1960. I ended up staying until about 1966.

And so those early years from seventeen to about twenty three were spent in San Francisco. And then I, then I returned home and then I, myself, went to work at Fort Lyon and it was there, while I was there, that I really started to formally get involved. I was a big fan of Cesar Chavez. I had seen what he was doing in California. Plus I was just affected by, by the music of the Beatles and the Stones and Bob Dylan and the message that they had about counterculture and revolution and social justice and so forth. And but in 1969 I went to the Crusade for Justice Youth Conference and after that I was pretty much hooked. After that it was every bit of information, every conference I could get to every meeting, every march, every demonstration, I was pretty much there. I mean, I was for lack of a better word, I was hooked. I was hooked on the movement.

I liked being around things where being talked about that I could relate to. In a small town like Las Animas there are very, very few people who really can get into that. I was—I seemed to be just kind of a little ahead and while working at—I mean, those are some really exciting times. And at first I would question myself and I wondered if perhaps this wasn't just something that was maybe a fad, that eventually I would outgrow and I think, I think I made—something happened that really changed my life then.

That we—I was—we were asking for some really reasonable things at the time, the little group that I had formed. So we went to the school board and asked them to have literature by Hispanic authors. There weren't that many at the time but "I Am Joaquin" was already in print, Stan Steiner, I think I remember a book called "La Raza" and books

by some of the South American authors who I liked but didn't really know much about Pablo De La Luna, Octavio Paz, Fuentes, guys like that.

So we went there, we asked for official recognition of Cinco de Mayo so we could have activities and we asked for the books and we asked for a least one Chicano school teacher that people could relate to. Looking back on it now, I mean, those are pretty reasonable pretty, pretty reasonable requests anyway it caused a hell of an uproar. And the school board were taken aback. They were incensed by the fact that me I could go over there and I could just start demanding stuff like this. I wasn't really demanding. In a way I was kind of demanding, in a way I was saying look at your--the composition of the student body and they need this they need this so I was, maybe in retrospect, I may have or could have been a little more less caustic maybe about my approach but I wasn't there with my hat in my hand. I knew we were entitled to these kinds of things and so I was pretty firm about what we wanted.

But they—they took it; they took it a different way. And so what happened was they started getting the word out to the community that we're going to have a special school board meeting to discuss some of the things that I had requested. And I don't think now looking back on it now I think now in the history of that town has there been—there hadn't maybe, maybe twenty, thirty people was a good size school board meeting. About three hundred people show up. Yeah, it's packed they even had to move—had to move it from a room they moved it into the auditorium where they play basketball. It was--it was electric when I got there.

But unbeknownst to me they had pretty much run out and told everybody this Communist rabble-rouser was trying to hoorah the town, was really trying to stir things up cause trouble. And so at some point the guy got up and he really mischaracterized what I was saying but made it sound like I was really a bad person. And then he said will all those who—who oppose what Mr. Lafore is asking for please rise and all three hundred of them stood up.

And here I was with my seven little merry men and women who were like my followers and I was humiliated. I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to do. And one of my friends, Janie Gonzalez said, "You've got to do something. You've got to say something," I mean, "you can't let this, can't let this pass, you have to say something." And I'm like help me, what to say and I think it was right then and there that I became who I became. I got up. I did what I seem to recall as a rather eloquent defense. Spoke, spoke very well to the point where some people actually started going, wait a minute doesn't sound like what he's really asking for and I made some friends among the standing three hundred as they came to be known.

And later some people would come to me behind other people's back kind of secretly saying, "I, I like what you're doing I just don't like the way you're going about doing it. It scares people when you do stuff like that." So I made—I started to gradually make some—make some friends. But I found that when I was out of there when I would go to Pueblo or Denver that I was very much very well liked and more the hero than I was in my own hometown so I enjoyed getting out of there and coming up to Denver and being with people who thought and acted like I did.

**Q: What year was that?**

A: This would have been 1968-69, yeah, in Las Animas, Colorado. I was—the movement was really—I was perfectly suited for the movement. I was—I had more guts than brains. I was very outspoken, I was fearless, I was brash. I was—I think in the beginning I really—I kind of liked the notoriety and I kind of liked the fact that I was stirring things up because it was really rewarding to me to see people come later.

I remember one time I led a march out of the school for Cinco de Mayo and a woman came up and slapped me and scratched me on the face and cursed me for "Leave my kids alone, you, my kids are fine. We don't need your kind of stuff." And then later that woman's son got in trouble got railroaded into something and she came to me and asked me to see if I could help out. Yeah, they were all—most of the—most of the blowback most of the criticism came from my own community. They wanted to be Americans, okay, say you're screwing it up for everybody else. We're trying to do the right thing here, learn English, we're trying to—we're trying to be good Americans and you're coming in here and you're stirring it up and you're ruining it for people. That was kind of the attitude that a lot of folks had.

And that was another thing I used to do that used to really piss a lot of people off is that I used to go to court with these guys, some of these guys that were railroaded into—and I went into court one time on the pretext that this guy was a—he couldn't speak English and so the judge said, "What are you doing here?" And I says—"You're not an attorney" I says, "No, I'm not an attorney I'm a translator for this guy. He needs—then I would do really outrageous things I would say, "Of course, you have Mirandized these young man, right? "What do you mean?" "Well, I mean, otherwise, some"—then they would—the judge would say something like "Hell, Ricardo, we weren't going to do anything to this kid. We were just going to fine him and let him go." I said, "Yeah, but I said, "These people can't afford a fifty dollar fine. "Well, then 20—I said they can't afford twenty dollars yet. "Well, Goddammit, we're going to give him a ten dollar fine and that's it. Now, like get out of here" and they would dismiss it.

So I became kind of a pain in the butt to the local government as well. And I would go regularly to the local weekly newspaper they wouldn't print any of our stuff so we even started our own newspaper. Had a newspaper called "[Spanish]". I'll give you a copy of it sometime and it was only a monthly and I was looking at one of the issues the other day, the other day and it wasn't really more about news, it was more about just creating awareness to people and we would do a lot of things that looking back on it now I said, what does this have to do with anything? Other than the fact that it was a good story to tell people but it wasn't news it was more information like a magazine kind of thing.

**Q: What kind?**

A: Well, sometimes there were—there were timely articles. I remember one kid named Alfred Salazar from Swink, Colorado had been beaten up by the police we took pictures of him put him on the front page. They used to drain the swimming pool at a town further south and after the Mexicans got to swim in it on certain days it was like Mexican Day after they drain the pool and fill it so things like that, things like that that weren't—were just things to inform. It was a way of rallying, rallying people. Who wouldn't get upset with that, right?

**Q: Who else would be...**

A: Elmer Martinez, Janie Martinez, Janie De La Torre, Rick Manzanares. You may have heard of Rick, yeah. Rick also led a march in Manzanola, Colorado which is in—Rick and I were very, very much involved. He was one of the guys that were—that we were very likeminded and we used to kid each other because neither of us were Mexican. He's even more blonde—he's blond. He was blond and he was more whiter than I was. So Rick and I were always, "Hey, I'm whiter than you" and that kind of stuff like that.

Okay, well, if somebody has to go rent a room for all of us, they'll either send Ricardo, they'll send Rick and they come back and say, "Okay, we got a room because they ain't gonna rent it to you guys." Yeah, Len Avila, yeah, ask him for why Len Avila was one of the guys that he was also—we went to high school together. So Len is the guy who led the Center Lettuce Strike back in '70. All of us marched from Pueblo to Denver that but we were on that historic strike. It was the only time I think outside of California where there was a formal, farm workers strike and that was the Center Colorado Lettuce Strike.

**Q: Was [] involved in that?**



A: She was a student. She was doing—she was part of the Vanguard Student movement which was very important at the time because students, it's unfair to generalize, but students generally don't have families they can do whatever the hell they want to. But then you get a guy like me who—my son was born in '70, my daughter in '72, you have to kind of temperate it down a little bit. I mean you can't be going to jail if you have kids and have a job but if you're a student, okay, you can get arrested. You're going to make bail anyway nobody's going to hold you overnight for civil disobedience and stuff like that.

So the student movement was very, it was very active at the time. When I eventually went to work for the Colorado Mine Council in '73 we—part of our charge was to find and recruit students for the Migrant Action Program so we used to work in conjunction with—the movement at that time was everybody would converge on stuff. You—you'd get the word that—just think what we could have done if we'd had cell phones or e-mail at the time. God, we—but we'd have to call or get a hold of at somebody's house, “Hey, we're going to have a meeting, we're going to have rally, were going to do this” and you just got to meet a lot of likeminded people.

It was truly, truly a very, very exciting time for a guy like me. We were young, we were healthy, we—the whole world was young and everything seemed possible at the time. We're going to change the world that's kind of really the—that's kind of the feeling that we had. We can do this and the more, the more you'd have small victories, the more you were encouraged, you were buoyed by these even small little victories that you had. It just made you—I was just—I was immersed I loved doing what I was doing. My mother used to tell me “You need to be careful because it's not all fun and games. And then she would tell me stories about my grandfather. He was like that, too. And she says in those days, they would kill you. People would kill you so she used to worry for me that some harm might come to me.

And one of her worst fears was realized when I was passing out my newspaper in front of a school and some rancher came by, shoved me, knocked me down and all my newspapers are all over the place. I signed a complaint against him. I went down to the Sheriff's department and the sheriff calls him up. The sheriff - they knew everybody. They knew each other. “Hey. Well, would you mind coming down?” I said, “Don't ask him if he'll mind coming down. Get his ass down here. I want to file a complaint.” So the guy walked in, he glared at me and he's like he couldn't believe that this little Mexican boy was having him come down to the sheriff's office.

Anyway, the word got around that this guy have offered \$1,000 reward to anyone who could lure me on to his property. He said, “I'll take it from there. Just make sure he's on

my property” because he was going to blow my head off. His Thirty 06. So my mom was real, real scared. I said, “Mom, it’s a bluff. I mean, nobody’s going to do it.” He’s on record of saying that. I mean, he’d be foolish to do something so, don’t worry about it but my mom used to worry about it. I wasn’t worried about it.

**Q: Would your mom even though she did worry about you, did she believe in what you were doing?**

A: She believed – it was – she was exasperated by the whole thing but she recognized that I needed to do it. But she was secretly kind of proud of what I was doing but outwardly, she was concerned and she is still worried that, “Ah, Mijo, I wish you do this. You’re going to have responsibilities and you can’t be doing this. You-” she’s typical Hispanic mother, you know? But I think deep down inside, she had that same spirit.

When she was 85, just before she died, the community of Los Animas gave her sort of a reception and she was almost not even lucid then but I have it on video because I was videotaping it. And she said something that always kind of stuck with me. She said, “[Spanish]”, “We’ve come so far and we’ve done so much and yet, we haven’t really done anything. There’s so much more that needs to be done.” Those were the translation of her words. There’s so much more that still needs to be done. So we’ve come so far and we’ve done so much and yet, there’s so much more to be done. That always kind of stuck with me.

**Q: Were there causes that she supported maybe in a more passive way or [] she honored or?**

A: She always used to encourage me to visit prisoners, people who were in prison. She thought that people who were in prison, that there were a lot of them who were sorry that they had offended and some who were there for political release and who needed support. She always encouraged me to do that. She was a big proponent of education and she was a big proponent of handicapped folks. She – my mother’s a real pistol. She started her own business with one of the patients from Fort Lyon who was ready to go out into the community but was no longer needed to be institutionalized.

And the VA was trying to place people in the community and she took this one guy and had a spare room. Of course, she was making money for it. She was being paid. This was a way of her making some extra money to support her family but at the end of her career, she had 12 patients. She built her – my stepfather built another house for the family. He made the big house, turned it into a – they called it the Bueno Residential Care Facility.

She ran, basically, a nursing home for 12 patients from the VA and was making some pretty good money.

And she would take the ones that nobody else wanted. I mean, the people who were severely, profoundly retarded or – what’s the word? I don’t like the word ‘retarded’ – who were developmentally disabled. She would take the most severely afflicted and she didn’t mind doing that and she used to kind of call them her kids. So she was also a big fan of not looking down on persons with disabilities. So that, I do remember that and the whole town remembers that. Mrs. Bueno, they still love Mrs. Bueno. She would take anybody in, you know, people who were like a little down on their luck and who needed to eat or a place to sleep at night. She would take [] in.

**Q:** []

A: Yeah, I think so. I think so. Yeah.

**Q: So how did she – you said she was an advocate of education, how did she do that?**

A: Only to the extent that she made sure that everybody had the opportunity to go to college. If you wanted to go, she said, “Well, we’ll find a way. We’ll find a way.”

**Q: That’s really significant [].**

A: Yeah. Well, she tried to channel everyone into medicine. Two of my - a sister’s an RN and two of my brothers were LPNs and on their way to being – I didn’t want anything to do that. I went to Liberal Arts College in San Francisco, got a degree in business, like a lot of good that did me, right? I just – all of my friends had degrees in sociology and – what’s a BA in Psychology going to do for you? Nothing. But as it turns out, a BA in Business Administration did nothing for me either because all the jobs I ever had were political or semi-political or I was even the Head Start Director for the City of San Francisco.

**Q: Can you talk a little bit more about that [] San Francisco?**

A: By that time, it was ’70. I had gone back. Things began to get a little weird in the movement about ’79. This is ten years now. Things were dying down, the enthusiasm was – people had decided that they wanted to work within the system and that’s how – and they wanted to work through partisan politics to get where they were going. I think the election of Jimmy Carter really was also another one of the turning points for me. I saw that we’d worked very hard for Jimmy Carter to get elected and that hadn’t really

resulted in any Hispanics getting big Cabinet or sub-Cabinet level positions. It was really messed up.

And I was Director of the Colorado Migrant Council at that time. And so in '83, I was not a big fan of Ronald Reagan and things had – since there wasn't really that much going on, I decided that this will be a good time for fulfill a dream that I always had and that was to go to college. I didn't go to college right after school. So I went to college in San Francisco and during that time, I became enamored with the struggles that were going on in Central America, El Salvador and Nicaragua. I was a big Sandinista fan, obviously. Hence, my dislike of Ronald Reagan and not only that but Ronald Regan had really kind of gutted all the programs like the Migrant Council, and Sare [ph], and Denver Opportunity and programs like that.

So I spent in the early part of the '80s really kind of going to school and working as a volunteer for what they call CISPES, the Committee and Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and they were big in San Francisco. We still advocate for people who are seeking political asylum because it was hard to get political asylum then. As you know, I had to be coming from a country that was communist. So the fact that your government in El Salvador was killing its people, it didn't matter. You still – it was really a hell of a thing to try and get political asylum.

So I volunteered for that and it was a creative period for me with my poetry. I wrote a lot of poetry in the '80s and I got involved with an Aztec dance group. And that was good for me because I learned the Aztec dance but it also was very spiritual. And I quit drinking and stuff like that. I kind of got healthy. And well, I really quit drinking because we were dancing one time and I had drunk the night before and I felt like I had to throw up on stage. We were at the University of California at Santa Cruz. I had to leave the stage and go backstage and throw up. So I said, Aztec dancing and drinking do not mix, you know? So it was kind of like odd period for me. It wasn't - my political activities were not anything like they were in '69 and the '70s. But I was still who I was. I mean, I couldn't – I did what I could do.

In '88, I came back to Colorado and I didn't have a job so a friend of mine who was a member of the GI Forum Skyline Chapter said, "We need a bartender. Would you mind being a bartender?" So I would tend a bar at the Skyline to make the few extra dollars and I began to see some of the – my brothers – I have a brother who did three tours in Vietnam and although it was kind of a – it kind of played patriotism down when you're in the movement. I mean, you want to be like rah, rah, U.S.A. all the way and stuff like that but I remember even in high school, I played football and you take your helmet off and you would, to play the national anthem. I always got kind of a chill. I don't know. I was

always kind of like naturally patriotic. And I still play it now. I wouldn't tell my other friends that I would - but I really used to get a big swell of pride when I would hear the national anthem. And so, I always was kind of like that but my experience with the GI Forum really kind of made me start hearkening after my brother doing three tours of duty in Vietnam. Didn't have to. After your first tour, you're not required to do – he did his first tour and volunteered for two more.

**Q: Which branch?**

A: He was – firstly, he was a paratrooper and then he was in the Army then he was in the Air Force but he did 30 years. He was a 30-year man. And the Vietnam experience after he came back, he was changed. He kind of mumbled, you know, sitting there and all of a sudden he's [mumbling]. What? What? And then I would say, "Francisco, what's with that? What's with the mumbling stuff?" And he wasn't crazy but he, something clearly was not right.

But anyway, going back, I hang around Denver. When I was here, I was very well known, very active in the community so it didn't take me long for people to say, "Hey, you've been gone a while but you need to get back in here doing this." And so, I started really getting involved with the Chicano Democratic Caucus. Used to do their own newsletter, too. Just did a lot of different things, a little more softer approach than back there in the day because it's just the way things were. People didn't want to stir things up during the '80s. They wanted to work within the system. I always kind of balked at that. I always thought that was foolish but I did that.

**Q: []**

A: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, right. He was prophetic, wasn't he? But in – I guess I just kind of – I worked for Rich Castro. I don't know if you knew who Rich Castro was. We were friends and I met my wife at a fundraiser for Rich Castro. And then Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell who was then in the Senate – I mean, in the House, had decided to run for the Senate and he came to Denver and asked around, "I want to meet some people who are well known and respected in the Hispanic community, people who could help me out."

So somebody suggested me. I mean, Pete Reyes. I don't know if you ever knew Pete Reyes. He was the first President of UMas and Don Sandoval who was a state Senator and owned a tavern in Westwood. And those are the three people who he said, "That's a good cross-section. If you could get those three guys, they could probably help you out in your campaign."

So we worked his campaign and he told me, he said, “Ricardo, if I can get 30% of Denver, I can win this thing,” he says, “I got the rest of rural Colorado, I got that nailed but I’m not well known in the urban setting if you can help me out that way.” We did. Well, we trounced. We won easily and he offered me a job and I went to work for him. I had different duties that were Senate duties, you know, IRS and Labor and small business but underneath all that, I was the Hispanic liaison which he really – he was a very big supporter of the Hispanic community. I don’t know if you know this or not but there’s Cesar Chavez Memorial building on 13th and Speer. Do you know that building?

**Q: Yeah.**

A: That’s – Senator Campbell introduced the bill to name that the Cesar Chavez Memorial building. Yeah. Me and the legislative director wrote the language but he signed it and then we got that and he procured about \$200,000 grant for the Museo de las Americas. He was one of the first guys I – do you remember there was a big thing about a guy named – what was his name? It was an illegal kid who was making great grades at the University of Colorado and they were trying Apodaca - Jesus Apodaca. Do you remember?

**Q: Yeah.**

A: Senator Campbell - every year, you get introduced what they call a Standalone Bill. It’s your Bill. It doesn’t even require confirmation. He used his to grant him asylum here in – I used to have to go be the in between and he’d be at the Mexican Consulate because that’s technically Mexican territory and they couldn’t go in there and grab him. So I’d meet with Jesus and we would talk there with him and his family.

So I became a big supporter of Senator Campbell. When he switched parties, that was pretty traumatic. It was pretty traumatic for me but in the end, all my liberal friends were asking me to denounce it and to quit my job and I thought about man, I said, “You know what?” I said, “I need this work. I need this job.” And so as long as the guy’s positions don’t change - so there’s an R after his name now and if he ever does something that I can’t live with – and he told me that. If I ever do something that you can’t live with, he says, “I want you to stay but if you don’t feel like that you can, I understand.” No, I stick out with him and I’ve never regretted that. That was a good move for me.

**Q:**

A: ’92.

**Q: I'd like to go back to the Vietnam Era especially when your brother joined?**

A: No, he joined. Again, for a lot of other reasons that he was 16. My mom signed for him to primarily get out of poverty. He'd never slept in a bed by himself until he was in the military. We all had to sleep together. I mean, sometimes, me, I don't even recall sleeping in my own bed either because I was with my brother, Antonio, Eduardo and Francisco would sleep in one bed and me and Antonio would sleep in another and my grandmother was over in a corner. So for him, I think he was just – there's absolutely nothing for me here. If I stay here, I'll die. I have to get out of here.

**Q: What year was that?**

A: That would have been about 1956 or '57 or '58. I was in high school so yeah, it would have probably been maybe '58, '59, I would say.

**Q: And then as Vietnam became a bigger issue, how did your awareness grow? What did you think of the war [] from Kennedy to Johnson []?**

A: At the time, I wasn't – I don't think I was astute enough to really make judgments about what was happening then during Kennedy. During Johnson, I started to, "Wait a minute, there's something going on here." I mean, even then, I wasn't really political and really astute quite yet. Remember, this will be about '64 or '65 and I – but I would remember that there would be some people who would say, 'They're lying to you on TV'. They're saying stuff that, "Today, we killed 300 of the enemy and only eight American soldiers were killed" and I remember I was in San Francisco at the time; a lot of liberal out there. That's bullshit. I mean, that's not true. That's not true. And we're getting more and more involved and the troop deployment would get bigger and bigger.

And so, it wasn't until about '68 or '69, Tet, during the Tet Offensive. By then, I was really interested in what was going on in Vietnam but it really never occurred to me to join a march or a protest until '69 which is when the time that everything exploded for me as far as the Chicano Movement and people burning their draft cards, people saying "I won't go", "Hell, no I won't go." Martin Luther King openly denouncing what was going on the war. All of a sudden, it just made sense to me. And then the fact that a lot of Chicanos were going there because they were poor or because they were patriotic and – it just began to suddenly just, 'Wow! I never thought about it this way.' People are going and being disproportionately killed and their numbers are disproportionately on their death toll and why and for what? It doesn't really – by then, I think everyone in the country, by then, knew that you can't win. You can't win Vietnam.

Johnson had as much as made a statement or McNamara had or somebody had, “We can’t win here. Let’s try to get out of here.” And even though all of this was happening, we seemed to just be escalating more and more. It seemed like Johnson was just saying, “By God, if I have to throw a million troops, we’re going to win this thing one way or the other” but it was just – I actually began to think about Vietnamese being very brave people. I said, “These guys, they’re not going to quit. They’ll fight ‘til the last person standing. I mean, we’re not going to be able to break the spirit of these people” and I was thinking that ’69 or ’70. While they were still – by then, Nixon was in and he didn’t have any idea what the hell to do either. No one did.

And so, Vietnam became something that I was very opposed to but never – and I want to make this very clear, I never faulted the men who were there fighting. Never. By then, I knew people who had been killed, I knew a good friend from Los Animas who came home with no legs and for what? Stalemate. Like Iraq now, you know. What did we win there? But I accepted there were 58,000 that died in Vietnam instead of the 4,000 in Iraq.

So every chance that I would get then, I was very opposed to the War. I would march and encourage people not to go. Don’t go. Burn your draft card. But Chicanos aren’t like that. They wouldn’t burn their draft cards. Some of them did. Ernesto burned his draft card so did Louis Jr. at the Crusade but we weren't going to Canada or Mexico, we were – there are some guys like Ernie and guys like – they went. They said - and I think a certain part of me, the part of me that I told you was patriotic, I kind of felt like that.

For all of that’s wrong with this country and everything, it’s still the best place in the world to be, best place in the world to live. I never really lost my faith in the resiliency of the American people and that this was fundamentally a good country and that yeah, we had a lot of, well all countries. All countries are like that but I always believed that we’d be okay.

And so, that was kind of the Vietnam experience. And when I joined the Mile High Chapter of the GI Forum, one of my first contributions was, people knew that I had a – I was kind of a drama or theatrical flair. I had been in shows with Su Teatro and stuff. I was a pretty good actor. I even got a pretty good review from *Denver Post* one time from one of my roles that I played at Su Teatro. And Cipriano Griego asked me, “I was at a GI Forum in New Mexico last week? And they had a challenge order. You think you could maybe coordinate something like that?” I said, “Yeah” and I took it and that first show that we did was really rough.



Looking back on it now - but I noticed something strange happening in the audience. I was the writer and I wrote and directed it and I noticed that even though some of the acts were really pretty bad that the people in the audience were very enthused and no partly because some of them - they knew the people who were on stage. So I said, "You know, next year I think I'll try and write a little better," and then gradually, the show got better. In the third year, I wrote this script about Vietnam and it was really well received and people told me there were people crying, veterans crying and stuff like that and I said maybe I got something here, you know?

So since then, that's kind of been my biggest contribution to the Mile High Chapter; is every year, I write a new play. And one of the plays I wrote was called Backs against the Wall and I wrote it in conjunction with the traveling Vietnam Wall here at Auraria, at Metro State out here and that has become kind of our stock show. It has all the music from the era and a lot of the Chicano experience during the play. So I - that's really probably what I'm known for or what people appreciate more about me is that I try and take the Vietnam experience and take it elsewhere or try to show it in its proper context or in its proper light. So -

**Q: The 1968 election..who did you back?**

A: I didn't back Nixon because I could see myself and I didn't - but I wasn't really, really that involved. My first real effort to impart some politics at that level was for George McGovern in '72. Before that, I didn't really care. I still kind of had the feeling that Democrats and Republicans are - well, Kennedy was a Democrat. He got us into Vietnam. Johnson was a Democrat. He escalated Vietnam. Nixon was a Republican. He didn't do anything about Vietnam and peace nig, Jimmy Carter coming along, I thought maybe this was a pretty good deal because McGovern got trounced. He just.

So since then I have voted in every presidential election. But I'm still not real - I liked Clinton. I did, I really did. I thought Clinton was a good president. And he had his faults like all other presidents, but I thought he was the consummate politician. Because when he needed to move to the left he did, and when he needed to move to the right he did. I mean politics is the art of compromise, I mean you know. If you're not willing to go out there and occasionally compromise, you know. You can compromise on tactics without compromising your principles; I've always believed that. I believe that today. You know my principles are intact. But occasionally I have to make - you know I have to make - I have to back up or I have to go forward or get out of the way or leave. It's part of leadership I think.

So I've voted in every election, and I've worked for somebody in every election since. But I didn't really get in 'till '72; 'till I actually went out and leafleted or planted yard signs or phone banked or gave money. Certainly not money. I mean you have to be really good for me to give money.

**Q: What did you think of Bobby Kennedy?**

A: Yeah. I was – I was a fan of Bobby Kennedy, but probably for the wrong reasons. Or maybe not the wrong reasons, but he was a big supporter of Cesar Chavez. And so Bobby Kennedy became kind of like a celebrity more than a politician. You know like the guy who was – he was young, he was good looking, he was charismatic, and he seemed to be like. And he was also – if you read or if you listen to some of his speeches, he was pretty much telling people that he was going to end the war, right? Now I don't know if he had lived and been elected I don't know that he would have had any more success than anybody else did. But those were one of the things that I was – you know of course we never got to know about that.

But again I do remember during that time I was – I hadn't really arrived politically on the scene until about '69. And even then when I did finally get into politics in '69 I was working actively for La Raza Unida Party, and I don't know if you knew about the Party. In '69 I led a demonstration at the Bend County, Los Animas-Bend County Courthouse. Mark Hogan was there campaigning for governor and I went down with my little group of radicals with signs saying Raza Unida Party and vote for Al Goulet. It was Al Goulet from Pueblo who ran on La Raza Unida Party.

And the Party, La Raza Unida Party; looking back on it I was never really going to – we couldn't even get on the ballot because you needed to have I think 10%; I forget what it was. You had to have a small percentage to be able to be on the ballot, and we never got that. So our motto was "wherever we are the majority we will control; and where we are the minority we will continuously act as a pressure group".

But you know, La Raza Unida Party, although it was a romantic idea, it was pretty flawed from the very beginning. I mean if you know anything about the history of La Raza Unida Party in South Texas, in Crystal City, Texas, Jose Angel Gutierrez, they did win. They won every municipal office in the town of Crystal City. The problem was they didn't know how to run the goddamn government. I mean they didn't know – they had no experience. So here you have a whole town where every elected official is a Chicano; not only a Chicano, a radical Chicano who supported these. And they didn't have – we don't know how to run the trains or run the electrical department or the police. We don't know anything about this stuff. So it was a flawed experiment from the beginning, and

we didn't really have the vision. And there was too much in fighting, you know, between Corky and Jose Angel. So anyway, I'm digressing from that.

But my first shot at partisan politics was with La Raza Unida Party, where I actually went out and raised money and spoke and advocated for candidates.

**Q:** So [].

A: I don't know. They told me that – Rick [Name]; what great memory I have of Rick. Do you know where Manzanola is?

**Q:** No.

A: It's just before you get to Rocky Ford. And I don't know if you – are we recording?

**Q:** Yes.

A: Oh, okay.

**Q:** []

A: No, no. I was just – I didn't know if this was really relevant, but that little town of Manzanola; if you ever saw a movie called Mr. Majestic with Charles Bronson, it was about farm workers in the area; melon pickers. Anyway, the big fight that takes place when Bronson knocks this guy out in a bar, it took place in that bar in Manzanola, Colorado. And I always used to tell when we passed by – because you have to through Manzanola to go the cinema.

So I would go see my mom about once a month when she was alive and visit my friends down in. Because like I said, the Town of Las Animas is just a little one-horse town, maybe 2000 people. But it's where the seeds of the movement were born. You know that's where they were planted; they were planted for me. I can never, ever dismiss that little town; what it taught me. I'm a product of my pain as well as my joy, you know. And a lot of pain – that standing 300 in Las Animas, Colorado; that was a baptism of fire. If I hadn't of – I could have taken the easy way out. I could have said you know what? Forget it. It's too hard; it's too hard do to this. And I was humiliated, and I don't like being humiliated you know. I felt low man; I really – to have that many people just get up and renounce you basically in your face, and tell you go back to where you came from and stuff like that. It was actually people in Las Animas who used to say go back to

where you came from. I don't know where they meant. I think they meant Mexico but I was born in Colorado.

**Q: What kept you going? I mean why didn't you?**

A: I was – I was – remember like I said I was stubborn; I was fearless; I was probably more guts than brains. I says I can't let this happen. When a moment like that happens that pretty much tells you who you are, you know. And there was always a saying in the Chicano community, in the Mexican community, [speaking Spanish]; you know don't crack up, don't crack up. And my mother would say [speaking Spanish]; you know men sob but they don't cry, you know. And so I sobbed but I didn't cry. And I said I'll live to fight another day.

So the minute that was all over you know I was consoled by my little – I had a group of about seven people who were totally committed to me and to what I was trying to accomplish. So we'd go to somebody's house, my house usually; we'd bring some beers and we would talk about the romantic parts of the revolution.

But not everything that happened in those times was happy. But that was a very dark period for me. But it made – what's that old saying? What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I came back totally determined and after that, like I said, a lot of people would come up to me secretly and say I really agree with what you're saying but I wish you would tone it down a little bit. Yeah, we do need change, but we need to tone it down a little bit.

One of the big Anglo leaders in Las Animas who later became a State Representative named Ken Kester – I don't know if you know who he was – was a friend of my mother's. And he told my mom; he said the problem is Ricardo was years before his time. We didn't know. We wouldn't listen. He said now I look back on it; now a lot of what he said was true and it has come to pass, and we just weren't ready for that. And so partially I forgave them because they weren't ready; they weren't ready for it. But it didn't help me at the time you know.

**Q: That was '68, '69?**

A: 1969, '69.

**Q: []**

A: Yeah, but not in the way that you would imagine. Like I said, there was a good friend of mine whose legs were blown off. So what you saw, you saw casualties. You saw – a small town like that is probably – you're not going to get a lot of far left rhetoric in a small town like that. That's – it's basically a farming, agricultural community. And the only – just like in Trinidad the only jobs were in the mines; in Las Animas the only job was at Fort Lyon, the Veterans Hospital. Everybody worked there including me. Everybody I knew worked there. If you didn't work there, you didn't work. Or either that or you were independently wealthy or you were a rancher or an owner. But if you were – had any kind of job at all you would work at Fort Lyon. People would even come from as far as Rocky Ford and Las Animas and Lamar to work at Fort Lyon, because it was like the magnet of employment in the Arkansas Valley.

**Q: What were []?**

A: Well we didn't talk too much about it because he didn't really like talking about it. But when I was at – when I was at Fort Lyon we used to do a group, group therapy. Remember, Fort Lyon was a psychiatric hospital, okay. So I mean you didn't have to be completely out of your head, you just had to have some problems. And a lot of the young returning Veterans were Vietnam Veterans. And because I was young the psychologists of the unit where I used to work said Ricardo, would you mind working with these Vietnam Vets; you know in group, informally you know. And just talking; used to try to get them to talk about their problems.

So I was one of the very first people that at Fort Lyon to have a Vietnam Veterans' group therapy session. And there I did hear a lot; that it was bullshit; that it wasn't worth it. But there was heated discussions during the group about some who said I went; I'd go again, you know. And I believe that we're fighting against Communism. People were – some Vets were absolutely, completely convinced we're fighting to stop the threat of Communism worldwide; because if Vietnam goes, everything goes. And then there were some who would talk about Vietnam in the way – people would say stuff like oh, that's bullshit. Do you think that when you're laying there and you're dying, do you think Nixon or do you think Johnson, any of those guys give a shit about you? They don't give a shit about you.

And there was a big perception that it was a big man's, a rich man's war and that it was a war waged by white people but fought by people of color. There was that kind of perception. Although not all of the Vets were Chicanos; a lot of the white Vets were of the opinion that it was just bullshit. It had nothing to do with race or anything; that they wished they hadn't gone and they had nightmares and they had – I don't think they had even coined the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder yet. I don't think they had that yet.

But the young Vets were different than the older Vets. They were more defiant, more openly critical of the government. And some of the older, the World War II and the Korean War Vets, they were still pretty patriotic. And in fact they used to rag on the Vietnam Vets; hippies and calling them long-hairs, because a lot of them had long hair. But you'd never find a World War II Vet with long hair, you know. But almost all the Vietnam Vets had long hair.

So that was – that also you know; that also kind of got me to thinking about the evils of Vietnam too. But that was – most of that I heard during the group therapy sessions. And then what I was able to glean you know from the times that the government wasn't lying to us on TV. I look back on it now and I think to myself, they lied to us every night. Wouldn't you agree? Every time they told us what the kill ratio was, I understand now that they must have been lying every time. Three hundred of the enemy died today; only 17 US soldiers died today. Well that makes you feel pretty good; all right. You know a few people died but we're really kicking ass over there in Vietnam; we're going to win this thing, you know. I wasn't – in the early days of the Vietnam War I wasn't politically astute enough to really realize what was going on.

**Q: So your brother went off to war, what did your mom say?**

A: She used to pray a lot, you know; which is – we're Catholics you know, we prayed a lot. I used to get in trouble, with my grandmother and my mom, because I would say Lord, thank you. She would say thank you for all that we've got and I would tell my mother, what do we got? We ain't got nothing! And ahh, she would smack me up alongside the head. But she never really, she never really talked about it. For some reason or another I never thought about the fact that he might be in harm's way or something. My brother seemed invincible to me.

**Q: Did he write letter?**

A: Yeah, but they were very brief, short letters.

**Q: What was the role of []?**

A: Well we're very Catholic you know. Religion you know – I'm Catholic now and I go – I still go to church. But there for a long time I quit going to church. I thought it was hypocritical. I – when I was in Las Animas we – I did – I put together a conference; this is '69 or '70, I believe it was '70. And I invited Corky, Al Goulet, Freddy Gurnados, Brian Sanchez. Freddy who was one of the – Save the Border, who died. Marty Serna. Some of the really – Ricardo Falcone; some of the really heavy people from the

[speaking Spanish] to come down. Corky was invited too, but he was defending himself against charges on Los Angeles and he couldn't be there. And Larlo Del Gato; you know who Lalo Del Gato was, he was invited.

I had to fight tooth and nail with this Catholic Church for three months before they would actually let me use the hall for this conference. I had to promise them this; I had to promise them that. And I would get in really some pretty good arguments with the priest about – you know I would say things that were offensive to the priest. I would say things like if Jesus was here today he'd be with me. I'd say Jesus would be fighting for these people. And he would go; he would go into your church Father, and he would clean out the temple like he did. And I would – just so stupid for me to tell this to a priest. But like I told you, I was crazy. I didn't always think. I said he would just wipe and tell you, help these people, and this is what you do, and you stop worrying about collections on Sunday and stop worrying about this; be where I want you to be. He would want you to be with me Father. And he would – he didn't like me very much you know. He would pretend like he was arguing but he really didn't like what I was doing. And he fought me every way, tooth and nail, for the use of this hall.

And eventually – I learned another interesting lesson there too. Of all the people that were there; all of them were radical, really radical. Except Lalo Del Gato, and he was a poet. And when I finally had to make my final presentation to the church council, they said everyone on this list is acceptable to us, even Corky; except for Lalo Del Gato. And I thought to myself, of all the people on this list Lalo is the most like you. He's the most Catholic; he's the most spiritual, non-violent person. And I said to myself it's because he's a poet. They're afraid of a poet. I learned a valuable lesson then too: people are afraid of poets because poets can make change. Poets can incite people; poets can inspire people. There's some great thinker in history I think once said "ultimately there are no revolutions without poets". Who said that? Somebody said that. Anyway I always remember that and I thought about that too.

But no; during that time I was very anti-religion. I came back to religion after my mother died and my wife – my wife who I'm presently married to – was very Catholic and she encouraged me to go. So I go; I go now because I made a promise to go. But I wonder sometimes; sometimes my mind wanders in church, which you shouldn't. Should be – but it does, it does; it wanders sometimes. And then I catch myself and I'll say why am I here if I'm not going to listen, you know? But I listen to the sermon and I listen to hear – I'm always real interested in the priest's sermon and what he's going to talk about. And that kind of tells me whether or not it was worth going based on what he says. Because everything else is the same. The reading; I like to listen to the readings too, and just it makes me think about things.

**Q: You told me you were a Protestant.**

A: Think so? At heart you think that's what I am? Yeah. Well I may be. But I really – the rituals and stuff like that, I can do them without even thinking. I know all the prayers, I know when to get, I know when to kneel. I'm really only interested in the sermon the priest is going to make that day.

**Q: Were there any priests during the years of the movement who you remember as being more progressive?**

A: Two: Father Jose Lara, who was very, very progressive. In fact I was there the night that the police arrested him. The Communist Party; there is a Communist Party in Colorado. I think it's still legal to have one. There were some who were I guess members of the Party and they were meeting at the basement of Our Lady of Guadalupe church. And somebody had called in like a bomb threat or something that these people were dangerous radicals and they had dynamite and stuff like that. And they arrested Father Lara and they broke his arm. And it's the first time I'd ever heard a priest curse. I thought it was so liberating. He really let them have it you know; he cursed them out.

And the other guy was Craig Hart; Father Craig Hart, another Jesuit who was along with us on the marches, farmworker marches. I liked Craig Hart a lot and he was very, very progressive; very, very liberal. Liberation theology I guess is what they called it then. And of course I liked Cardinal Ernesto Cardenal. I didn't know him but he was the Cardinal in Nicaragua that was scolded by the Pope for diverting a little bit from Catholic doctrine and being more like siding with the people of El Salvador and the Sandinistas and stuff like that. But I knew two of them; I didn't know the other one.

But Father Lara is now just Jose Lara. He got married, lost the calling, and he's not well. But I loved Father Lara; he was a good man. You know; you've heard of Jose Lara, right?

**Q: Oh yeah. []**

A: Oh, he'd be great. I understand he's not well. I need to go see him. Well he's 80; he's in his 80s.

**Q: Anything else?**

A: Sure, fine. No, that's good. Thank you.



