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Oral History of Houston Project
Mexican-American History – Migrant Rights

Interviewee: Maria Jimenez

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Abstract:
Maria Jimenez details her family's history of crossing the Mexican and United States border both legally and illegally for job opportunities, and then her own migration in 1958. She begins with her life as a school-aged child in Houston, with memories of segregation from whites, Mexican discrimination, and oppression against all aspects of Mexican culture, especially language. Maria recalls interactions with white classmates and the way they treated her or made prejudiced comments, and the way her family cultivated her sense of justice, independence, and equality, and describes her traditional upbringing. At the University of Houston, Maria became involved with political organizations and the Chicano Movement, mostly the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and advocated for equal treatment of Mexican Americans inside the University and in their respective communities. Within the structure of MAYO, Maria clashed with her peers and their opinions on feminism and Chicano identity. These debates and her experience working with the Lettuce Boycotts shaped Maria's outlook on stratification and injustice. After graduation, Maria traveled to Mexico and experienced for the first time how it felt to be part of a society's dominant culture and prepared herself for work with multi-lingual, multi-cultural organizations once she returned to the United States. Maria used her political knowledge to help immigrants gain citizenship after in 1996, legislation passed that stripped thousands of immigrants of their temporary resident status. Maria organized ARCA, the Association for Residency and Citizenship of America and expanded it nationwide. She stresses the importance of inclusion across ethnic backgrounds and cultural sensitivity in order to maintain involvement. Maria explains ARCAs activism and how they passed legislation that resulted in community awareness about the electoral system. Maria discusses recent work with the Ezekiel Hernandez case and how she has shone light on Border Patrol abuses, and the formation of CARECEN, the Central American Resource Center and touches on her personal experiences and thoughts on illegal immigration.

NG: This is Natalie Garza. I am interviewing Maria Jimenez on July 14, 2010 at Stanaker Library. Can you please begin by giving me your full name?

MJ: My full name is Maria De Los Angeles Jimenez Flores.

NG: When were you born?

MJ: I was born on August 2, 1950 in Castanos, Coahuilain Mexico.

NG: Okay. How long did you live there?

MJ: I lived in Castanos I think for about until my third or fourth birthday and then we moved to a town that is nearby called Frontera, Coahuila and I believe but I'm not certain that I lived there about two or three years before my father, Raul Jimenez Gomez had migrated to the United States in 1956. So then my mother, Elva Jimenez, Elva Flores Jimenez she took myself and my three older brothers and sisters, well my two, actually we were three, I was the oldest and then my brother Raul Enrique and my sister Elva, took us to Monterey and basically did the paperwork and we crossed into the United States, as my mother liked to remind us every year on May 9, 1957.

NG: Why do you say she liked to remind you every year?

MJ: For her it was important so every year, she died eight years ago but every year on May 9th, that's why I remember the date otherwise I was a child I don't think I would remember, she would remind us that on May 9th we crossed into the United States.

NG: So you said she filled out the papers so the…you had documents when you crossed?

MJ: Yeah my father, my father's family had a long history of migration. My grandfather, his father, Jaime Jimenez had and his brothers crossed constantly into the United States leaving a family in Mexico. My grandfather crossed in 1912 and at that time you paid a tax at the bridge and they extended a legal document and so like in his lifetime he came back and forth between the United States and Mexico for a period of something like twenty five years. He worked in about nineteen different states of the United States, he worked on the railroad. He always entered legally. So my father, although some of his friends and even his older brother would cross in without documents, felt that he didn't want to do that. He wanted to cross over legally so he crossed over legally. But this was 1957, it was fairly easy and he was a skilled workman. He retired as a machinist because at the time in Casanos we were a series of little towns around _____ where _____ _____ was the, at the time the largest steel plant in all of Latin America. So my father and all of his friends were really industrial workers. So he was a machinist and so it was fairly easy for someone with skills to get their paperwork done. He came in legally and it was very easy for Mexican families to cross over legally and I remember, I remember as a child going to Monterrey with my mother and my two younger brothers, my brother and my sisters staying with a great aunt in Monterrey and getting all the paperwork in less than six months, our paperwork was done. So we crossed over legally.

NG: Where was your father working in the United States?

MJ: He, most of the industrial workers at that time, including my father, would migrate to Chicago because that's where the tradition of migration of industrial workers

was. My grandfather, his father also had migrated to Chicago it was one of his favorite areas of migration. He first migrated to Chicago but there was a farmer he had in ____ _____ who somehow ended up in Houston I don't know how and so this particular foreman wrote to my father and said, "Come over here it's an industrial city." Houston wasn't very well known among industrial workers, San Antonio was but people avoided it as my father thought because San Antonio because it paid very low wages and the discrimination in Texas so the industrial workers referred to Chicago. When this foreman, this foreman, his previous foreman he had wrote to him that there was a city called Houston which was also large industrial city and there were jobs here, my father then decided to come back to Houston because he just didn't like the cold in Chicago, it was too far away from Mexico so that Houston was all what he wanted and then, when we came, we came straight to live in the east end of Houston, in Magnolia basically.

NG: What was the neighborhood of Magnolia like at that time?

MJ: Well it, the most, the more populated areas of Mexican origin that I remember as a child were really the Second Ward and then the other side of 75th Street including DeSavala Elementary School and so forth. We wound up in a little house on Avenue I, close to Franklin Elementary School and I think my father chose it because it was close to the elementary school. At that time it was, we were few Mexicanos in that area that I remember. Franklin Elementary actually was the majority, unlike DeSavala which was, had a large presence of Mexican children, Franklin we were in the minority. My father says that he chose it because he wanted us, he wanted to be sure that we learned English. But at the same time in our household my parents had a very strict policy that we could

only speak Spanish at home because they felt that the house was the only place that was going to reinforce our Spanish and everything else outside of the house was going to reinforce English. But they did want us… he chose it, according to him, so that we would learn English. But of course at that time when I started at Franklin Elementary as a child, at that time it was forbidden for anyone to speak Spanish at school. We could be expelled and I remember as a child starting the first grade at Franklin where I couldn't even ask for water or where is the restroom, I remember not being able to understand what the teacher explained because nobody was, could speak Spanish. I did luck out and have a Spanish, I don't know what nationality she was but she was a Spanish surnamed teacher but she almost, it was like, I remember only one time where she broke and told me because she saw that I could not understand. Of course that was only the first semester from then on they were Anglo teachers so there was no choice. But I also can remember as a child some of fellow students, I remember asking somebody once, something in Spanish, somebody else was a Latino and on the playground and they started saying, "We're going to turn you in to the principal, blah, blah, blah." So it was a very sort of repressive and it was with a, there were, I mean the access to anything that was Mexicano was very limited. I remember we could only get one brand of tortillas and that was corn tortillas and they were terrible I remember because we put them on the fire and they would quickly turn into ash. There were two that I remember there were two theaters that would show Spanish speaking movies on Preston and Congress. I think one of them was called Ritz and the other Almeda and my parents would take us on Sundays. There was only one, well two churches where Mexicanos could attend that was Guadalupe church

and Immaculate Heart of Mary but Immaculate Conception was all Anglo and anything from Canal to Harrisburg, all of this was Anglo. As a matter of fact you couldn't buy, like I live on Sherman Street now, but at that time you couldn't buy or rent anything, I'm sure, if you were Mexicano. Segregation was very much a part of my growing up. Hidalgo Park on Avenue R and K, that was called "the Mexican park" and as a child that was the only park we could play in because Mason Park, who was a mile and a half away, it was forbidden for us to play there only the Anglo children could play there. I think only on one day we could go and swim in the pool. There was only one day designated a few hours. So it was a highly segregated. There was not very much access to anything that was Latino and there was a sense, as a child I remember growing up feeling confused and sometimes not understanding why we couldn't speak Spanish or why, even though we weren't familiar with the white bread at the time, in Mexico now it is common but it was rare then, the white bread and the bologna sandwiches. But that's what I had to take to school because that was the norm. I mean if we took a taco we were ridiculed and so forth. So it was like growing up in two very different worlds and having to sort of deal with those differences. That's kind of what I remember, the very highly segregated and very, very… it was very difficult. Like I said there were no Spanish, there was only one Spanish speaking radio station which is the Morales radio station but there was no television. It was very difficult to get any Mexican products. I mean it was just very, very different and it was a predominantly Anglo neighborhood that we came to. It was a working class neighborhood, I think, but it was still predominantly Anglo at the time.

NG: How far away was Hidalgo Park was it further away than Mason?

MJ: No it's, I guess it would be from where we lived on Avenue I it was probably about maybe a little closer. But it didn't have very much. Later when we had Latino representatives that were elected to city council they took care to put swings and better the park but before they almost didn't have anything that is what I remember as a child in terms of swings or if they broke they remained broken for a long time whereas Mason Park was well taken care of. It wasn't until about 1994 that the Mexican Consulate decided to bring in a statute of Miguel Hidalgo to the park and that's when everybody found out that it wasn't named Hidalgo Park, it had a gringo name. But because it was "the Mexican park" the Mexican community appropriated and always called it Hidalgo and it wasn't officially Hidalgo until 1994 when it was discovered that it wasn't its official name. So a statute was put in the park and actually former President Vicente Fox was governor of _____ at the time and had been Grand Marshall of Diez y Ceis de Septembre Parade came into the inauguration of the statute the Mexican Consulate brought him in. But, so it was very different. It was a very different society. And it continued to be different because even when I went to Edison, Edison when I started middle school again it was predominantly Anglo but changing and some of my Anglo classmates I think were beginning, we were beginning to see flights to places outside of Houston. They were moving to… I remember one to LaGrange. I remember another one moved to Pearland. I mean they were going outside of the inner city. But by the ninth grade as I remember we were the majority Latino at Edison. But when I graduated and went to Milby we were again in the minority. We were I guess 15% of the student body

at Milby at the time. We were Latino; the majority were Anglo. So it was highly segregated society.

NG: Were there social interactions with your classmates that were white?

MJ: Yeah because they were predominantly I remember having a lot of friends who were both in elementary school and… yeah in middle school and high school who were white. In Franklin I remember having a very close relationship with one young woman, Sharon Bradshaw was her name. I never know what happened because she was the one who moved to Pearland; but she lived on Sherman and I remember once we had, and I was very good friends with the Chinese, because we had a few Chinese because some of the stores were owned by Chinese. So we had a few Chinese with in the schools because they lived here. Gordon Quan actually, who later became City Counsel person and has a big immigration law firm lived in the area. I didn't find out about him until I started working on immigration issues but I went, I actually went to school with some of his sisters, his younger sisters. Gordon told me his father had a store on 78th and 75th somewhere along there. So anyway so I also got to inter-relate with Chinese. African Americans, we didn't. I only remember one young woman in elementary who I could, her characteristics were African American but she kept saying she was Italian. She was adopted in Italy. So I don't know. Anyway with Sharon I remember we had to do homework and after school she said, we can do it at her house. So we went to her house and were working on a typewriter in her kitchen and she lived with her grandmother and her mother and her little brother. So the grandmother basically tells the little brother as we were working, the little brother. She says, "No you don't go outside and play with

those Mexican little boys." I heard her say that. So later I said, "Why did your grandmother… I'm Mexican and I was there?" She says, "Well I told her you were French." So there was, there was a lot of, there was interaction but again there was a sort of, everybody knew there was a great deal of difference in terms of how society ridiculed you and treated you or even how careful we were with each other in terms of our relationships.

NG: Where was your dad working, here in Houston?

MJ: He always worked in machine shops and I think he worked at a Tex Tool Machine Company which is here on Longdale, still here on Longdale, and then he moved on to Hugh Text, that disappeared and… but when it disappeared the owner gave the workers stock. My father is actually a stock owner. Sometimes when things got tough he would do work like at the ship yards. But because he was highly skilled we actually had a very comfortable household in terms of economic security. Yeah because I remember when I was at I think the University of Houston which was between 1969 and 1974, my father made more money than many of my professors because it was at the times when the industrial manufacturing and industrial worker was the heyday. So even though he was active in his union in Mexico here he was basically was never unionized, I think only for a very short period somewhere where he worked, but otherwise he made very good money. He worked a great deal though. I remember he worked nights for maybe eleven, twelve years, shifts with nights and that and so my mother would try to respect that you know we wouldn't make noise and children and so I remember we were never too religious but she started going to church to get us out of the house. We would go to

Immaculate Heart of Mary and she would take us to there was a movie theater that opened on Navigation but it was English speaking. She would take us to the matinee there, things like this to keep us out of the house so he could sleep on weekends, during school, well we were in school.

So that's what he worked. He was a machinist. Eventually he saved money, bought machines and opened up his own shop there at the house that is the advantage of having no zoning in this area that his house and then he finally bought an actual, you know, shop on Avenue L and when he retired he handed that over to my younger brother. We have two other, a sister and a brother who were born in the United States and so, so basically he's always, and he still works. He is still alive. He is 80… he will be 81 in August and he still works. He is very active and healthy and he goes to the machine shop every day.

NG: Did your mom ever have to work outside the home?

MJ: No, ours was a very traditional house hold. You know he was the boss, he was the breadwinner. My mother would absolutely, you know, everything that was done in the household she had to consult with him, well in theory. Because, I always… I'm often asked how I got active and I tell them partially it was my father. He was a union activist in Mexico in Suarez, back as far as I can remember. When we lived in Mexico he was always involved in his union work and my grandfather on my mother's side was a teacher and he was a social activist, you know, pioneer in adult education and in town and theater and all sorts of but he was always the social justice activist. But from my mother, from my mother, what I learned is how to deal with absolute power because my father was that absolute power in the household and she would figure out how to organize things and get

things done. So we were very traditional. It was a very traditional role. My father was… he is an interesting character because, for instance, he never liked corporal punishment. My mother would hit us with her hand or so when we misbehaved but he never touched us. He didn't think that was an appropriate way of raising children. When we were very young he would say we were going to go to college and he started saving and had an insurance policies for all of us to go to college. I remember growing up his buddies would say, "Why are you insisting that the girls go to college? They are going to grow up and get married?" That is what traditionally my generation did as women. He would say, "No, no, no, no… they are going to college too, because if they ever get a bad husband they can divorce him and get out on their own." He didn't see it for our own selves, but at least he had… so he stuck to his plan. In that sense we were very limited because he was very frugal and part of the discussion always at home between my mother and him was his frugality. He was always this saver, saver… So we had minimal things always at home. But we never lacked anything in terms of food, and education was a priority. Like when I decided to get involved in high school in the debate team, you know, spending money so that I could go to a contest, you know, outside of the state was no problem for him. For all of us education, educating us was his goal and he stuck to it. He basically, all of us have degrees except for… yeah all of have degrees except one of my sisters. She went to study in Mexico, art and I don't think she finished but she did go three or four years and my younger brother didn't go to college because my father, when he graduated, basically got him involved in his business and then turned over the business to him. So basically it was a very traditional household. He would refuse any invitations

from anybody for weddings or whatever, where he couldn't take the children. So it was… and so it was, but he also had quirks, so when carpets came in style he refused to let us have a carpet in the house because he would say that workers could not, like him, who come home covered in oil, shouldn't have carpet so there were no carpets. He refused us to go to any restaurant where a worker serves him. He said he can't understand how a worker could serve him. So he is a big fan of McDonalds where nobody serves him. So he had quirks like that that were part of our growing up and our view of the world. My mother was always, had a very strong grandma, her mother was a very strong woman figure who, because of my grandfather who was a teacher and sometimes wouldn't get paid by the government in Mexico or would give us money to set up his own money for adult education and whatever. My grandmother always had business outside. She was a very strong woman figure so my mother always, always emphasized that the only role of women was not just to be at home and have children, that women could do other things. So she herself I think was able to imprint in my mind and also at an early age that this wasn't… that household work wasn't romantic like we saw on the movies of the 50s which is what we got culturally, that it was hard work. That having children was hard work and that it wasn't the only option that we had as women. So, even though it was very traditional, there were things within the house that allowed us to view another type of world. I think the other thing was my, because my father had been a union activist, we were always, and he liked politics, we were always glued to the TV and we would watch news and we would comment about current events and so forth. To the degree that I knew by the time I was 13 years old I already knew I was going to study political science

because I wanted to do away with injustice. But that was because of the early formation, I think, in the home. I think a lot of it has to do too with my father's stories as a child and of course he belonged to, and he was in rural Mexico, and my mother, who her father was a teacher. So she had a more secure household. My father's, besides my grandfather migrating my father after, during the great depression with the repatriation my grandfather was sent back to Mexico and that period of instability of the great depression in rural communities in Mexico, my father talks a lot, has a lot of stories about him migrating from town to town about being hungry all the time, about seeing people, children dead because they couldn't find anything to eat and he has a lot of stories about how they would manage to steal food or manage to pick up food in the garbage. So all of these stories, plus the situation at home from a very early age I knew that there were inequalities. I knew that there was discrimination and I knew there was suffering and that certain people bore and some people didn't because of my own experience. I would go to my mother's house and everything was secured and ordered and there was no problem but then my father's family there were, in that sense there were always problems. My grandparents on his side always had poorer homes and had a different lifestyle then my mother's, so I always saw this unequal, this inequality and then my father's stories kind of and my own experience here. I very early understood that there were inequalities and that it's through the political system that we have to change it and I didn't have all that _____ but I knew I had to study political science because I wanted to end injustices, that was my deal.

NG: You mentioned that he had no problem paying for you to travel for debate. Aside from, from investing in your education he didn't have a problem with you traveling as a woman?

MJ: Oh yes definitely he had problems but like every… and we did a lot of debates from Milby. The debate coach, Mr. Thompson initiated and I think he passed away last year or the year before. But he took us to like maybe twenty debates a year and even here in Houston. When we were here in Houston my father would go all the way to the school and even though Mr. Thompson and there would be, you know, mother volunteers and parent volunteers that would take the team back and forth because we were several, my father would go and wait for us to get out of the tournament, usually 10:00 or 11:00 at night and then he would follow us to the school or pick me up and a friend of mine who lived in the neighborhood, Anglo also, Barbara Odom lived in this neighborhood, would pick us up and bring us, every single debate tournament. He would let us, he would let me travel because he trusted the teacher; he trusted that they would take care of me. But like in that sense it was very traditional. You know fifteen years old, I don't even know how to ride a bicycle because he insisted that women should not get on bicycles and of course now he denies it because my younger sisters got their bicycles but when I was growing up no bicycles, I couldn't wear make up until I was fifteen. I didn't want a Quinceañera party but they insisted I have a Quinceñeara party. I wanted to travel but I was their first daughter. So whatever they believed should be, should be. I couldn't date. My friends who were Latino began going out and having boyfriends when they were in middle school I remember. In high school many of them married as soon as they

graduated. I couldn't have a boyfriend it just was not in; unless I was going to marry the guy I could not but since I was going to study that was just totally out. I mean it was that type of household. There was a definitely autocratic, very traditional Mexican and particularly, the only way I could go out was to couch it in educational terms. But guessing that happened in my household was we, my parents kept very close ties to the family in Mexico so because we were legal it facilitated us we would always go back in December, we would spend most of our vacation summers with my mother's family in Mexico and we would, anytime there was a marriage or a funeral we would go back to Mexico and so that, the times we were in Mexico provided a freedom that I wouldn't know if I were living just here because there were a lot of cousins and my mother's younger sisters which… one of them is only two years older than I am, were always going up and again it was a very traditional family. I mean you know it's just you didn't do certain things but there were a lot of young women that I could go out with, and back and forth, and sometimes my grandparents were also unusual on my mother's side. Because, and the older grandchildren benefited from their energy at the time but they would also arrange excursions to Mexico City so they would take eleven, twelve grandchildren and my grandfather would take us to see Mexico City and Michoacán and other places in Mexico. So I got early, those periods of summer and the periods in December provided us a space where my father wasn't the controlling factor in the home and provided a freedom that I would not have here in the United States. Also, my grandfather was influential because he was a teacher he introduced me to poetry and classical music and he even gave me a violin. For a while I played violin and something

that I couldn't do here at home because my father is an industrial worker and did not have time, he spent little time at home, but he wasn't inclined to listen to classical music and this type of, or poetry or things like this but my grandfather did and the excursions that they organized, that my grandfather organized. Now I think about my cousins and I think, my God that was great because they would take eleven of us in the bus and I remember we were…I remember we were my _____ taking about my grandmother because we couldn't get up in the morning and she would say, "Hey if you want to sleep you should stay home you are here on vacation get up at 7:00" and she would have us all going. But we would see museums and Vejasates and all of this, those things we would learn by going on those excursions. So that is where we had the freedom but I could not and even at the University of Houston as a student, I could not be like the other women. I mean I was always a very tightly held situation. You know I had to come home early and you know it was just not allowed. Because, again, the issue was that if I wasn't going to marry the guy I shouldn't have a guy, period. That was just the norm.

NG: Were your parents educated?

MJ: No… well my father made it up until the… I think the seventh grade or eighth grade. Either was in the seventh or eighth grade but my mother had scarlet fever when she was in the fourth grade and so she never returned, she just took care of her brothers and sisters. But even though her father was a principal even she just never returned to school. So they weren't… and for instance they refused to help us on our homework. Partially because it was in English but partially because I felt they were limited in their knowledge, so who needed to educate us were our teachers. But they, like when I was ten

years old my father bought the World Book Encyclopedia and I mean very few people in the neighborhood did that and so to this day he buys the yearbook and he wonders what he… the other day he was saying, "What should I do with this yearbook? Nobody reads these anymore." I say, "No because everybody has a computer." But, so yeah so the issue of education was very important to them.

NG: Did you go to the university right after high school?

MJ: Yeah and there I had the possibilities of going to the University of Texas but my father wouldn't let me go. As I said there were certain things where he wouldn't but if I went to the University of Houston, he paid everything. I never had a loan, I never had financial aid. He just… I did have jobs, you know, work study jobs of a few hours in the last few years at the University but I never… he paid everything.

NG: Did you work while you were in high school at all?

MJ: No.

NG: No?

MJ: No. My father believed that if we worked we nos ibamos enamorar con el dinero, we would love money and we would abandon the idea of going to school.

NG: In going to the University and even applying to it did you receive encouragement from school or help from your counselors?

MJ: No, we were the generation that was told we shouldn't. Like I wanted to study political science and I remember my counselor said, "No you shouldn't study, that's not for you, you should study sociology." I guess because they thought, you know, there was no future for a Latino in politics or something. But I also had gotten, I had gotten I don't

know they do a mock government in Austin with high schoolers and I was elected to go and I couldn't go because I wasn't a U.S. citizen. Even in debate, there were certain debates, certain debates that we had where the judges basically… my partner was an Anglo, Brenda Culverhouse and sometimes Barbara Odom, it would rotate between the two and so… Brenda and I won the state championship in 1969 in debate. But there were many times where we lost a debate and Mr. Thompson who was our teacher would say "Well, why did they lose?" Because he wanted the critique he would go and talk to the judges and there were a couple of times that the judge would said, "I don't know how that Mexican girl…" You know, so we lost a couple of debates because some judge was prejudiced I remember that. And many scholarships I could not apply when I was graduating because of, because I wasn't a citizen or because outright it just wasn't given to Mexicanos at the time. The irony was there was one scholarship that was put together by LOMAS which was the student organization at U of H, they didn't give me a scholarship either, because they thought that my grades were so good and here I was about to start debate and somebody else would give me a scholarship so they didn't give me a scholarship so I only got one which was from Sembradores de Amistad the organization still exists and still gives out scholarships but that was the only one. I think they gave me a $500 scholarship.

NG: Is that like a mutual aid organization?

MJ: I guess it is Sembradoes de Amistad, not, it is some sort of organization of like, well somewhat like a mutual society but I think it's a little different but it still, it's still there.

NG: Were there many Mexicanos at U of H when you were a student there?

MJ: The population of the student body was 29,000 and we were only 400. We hung around in a special little section in the Cougar Den, there was a Cougar… it is no longer exists there in the student and that's basically there we built social life in the little part of the… But it was the… while I was in high school it was the time that you know the great boycott and the boycott in the Rio Grande Valley and the Rio Grande Valley Strike of 1965, and so forth, so there were social movements. By the time I got to the University, it was like the Chicano movement and the woman's movement and the anti-war movement there was a lot of… I first joined the Young Democrats because I didn't want to join the Latino organization, LOMAS, because I thought it was a social. I didn't want to waste my time at parties and things and I wanted, I really wanted to be involved in politics. With the Young Democrats I met one of my best friends _____ who introduced me to the Lettuce Boycott. Actually the person I talked to, Bill Chandler was the organizer who came in from Delano, who came in to organize the lettuce boycott here in Houston. I started working with the young democrats I started working with the Lettuce Boycott. Then LOMAS decided, the more people were radicalized and decided to turn itself into MAYO, the Mexican American Youth Organization, a militant organization, of the Chicano movement so I joined MAYO because then I saw, "Yeah." It had more of a purpose. So I worked on both the Lettuce Boycott and MAYO and I left the Young Democrats, I no longer participated in that.

NG: I want to talk about I guess terminology and identity briefly. You said that when you entered the University, that more like the feminist movement, Chicano movement were going on. Did you identify Chicano and do you identify as Chicano?

MJ: Well I had, because of all the worlds I lived in, I lived in multiple worlds and in multiple worlds I had to deal with multiple identities. I felt comfortable in the Chicano identity and saying I was a Chicana at the time because I was very conscious that I was the product of two different worlds. I mean particularly in our age group it was very stark, separate, But I never left my Mexicano identity because of my home life and how we returned to Mexico, continued to return to Mexico. I think very young because of the comments of my father's friends and so forth, and my mother's comments of the difficulty of home lives, I think I had seen the archives of it and here, *Papel Chicano* was the newspaper I wrote my very first article as a feminist in which I debunk the myths of that women and their role in the home and so forth. I think I was eighteen or nineteen years old and I wrote the article and it got published by *Papel Chicano* and I was forever criticized by the fellow Chicano activists because I was breaking la familia and stuff like that. And because I had been Mexican and had been allowed to particularly, my grandfather go through his books and he had a lot of books on the revolution. I had seen revolutionary women and armed revolutionary, and so when Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz was very aware because of those instances and my grandfather and the history of women, my answer to my fellow Chicano's was, "Well I would rattle off the history." Sor Juana Inez de la Crus, las Sabellitas, the Mexican revolution and this that and I would rattle off a bunch of the women and their role in Mexican history and I would say, "That's my

history. The history of Mexico is the history of the fight of women for equality. So that's my history I don't know what history you're talking about." So that would shut them up right away but it was a fight. So I was very, I guess the situation of equality was a very, I was conscious of it very, very young and I remember in Mexico, I mean something as simple as… I must have maybe been three or four years old, but I remember that my grandfather's house in my father's side, their floor was just cement and my mother's parent's home was made of mosaic, colored with flowers and so forth. I was very conscious of the inequalities and so the women showed us also inequalities. I was conscious of economic stratification and also gender stratification and for me it was, at the university I had a feminist position as I said very early and I could identify as a Chicana but I could not lose my Mexican identity. I often now when people ask me, "Well how do you identify yourself?" I say, "I'm a Mexicana, I'm a Chicana but I am also a Gringa." They say, "Why are you a Gringa?" I say, "Well because I'm a U.S. Citizen and I realize that some of the attitudes I hold are really American." I mean the culturally American attitudes that I can't find in Mexico but I can find them in the general American folklore or popular culture. One of them, my people, one of them I can think of is the issue of tolerance. This society is one that is very conscious of racism and discussing its role. Even though there are streaks of the American experience of intolerance it is also one that talks about tolerance from the early issue of religious tolerance and so forth. When I go to Mexico it is a monolithic culture and there you don't… I mean you don't talk… tolerance is not a Mexican concept, I think, in Mexican

culture. So now I say it's all three but at the time I did join the Chicano movement I would call myself a Chicana but I would need to…

End Tape 1 Side A

MJ: … and I think the other thing that was different about me at that time too is at the age of eighteen years old I became an atheist and not too many people are now or were then. I never talk about my lack of religious belief because of the work that I do in the community it scares people and so I respect people's beliefs and so I think that a religious belief is a personal belief and I work with many pastors and many Catholics and so forth and I never talk about my own disbelief. Only if I get to know people fairly well. I mean in my house they know that I am a disbeliever. I actually worked in the CYO here at Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Catholic Youth Organization and that introduced me to the Rio Grande strike we collected things through the church that went to the strikers in the valley in 1965 but as I started to teach, as I said I indoctrinated about five generations of Catholics but in Immaculate Heart but as I prepared more and more in terms of theology, I would take advanced theology classes so I could teach my classes better, I started to understand that it was a historical phenomenon and not a divine phenomenon and clearly I think by my eighteenth birthday I just did not believe in God anymore and still don't. I remember a graduate student who called me and I guess about three or four years ago from the University of Texas who was doing a thesis on the spiritual beliefs of the Chicanos in the Chicano movement and I said, "Well with me my spirituality has always been my belief is that human history moves towards progress and that it is that experiential material experience that has moved humanity toward the creation of more

just worlds. And so part of my "rush" to create a more just world today is that I find it intolerable to think that people in some places of the world are dying of hunger or people in this country can't develop to their full potential because of discrimination or exclusion. For me it is a creation of heaven here now; that perfect society. I have no expectation that it will be one later. Well anyway my father thought that the University of Houston made me an atheist so he sent my younger sisters to St. Thomas. Now he regrets because she is a religious zealot in the Catholic Church but…

NG: When did you become a citizen?

MJ: Well because of my high school experience that I couldn't get, you know couldn't get scholarships and I actually, even though I won the right to go to the mock government in Austin I was denied the eventual trip because I wasn't a citizen. My crazy debate coach, Mr. Thompson whose father and he had been very active in the Ku Klux Klan and he himself was a contradictory man and actually he opened up debate to African Americans. He was the first one to hold a tournament for African American schools and white schools debated together, but he was a contradiction himself and so he had, he and his father and all of had been active in the very conservative Democratic circle here in Houston. There was a powerful Democratic congressman, I don't even remember what his name was because I didn't have to deal with him, he dealt with him. When he saw that I couldn't get the scholarship and that I was denied the right to go he just thought it was terrible so he went to this congressman and said, "You've got to make her a citizen." This congressman introduced a bill, there is an actual bill introduced in congress to make me a citizen. But it was close to my eighteenth birthday so the other thing that happened

was you know he said well he talked to the INS at the time so I could put in my paperwork. I put in my paperwork on August 2, 1968 which was the day I turned eighteenth when I can become a citizen and eight months later, I remember September 4, 1968 I was being sworn in as a citizen of the United States, you know they gave me my test and all when I turned in my paperwork on August 2nd with seven other people. It was like, very few people became citizens. My parents didn't become citizens. My mother died not being a citizen and my father refuses to be a citizen. But I did that somewhat because of this particular situation I had with confronting and the energy of my debate coach and his connections. Many years later, in the eighties, I was looking for a job and I couldn't find one and the other one was as an interpreter in immigration court so I applied and I was interviewed by a judge of the immigration court at the time. He says our only question now that we have done the background checks is how you became a citizen? I said, "It was not my fault that you guys fall to influence, congressional influence" because it was so unusual. But that is how I became a citizen it was something practical. But I always wanted my, to recuperate my Mexican citizenship because I do have that dual identity so I later, we would, in Houston here and I would join with other Mexican immigrants throughout the United States sending delegations to Mexico City to change the constitution to allow for dual citizenship, dual nationality. I went myself to Mexico City to lobby in the Mexican congress and for that change and that change came and so when the law went into effect that we recuperate our dual nationality, our Mexican nationality, I was the first one at the Mexican consulate signing and I was invited to the national palace in Mexico City with one hundred others to receive to my recuperate my

Mexican nationality. The 110 of us were, actually received it from the president of Mexico. Actually by this time I was very involved in progressive politics, so I didn't want to go and receive it from the president of Mexico I didn't want to be associated. But my father says, I was organizing a group here called ARCA, the Association of Residency and Citizenship they were trying to legalize their situation which eventually they did in the year 2000. But _____ we know they are corrupt but go in, if you need help for the Mexican government these people won't be hurt. So I said, "Okay." So I went and interestingly enough of the 10 only three of us were asked to address the group. So I was one of the three who addressed the group but the rest thanked the President, I didn't thank the President, I thanked Mexican immigrants because without the active migration we would not have a sense of dual nations or dual experiences and so my own history was my grandfather and his migration, my father's migration as an adult. After I graduated from the University of Houston I married and went to live back in Mexico, I lived ten years in Mexico. My children were born in Mexico so I am a typical Mexican immigrant family. We are four generations of first generation Mexican immigrants. I migrated as an adult both ways like a lot of Mexican immigrants. Anyway, I did thank the experience of my grandfather, my father, my own experience and then of course my children's experience as an example of the creation of that dual identity.

NG: I want to go back a little bit to your involvement in organizations at the University of Houston. MAYO of a lot of people bring it up in relation to you the school board. Were you involved with the organization at that time?

MJ: We were in one because at the time there was a separation made of MAYO Barrio and MAYO U of H which I never understood the difference because we were only at U of H as students, we lived in the Barrio as well and went back and forth but the Barrio MAYO was the one who took over the church and they did the more radical politics. We did radical politics but I always thought in more assisting them as opposed to us taking. I think our role was more cultural renaissance, a cultural renaissance because of the oppression we had received in the Mexican culture, more of a cultural renaissance. And then of course the formation of the Raza Unida party because then I think because then I became a candidate for the Raza Unida party in 1974 for state rep. So it was like the… and then the way schools of that period that was really another sector. I mean that was totally, although I knew Leonel Castillo because he had been, we were five or six people who were the original lettuce boycott committee and Leonel Castillo who lived with some of the leaders of the boycott, the Huelga schools, was also one of the people in the lettuce boycott movement. But I think we were, I never saw… it was I thought that was much more of a very grassroots movement and the leadership was a much more broader leadership, although MAYO participated in it, the direction of that particular movement was not in MAYO's hands it was in and I don't remember what the actual name of the organization that evolved from the huelga schools. It was a different sector in the community.

NG: Who did you marry? You said you married right out of the University?

MJ: Well in one of those many trips that my, by this time, that my aunts organized in Mexico one of my aunts who was already studying her masters as a teacher in Monterrey,

Superior de Monterrey organized a twenty one-day excursion into different parts of Mexico, which I went, I was nineteen years old at the time. One of the places we went to was Oaxaca and the hotel where we stayed there was a group of teachers who were there teaching rural teachers in Oaxaca to get their paper, to get their degree. It turned out that several of them were from Monterrey so they knew, they knew a lot of the teachers of they were part of that excursion that I was with. So they organized the dens and I didn't want to be there. Because I've as been a party pooper all my life. Political parties, fine but social parties, I was always known and still am known to go to sleep at 10:00 I just don't do those things. So I was telling my aunt, "I don't want to go." She said, "Okay I have to do this because it's polite Mexican society, you don't refuse." So I just went to spend an hour to then go up to my room and a man asked me to dance. One of the teachers asked me to dance and my ex-husband who was from Monterrey, his family is from Monterrey but he actually had his green card. He didn't like living in the United States but he actually had a green card his parents lived in L.A. and he had several brothers in Las Vegas but they were from Monterrey originally. So he asked me to dance and again it was this thing about, you know at that period you danced danzas you had to dance seven pieces, and every time one dancer asked you and the woman couldn't say no to the guy because that was impolite. Since I had already been told I was impolite for not wanting to go I figured well I'll just have to talk to him about politics and history and he'll sit me right down because a man could sit you down, you couldn't say no to the man. So the dance, the male dances and I started talking to him about politics and history and it turns out he loved politics and history so we met there. It kind of resolved my need

to have a boyfriend but without having a boyfriend because he lived in Mexico. So we corresponded and saw each other a lot and so finally when I graduated from the university, by the time I graduated from the university it is very clear in my mind that it's not just an issue of discrimination, but of social inequities, and they were white so by the time I decide to marry him I don't feel that I'm abandoning the struggle here but rather that I'm continuing it in Mexico. So he was very much involved in leftist circles in Mexico so I got introduced to many, I got to know many inadvertently some of the actors in Mexican leftist politics. So we lived there and then became active in different movements in Mexico as well, primarily the labor movement in Mexico but we lived only two years in… at first we lived in Mazatlan no in _____ and then Mazatlan and then because his best friend who was, you know, and he got… we all got involved in a strong political movement against the bus fares, the bus fares in _____ his friend who was his boss as well was asked to leave the state of _____ and so the institution he worked with which was _____ which dealt with _____ offered him a transfer to _____. So he decided to leave and so he asked us if we wanted to leave as well. We said yes so we went to _____. My children were born in la Yucatan which introduced me into another of the interesting experiences which was to live in a very different type of, it wasn't northern Mexico, it was in central Mexico and I never understood why we were so different from the rest of Mexico until I came back to the United States ten years later and met Central Americans and then I understand the Yucatan's part of Central America and how they expressed, the languages, the fact that many were bilingual or monolingual Mayan and the food. So for me El Salvadoran,

Honduran, Guatemalan food is very familiar because I learned about it and eat it and so forth when I lived in Yucatan. It brought me into the contradictions of being the dominant as opposed to the minority when dealing with indigenous Mayan communities. I worked in organizing and training around economic projects in Yucatan so I would get to go to meetings and the _____ for instance, the Yucatan the _____ producing region of Yucatan _____ had their meetings in Maya and I couldn't understand Maya and then sometimes there was a lot of corruption among the leadership of the _____ with the bank and so I had many occasions where I could tell they were talking behind my back and I couldn't understand them the way we would talk Spanish against the Anglos as a form of protection. That was an interesting experience as well, having to view society from the dominant culture as opposed to being dominated.

NG: What did that teach you about organizing?

MJ: Well one of the things that it taught me about organizing was how complex organizing in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural setting is and how important the process of establishing spaces of multi-lingual communication and communication is often a process of democracy, of bringing democracy within structures and I still feel today in the sense that like the coalition that we have that we belong to, one of the ones we belong to had a meeting yesterday. If we don't have an interpreter there many of the immigrant participants will start to leave. So if we want to be inclusive, we have to be able to allow for methods of providing a muti-lingual multi-cultural spaces. With ARCA when I organized that group which was a national movement, it started here in Houston predominantly Mexican but there were Latinos of many nationalities. Actually, the main

leader from _____ Fernandez but we had to organize ARCA all over the country and some of the strongest were in San Jose and they were Sikhs from India and we did mobilizations to Washington to try to get their law in three years. So having to deal with, you know, so we would stay at the same hotel but we would have to do two different meetings. One with the Latino, who was speaking Spanish and then I had to do a different meeting with the, they spoke Punjabi so I had to, I couldn't understand them either, but through the leadership had to develop and then the cultural experiences were different. Just relations, the building of relations was difficult. But that difficulty, like I say, I began to experience it in general when we were organizing it around the lettuce boycott and so forth. I thought that one of the lessons I learned from organizing around the lettuce boycott was how the instances of the farm worker movement was sort of the integrated political movement of all sectors. But in Yucatan, it is still, it was still the same experience in terms of… I actually tried to learn Mayan but it is so difficult, it is much more difficult than English. It's… so anyways from the organizing standpoint is that we do have to take into account the cultural in order to build trust between the groups and then begin to deal with the issues as you are in the process of organizing. Like in the case of ARCA, one of the things I learned was for instances with Sikhs. Latino immigrants you have to shake everybody's hands, shaking their hands is a must in the beginning of the process, the end of the process, the middle of the process, wherever, it is important. But with Sikhs you can't shake their hands, especially for women, it is considered taboo. So then I remember one, in their religion the sword is their symbol like the cross is in ours and they wanted to wear it to the White House, sort of how to deal

with issues of that nature. Then, breaking stereotypes, one of the things the Mexicanos would start to call the Sikhs were the Kalimanes. There is a comic book in Mexico and the main character is a guy with a turban named Kaliman and they started to call the Sikhs, Kalimanes. and I had to sit them down and "You don't call them this." Then the Sikhs they were predominantly male. They were rarely woman. Latino organizing it's the whole family, they carry everybody. So all those issues, the common issues so it's when you learn to deal with them and our group integrated and eventually they triumphed. This group was an extraordinary group they did pass the Life Act of the year 2000, so about 400,000 immigrants were legalized. The Sikhs invited us to their temple after the law passed and it was sort of a ceremony to give thanks. That was interesting because they invited Adriana, myself and they invited Concepcion, Mirana and all of us women so we go into the temple and the women sit on one side and the men sit on the other.We sat with the women and of course you have your hair covered and you have to take off your shoes. We were on a different side and then the men came and took us over to the men's side so we were obviously out of their element for about two hours and they allowed us to speak so it's a complex, and I think the United States' organizations' are very complex because of the situation and the language differences, their cultural differences. But then there were also differences that you know that are basically, you have to deal with the differences from their home countries. It is very common among Mexican immigrants, you know just don't talk about the political parties because if you do talk about the political parties. While they may be united and like the Cubans, or while may be united, you know, in terms of viewing the need to speak Spanish as a right and

against English-only movement or they see you know access to education as an issue, just don't touch pro- or anti-Castro positions. In Mexican it is the same thing, but it is the same thing in dealing with some of the other countries. Like with we are in the middle of a campaign, the ARCA campaign, which took three years it was a fight, a fight broke out with Pakistan and India. We had Pakistanis from Chicago participating and then we had this large group from India, I remember saying, "Are you talking to each other? Just don't." They say, "Yeah, yeah this is something else. Okay, okay something else." So it gets complex because you are organizing many different levels of complexity in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual situation.

NG: I wanted to clarify one detail with you quickly. You said that you had a meeting with the Mexicanos and the Sikhs in San Jose. San Jose where?

MJ: California.

NG: California okay. You mentioned ARCA, a few times. Can you tell me about organizing that organization? When did it start and what was the purpose?

MJ: Basically ARCA was an organization built by immigrants. ARCA is the acronym for the Association for Residency and Citizenship of America. That is the name they gave themselves. Basically it was the 1986 legalization law, you know? Before you implement a law, the government issues regulations of implementation. Well, one of the regulations that they issued at the time was that you had to have continuous presence in the United States between the date 1981 and 1986 between the date that the law said that you should have been here and the date you applied. So anyone who left the United States at the time according to the INS, would not qualify. They insisted that you should have told the

government that you were going to leave which was absurd because you were undocumented, you were hiding from the government but they sustained this, this regulation. There were a couple of lawsuits that were filed on behalf of this class of immigrants in Federal Court by an outfit called the Center for Constitution, Human Rights and Constitutional Law in L.A. and so as this fight took place in the courts, to go up to the Supreme Court, come down and go to Federal Court… as it took place in the courts at one point they reached the decision that all these class of immigrants would be given temporary residence. So they were allowed to file, if they fit this class, to file for work permits and it allowed them to travel and work and so forth. So it was almost like a permanent residency. So the fight in the courts went on for almost twelve years and Peter Shey and Carlos _____ who are the two attorneys, who are among the best in terms of immigrant rights in the country. So they kept winning and if they lost, kept appealing so they kept all these immigrants under this temporary status but immigrants forgot they were in a temporary status and so in the ’96 law, the lawyers, the government lawyers went to congress and said, put a little line in the 1996 law that said the courts could no longer have jurisdiction over these cases. In 1998 when it reached one of the courts, the federal courts in California. The court said, “We can no longer look at these cases.” So the INS said, “We cancel your temporary residence.” From one day to the next 400,000 immigrants nationwide became undocumented and they thought they were here to stay. They had bought homes, they had started businesses, they had children beginning in college. So I had already met Mr. Galvan who used to volunteer with me. He had already brought his daughter because he thought twelve years of temporary residence was too

much and they thought they should begin to worry about it. So I had already begun to talk to Maria Chacon about the issue when all of the sudden we saw, it was a Tuesday I remember on Univision of a man in the same class who had received his orders of deportation which was a violation of the original law of ‘86 in which if you didn’t qualify there would be no penalties, your case would be closed, so you couldn’t be deported. And so I saw that and so then I decided to call a meeting at my office and I didn’t have a chance, I just told Univision we are having a meeting on Sunday. I didn’t have a chance to look for a place so I just rented a hundred chairs to put in the yard and I had three hundred people show up to the office with this problem. So we told them the only thing you can do is organize and try and get your own law through Congress and we will help you organize. I think the fact that many of them were long term residents, that they thought they were here to stay, they had a lot to lose, they said, “Well just tell us how to do it and we’ll do it.” So we had our first protest, they were very nervous. We did it early in the morning because it was before many went to work out at the INS and they stopped the deportations. Then the second weekend I said, “You need to form a coordinating committee, a leadership committee. Fifty volunteered, you know I divided them into their respective committees. The third meeting they had the new leadership had their own meeting and I kept telling people, I didn’t know how to use the internet. By the fourth week they had already set up their web page. I mean they were particularly motivated. So because it was a national problem and I talked to Peter because I knew Peter Shay and Carlos Ortiz and I had dealt with Peter on other issues before so I talked to them about coming to Houston and so they organized a big meeting there were 1,000 people there.

So they were very smart, I mean the leadership was very smart about how to raise money. The only thing I did was kind of kind of map out so they could figure out, you know kind of direct them, like an organizer does. As an organizer you simply, I always tell them it's like a coach. The players are the ones that are playing and they have to play. The coach kind of has the experience and watches on the side and tells them, "You should do this and that" and together they figure out what the right plays are. That's basically what an organizer does. We, for the first time we went to Washington I think it was in May of '98. Their first meeting was in February of '98 and so by May '98, a hundred of them here from Houston, we took a delegation. It was before 2001, so it was fairly easy. Even though they didn't have any documents, everybody had a driver's license and so we took a hundred people to D.C. and there we met through Peter, who kept in contact with different people who called his center. He basically mobilized others, but they, but they came small, one, two or three from other cities. But they decided to form their organization to attend to. Of course the first step was to train them to go visit their members of congress and how to deal with that type of issue of, how to deal with lobbying citizens. Actually I think they met with Eric Holder. He at the time was in the Department of Justice. That first meeting a group of them met with them. But anyway, Janet Reno was the Attorney General at the time. Anyway, so this group, we just it became important to set up group, because it was a national problem and through the contact that Peter had and as people started to hear about the movement. So from Houston we traveled and we formed groups in New York and New Jersey and Miami and Chicago. I went three weeks to L.A. and formed a group in L.A., the Sikhs in San

Francisco and Seattle, Nevada we had a huge group in Nevada. That's how we met Harry Reid for the first time. So… but they basically, by the end of the three years, by the time they got their law passed, this group became experts on how to deal with congress, how to organize the trips. I tell the story about the how the first trip in May, todos los senores you know they all wanted to sit with me on the plane, they all wanted to sleep with me in my room, you know, at my hotel. The last trip we took I had to stay behind and talk to the Sikhs, they were supposed to meet Union Station there in D.C. and I was supposed to meet them, then we would ride the subway to the airport. When I finished with the Sikhs and went back to the Union Station I couldn't find them. I rode on my own and they almost left me. So that's the job of an organizer. You know, they became very talented. The majority of them now are U.S. citizens. They voted for the first time and some of them became active in political campaigns. I always thought it was interesting I would get emails like from the Sikhs from _____ in San Jose in the primaries, "Make sure and vote for Hillary Clinton, blah blah…" I thought that was interesting. But so ARCA is probably an example of and I tell them, we met at a moment when I had enough organizing experience to be able to assist them in their own process and they developed, they were tremendous, you know they were willing to put in the time. They, you know, they became experts at it and they got their law and it is the only law that's passed since the 1986 law of, besides Marcario who that legalized immigrants in the country. But my role was just as an organizer but they did the work. They were, they still meet. They are not as big as they used to be. They still meet. ARCA still meets here in Houston. But they used to have, during the prime of the organizing during the three years of organizing,

they would… Resurrection Church would lend their gym and their meetings were no smaller than three hundred people every single week, sometimes up to five hundred people. Now they average maybe forty or so, every meeting but it is still a large group for Houston, to be that continual. So that was my experience with ARCA. In that sense it was one of the more interesting experiences in organizing that I've had where I was the, to say I was the head organizer, the lead organizer until they took over. At the end of the three years as I said I would go to their meetings but only just to be pampered because they did everything. They did everything. So it was just, it was a very interesting and exciting experience to see that. It also goes contrary to the concept that only you assistants, can do that because they were undocumented and… all of them were undocumented technically. But their capacity to understand and participate and it makes a difference because now that they are citizens there aren't… there are people who became U.S. citizens like me because I had a problem or needed to, or because I needed to immigrate my relative quicker than if I had a permanent residence. They became active participants in the political process as, even before they became permanent residents and now they are citizenship means a great deal because they continue to be active in voting and caucuses and, you know, new political affairs. They know it because they had to go through it, they understood it. They had meetings with the White House. Ariana testified in congress hearing; a hearing that was organized by Sheila Jackson Lee so it was a very powerful movement that group.

NG: When you were working in… you said you were working with labor…

MJ: Yeah.

NG: What made you transition into working with immigration in the United States?

MJ: Because for me it was, they are still the work force. They actually the same work force I was working with in Mexico. I worked there with an attorney who has now deceased, Julio Vacosais and because Mexican labor laws really didn't work you had to develop political movements in order to win your contract in order to sustain your union and movement. He had eight or ten of us who were volunteer organizers and so whatever work he was ready to organize, to have, to do the paperwork for a group of workers we would get involved in the actual organizing. So it was the same people. For me, the immigrants, when I came… when I was an immigrant I understood the experience of immigrants from my own experience but when I came back to the United States and saw Central Americans, because when I left the United States there were no Central Americans in Houston. I came back and one of the first things I did was to work with a survey of that Dr. Ernesto Rodriguez was conducting in the Central American community and I wanted to do it and I did it because I wanted to understand Central Americans. It was like they were a new experience to me. So I got to know a lot of why they were here and all of this and particularly women I partnered with a lot of women I tried to do a lot of women and according to Ernesto I discovered that _____ as what do we call a sociological discovery or something. Anyway, but it was because when I came back I started volunteering with unions that were organizing immigrants and one of them was SEIU the Service Employees International Union and their first efforts to unionize janitors downtown. They were some Honduran _____ that were janitors that's how I met them. For me they were the same and then after organizing after a while and to

_____ your bases I did get a job with the Texas State Employees Union but they were all U.S. Citizens, government, state government workers. I only stayed with them six months when I was offered a job from some friends of mine who will be, the people who had been organizing the janitors downtown with SEIU. Well also, they were a part of the community apparatus of the American French Service Committee which was a Quaker organization, and so they said, "There is a position open and you may be ideal for it." I missed organizing immigrants. I mean it's just, I mean when you are with immigrants, Latinos, speaking Spanish or dealing with the same issues so it's like, you know, so I applied with the American French Service Committee and I was hired to implement a new project that they had called the Immigrant Law Enforcement Monitoring Project which basically what it was, was to develop forms of documenting abusive authority and the enforcement of immigration law in the border areas. I basically developed community organizing strategy and worked to form coalitions that would work on documentation, a documentation system in the Rio Grande Valley and El Paso and Tucson, Arizona and the _____ had an office in San Diego. So for sixteen years that's what I did but originally I was supposed to be in Philadelphia but at the time my children were small. When I divorced and returned I returned with my twins, Carlos and _____. So I told them, if I move to Philadelphia, there is a lot of traveling I won't be able… I'd have to leave my children with people who don't know them. In Houston I have my parents, they can stay with my parents and so if you want to hire me and you want to hire a single mother then you need to open up an office in Houston and so they said yes when I was hired. I said, "You have your office in Houston." So from here I had all the resources

because they gave me all the resources and so then I would travel from Houston to the border areas in developing the documentation and the training on the project that they wanted. We did a great deal. The report we issued in, the project started in April of 1987 and that is when I was hired and our first report, no our second report actually became law. The recommendations, the second report, Section 503 of the 1990 immigration law were our recommendations from our report. They called us in Congress our _____ office. They included our recommendations as part of the law in order to basically develop, enforce the INS and the border patrol to develop clear policy on the use of deadly force and because we documented about thirty immigrants that they had shot. And also on the second thing was develop standards for enforcement. The third thing was to have officers trained in them and the fourth thing was to have a system, which because they don't have… we clearly documented there was no real system to file complaints. So, and to have a system that people could file complaints when they were, when these standards, when these policies were violated. So we did that work for sixteen years and it gave us the opportunity to do a lot of national and even international work. We are part of trying to set standards on a continental basis and of groups that met like in Guatemala City, we met in Guatemala City and Costa Rica and other places where we provided standards which had developed from our project. One of the things I told the friends when I started organizing, they worked primarily as advocates. You've got the position and you spoke for the people affected. I told them I can't do that, I have to be an organizer because it is very easy for me to go into the Rio Grande Valley and then scream about the border patrol abusing somebody but I don't live in the Valley, I don't have to

live with the border patrol. So we have to develop, we have to think about how we develop structure so that when we disappear they will continue to work and they can work in the context in which they feel that they can make a better, have a better affect. That's what we did and to this day those structures exist. The Border Network for Human Rights in El Paso that continues to work on the issue was a product of the work. The _____ who is doing a lot of work in Arizona continues to be the group in…

End of Tape 1 Side B

MJ: The other case that was to me important that I'd like to mention was the work we did around the Ezekiel Hernandez case which was the case of the young man who was shepherding goats near Redford, Texas and there was a covert marine operation and he got shot to death. Because we had been monitoring the border, we had been increasingly alarmed by the growth of covert operations by the military on the U.S.-Mexico border and when we heard of the case, I remember I was in Tucson at a hearing of the Human Civil Rights Commission on Border and I got a call from a reporter, "What do you think of this?" I said, "My God, it's a U.S. Citizen who got shot." With the group in El Paso we arranged to have a town hall meeting in Redford, Texas. We had a town hall meeting in Redford, Ezekiel's family was present. We proposed a legal strategy because by this time we had developed a network of attorneys who worked on these issues. That's how come I knew Peter in L.A. and all this. Anyway, so they already had their own attorney but we would support them in the process of their legal case against the government. Then we developed a political strategy of putting together a delegation that would go to Washington and then a community organizing strategy where we would do _____

among all the border groups around the case. So because of the American Friends Service Committee and their resources we were able to take a delegation of Redford residence, seven of them including Ezekiel's sister, who couldn't speak but went to, went with us to show support from the family. I'm not kidding this delegation, the AFSC had an office in Washington that arranges delegations. I met with the highest levels of government, even the Pentagon. The office basically, since the Quakers are pacifists who really don't know anybody in the Pentagon but they knew one person and so they called them and said, "This shooting on the U.S.-Mexico border. There is this delegation. Who do we talk to?" So they said, "No you talk to the Southern Command." So we talked to the general and you know they are in charge of the Southern Command, the delegation there and they were great They were great! It was a great delegation. They were prepared, they knew their stuff and they spoke well and then with Barry McCaffrey who was the Drug Czar at the time, he was on vacation and cancelled his vacation to meet with them the head of the INS with the key congressional committees and so forth and of course the press conference and all of that. Their story was covered on Dateline, and some of the press conferences of the delegation was seen on Dateline. It resulted in the end of covert government operations by the military on the U.S.-Mexico border. Two weeks later, the Department of Defense announced that they would suspend those operations and could only be re-instituted if it got permission directly from the Secretary of Defense. Up until then it was the Border Patrol Sector Chief who said, "Yeah we want covert…" you know, "We want a covert operation here." So it was an important victory as well.

NG: Do you remember what year that was?

MJ: Well I think Ezekiel died in I can't remember now. It was in… he must have been '97 or '96 that he died. But there are stories about his case. But for me those are the three like very where I was directly involved that resulted in a policy change even at a national level.

NG: So with the immigration law enforcement project you did reports but then also worked with people to get laws passed?

MJ: Yeah, we organized border communities to form their own coalition for structures, we developed the documentation. I think we historically will probably be among the very first to develop a statistical analysis of human rights violations or reports that become statistical analysis. In many parts of the world the same thing was happening but we were probably one of the first historically here. Then we also, because it was about strengthening communities about how to exercise their rights it was the first objective, the second objective was increasing awareness. We did a lot of public forums, a lot of reports, you know a lot of public presentations, that type of things and then the third was impacting policies. It was around organizing around policy changing. I, myself have testified, have been invited in that period of testifying three times? Three times before congress, different congressional committees.

NG: You no longer work with border enforcement, law enforcement issues?

MJ: No.

NG: What do you do now?

MJ: Well, I did last year. I was contracted by the National Commission of Human Rights Mexico and the ACLU San Diego to issue a report on migrant deaths on the U.S.-Mexico border and that report did, I did write it and it was issued on September 30th of last year and it hit the Washington Post. It was covered by a story in the Washington Post, I mean we had the cover. When we did the work with LILA with the immigration law enforcement, we had been covered by man newspapers and media outlets but we could never break the Washington Post that was kind of why I was excited when our report was released it was the Washington Post did a story on it. The L.A. Times did an editorial in support of the conclusions of the report so that was kind of the, that has been kind of a lasting identity in terms of border work but it was kind of isolated. Right now after I left the FSC and the FSC closed the project, I have worked primarily here locally with several local agencies that I have been permanently since 2005 with. The Central American Resource Center and who created a non-profit called Houston's America for All, America Para Todos. Here I do less direct organizing and more I do work to develop the organization. You know, I do proposal writing. I do analysis of which of, what needs to be strengthened in terms of the workings of the organization. And just we are about to inaugurate on August the 8th I did a proposal to what used to be Sharpstown Mall, that is now Plaz Americas to see if they would be willing to give us space there at the mall to create a center, a community center for different organizations and they approved it so we are about to inaugurate it. So I do special projects for them in terms of the proposals, getting it started and this type of thing but I am still working with immigrants so we were the ones who basically during the 2006 with those huge monumental marches, we were

the ones who did the primary organizing for those and even the last one in May that we had here in Houston. We formed the coalition that now works on that and so forth.

NG: The Central American Resource Center, the acronym is CARECEN?

MJ: CARECEN

NG: Who started that?

MJ: That was started by _____ he basically, you know they were part of the Central Americans that were trying to escape political persecution. He had been active in El Salvador and some of his… several of the El Salvadorians who took refuge in Houston developed the _____ but the leader who was the community organizer basically _____ kind of disappeared all over the country after the Peace Corps in El Salvador but here he sustained it. Then TPS came around and so but the but _____ and I had worked during the time that I had the AFSC office here and also worked in the community and in the community in Houston and had worked for many, many years together. So and Benito Juarez with the Guatemalan community as well. I remember when I would go to national conferences they thought it was unusual that Mexican immigrants worked with Salvadorans and Guatemalans because generally everywhere else there was conflict. But we always had worked together we sort of identified as community organizers and so we worked so when I left AFSC to come over here and so I only worked part time I don't work full time anymore. But what I like about it is it continues to be… and I enjoy it because it continues to be focused on community organizing.

NG: How is it funded?

MJ: Basically CRECEN is funded or _____ is funded because they established a early illegal program so people do their paperwork there. The legal program basically establishes a solid base that permits operations throughout the year. When I got on board I began to do some grant requests, but it is limited though in getting grants but we do get grants from like the Catholic Campaign for Human Development from… we got a public welfare foundation grant for work among day laborers a couple of years ago so we get that type of money but in general it is the legal program. That is why I am able to be here today since I'm not part of a legal staff. When Salvadorans have to renew their TPS, I'm not kidding there are at least a hundred people a day that go through that office doing that TPS, so my office is taken over a few hours by somebody who is doing that paper work.

NG: So right now you are working you said with projects for that organization. Does the organization also work to change legal, the legal structure in the United States?

MJ: Oh yeah, yeah. That's why I keep with them, even though… because I can't find any organization in Houston that does that. _____ and I remember I used to use him as kind of an unusual project because we have many offices, many organizations here in Houston that do legal work and visas for immigrants but none of them set aside money for community organizing to change the laws in _____ it's always been a part of his work. We organized in October for instances I raised the money and we took 40 people to D.C. to lobby and to be in a march in D.C. I spend a lot of time on behalf of CRECEN trying to structure other coalitions like there is a new coalition called the Houston Coalition For Immigration Reform and they are new at it. There are different sectors that are new at it so the coordinator keeps calling me, "Come and help me do this

or that." Then with him I took him along on the delegation in October. Then we went to, in March there was a big immigration march in D.C., he took a delegation. _____ and I talked about how it was difficult for the Mexican community to come to CRECEN because they said, they're not Central Americanos you know so we decided to organize an organization for Mexicanos and _____ and a volunteer from CRECEN Victor Rivera has taken it on and he's done a great job. His _____ like now he is organizing a bus and I'll probably be going with them because I am the one with the experience and he is organizing a bus of families and children. There is a children's march for immigration reform on the 28th of this month in D.C. And anybody else would probably stop you but because the _____ organization is the same, and very much understands why community organizing putting for social change, that _____ states that even though I don't have any insurance, I don't have any, you know I am only working part time. The good thing is that I don't have debt, I finished paying my house and my children are grown so I can give myself sort of that luxury being in a part time job. But I stay with it because it gives me that ability to do that work and so we very much still... I mean and also one of the other persons there that is on staff is this muchacho, Cesar Espinosa who organized FIEL and that's the only student group in Houston that is working on the _____ and they are, you know they do things, we do protests all the time at you know at the federal building and again we're the source of organizing the marches. If you look at the permits we took out the permits for the marches America Para Todos because we are the ones… it is one of the few organizations that allows that to happen and makes it an important part of the process.

NG: You've spoken a lot about working within the structure and changing the structure of government, the laws and doing it through legal means. But it sounds like the same with the marches and things like, that that there is an important street activism that is necessary as well.

MJ: Well personally, I am a profound believer in non-violence but non-violence requires the creation of tension and conflict, not violent but tension and conflict much the way Gandhi did or Martin Luther King did so that means confrontation sometimes through civil disobedience. All those are processes that go toward change. I don't see any contradiction from the role legally, they are all permitted. They are first amendment rights and, you know, but in terms of political change you have to be flexible and you should use street activity and civil disobedience if necessary and as well as it is still, for me it is still within the structure because it is permitted by the constitution. But we do a lot of… it is because we have to look at who we are organizing. Primarily a lot of our work is dealt with immigrants who have no right to vote. So, if you don't have a right to vote then how can you establish your presence and petition the government and pressure? So that deals more with street activity. Even the case of ARCA, it wasn't just visiting congress, every time we went we also had a rally or a demonstration or a vigil in front of the White House so it is combining the many forms of political activity in order to achieve social change.

NG: I read an article I think it was done this year that said, where you said that Houston doesn't have a well-funded immigrant coalition and that perhaps that's the reason that there isn't as much protest activity or participation in Houston as there is in

other cities of comparable size. What do you mean exactly that they don't have a funded immigrant coalition?

MJ: Well in other cities you find like the New York Coalition, you find the Chicago Coalition, in L.A. you find the Coalition for Human Immigration Policy of L.A. and the San Francisco Coalition and coalitions that large foundations invest a lot of money in and so you have the Ford Foundation, you may have the New World Foundation, New Seasons Fund, a lot of large foundations that invest and so they have permanent staff that have full time jobs, that have health benefits to do this work. So you have a coalition in Chicago that has twelve permanent people on staff, New York has twenty seven permanent people. L.A. has fourteen because they get well funded. Well, in Houston we don't have one. We have coalitions but they tend to be voluntary coalitions like the one I went to last night where we are about eighteen groups but there is nobody paying anybody to coordinate the work of the coalition. We just know that we get together right now because of the situation in Arizona, we are getting together every week. We talk about structure, committees, we define activities, but there is no paid staff to carry them out. In the… in other cities you have staff that specialized in communication, staff specialized in raising funds, staff specialized in activities and special programs, citizenship and so forth. Here, we just don't have that here.

NG: Do you think there is any hope of developing that?

MJ: Well I think that there's, right now the formation of the two different coalitions and their attempts to try to get them funded and established. But in Texas, in general we lack the progressive base of individuals that would provide funds on the systematic level

and for some reason national foundations stay away from Texas. So it's a big problem. Right now we have indications we could probably put in a proposal to, again to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development for one of our coalitions but that's, you know, it's nothing. We'd be getting something like $25,000, $50,000 for a coalition at the most, which is a lot when you don't have anything and everybody is putting in from their own organizations, as compared to a New York coalition that may have a budgeted million. So that's why it is very different situation.

NG: Are the immigrant groups united in what needs to happen in terms of immigration reform?

MJ: No that's why we have different coalitions in Houston because I think we have different ways of looking at how this should proceed. And they are all valid I think. It's just where you stand from and your experience and again our coalition for immigration reform is primarily institutions and churches. So there is a coalition that has formed recently, the Interfaith Coalition. They primarily handle, at the leadership of the Cardinal with the Catholic Church but includes the Methodist, the Lutherans, the large institutional domination. There is…we actually have a coalition of business in Houston under Americans for Immigration Reform that are working on it. Then there is our coalition which we just changed the name from the Coalition in the Sense of the Community which was the name to we just changed it to Houston United. And so each of these coalitions, and we are more of the grass roots, we are the more grass roots, we are the ones who aren't shy about organizing the street protests and the marches and the other ones still, they work. The Houston Coalition for Immigration Reform they see their role

mostly as contacting members of congress and visiting. The Interfaith Coalition see their as more as a moral authority and primarily tend to work within their churches to educate their membership in order to take action. So each one does a different type of work but it is characteristic of social movement. Social movements you can march separately but we need to hit together. The hitting together is when there are political moments when we all meet together to get this done or that done. I think that's just the way political movements are. I mean the social movements. They just represent different _____.

NG: What is your opinion of what needs to happen now with reform?

MJ: Well for us the only thing that has ever worked in terms of getting laws passed is for people to understand that they are the ones that have the burden of petitioning the government. So for us it is continuing to organize at the level of the different ways people can pressure government to act and like in our coalition we have a committee that is dealing with voter registration, voter mobilization. We have another community that deals with street action. We have another one that is dealing with policy impact work and so all of those have to be combined. I think in terms of, part of the problems that I think that we have as a community and I'm speaking about the Latino community is that a lot of the way that politics is carried out in this country is a fairly remote experience for most of us. I think a lot of people know to go vote and of course a lot of people who can't vote know to be on the street. That is why we have such big marches. But the politics of everyday of how things are done in this country means a continual pressure on your authorities which means a lot of communication by mail, visiting their offices, going to their town hall meetings. That part is where we are weak and that's where at least the

anti-immigrant movement always beats us because we don't have that experience in… I've had, you know I've been at a meeting of thirty five native born Latino U.S. citizens and I asked them, you know, "Who is your U.S. Senator? " And if I have one name a U.S. Senator, it's a lot. So much less, if they can't even name who the U.S. Senator is, I know that they have no experience in calling their office or understanding that they can go visit them and have an impact in that they can write to them and have an impact. So that is where a lot of our challenge is, is how to sustain that activity and for that we do need a lot of resources.

NG: But in terms of what needs to happen like do we need a work program or legalization, do you have an opinion on that?

MJ: Oh yeah people should have the right to live permanently in the United States and an immigration system that allows for easy legal entrance and easy legal adjustment of status. Because I don't know anybody, I don't know anybody who is for illegal immigration. Even immigrations who enter illegally are not for illegal immigration. If you could give them documents for legal entry they would prefer the documents. I mean nobody wants to go through the desert and pay coyotes and all sorts of things, no one. It is done because people need to but they do it because it's not… there is no flexible system for legal entry. It doesn't, our system doesn't allow it. Before 1996 the way the law was before 1996, I mean after seven years of being in the United States without documents if you didn't have a criminal background and you worked, you could go to the INS and petition for legal residency. But in 1996 the republican, the so called republican revolution that happened in congress changed the law and took away almost every

mechanism to facilitate the legality. So that is what has created the large undocumented population. Because in previous years there were systems in which people became legal quickly. So we don't have it anymore. There are very few solutions for to people to acquire legal status. So for me it is permanent residency because then it allows them for citizenship and then citizenship is what people to consider to be equivalent of your full rights with the right to vote. That is one of the problems with the TPS like with the people who are applying at the office today, the Temporary Protected Status is that that does not allow you to become a permanent resident if you are not allowed to become a permanent resident you cannot become a United States citizen. If you cannot become a United States citizen then political figures and institutions dismiss you quickly. I mean if you listen to the republicans, the republicans, their worry is the impact that new citizens would have on redistricting and the political power, the distribution of political power and so that is at the very heart of the immigration reform question. So we have to insist on legal mechanisms that, it may be that people may have to be on temporary status but it should be just that temporary. With a way of people then after several years of being able to become permanent residences and then become U.S. citizens. And you have to understand that all of these are political decisions. People don't remember that in the 19th century, male immigrants could vote. That's how all the machines; the political machines were built in New York and Chicago. If you look at the feminists writings of Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Stanton they are always talking about, "These men who were foreign born and they can vote and we women who are native born, we cannot vote." Immigrant women could not vote but immigrant men could. So it was a political decision

to take away the vote from the foreign born like it was to give it to the native born women. I always tell people how did, for instance, an island like Puerto Rico, did everybody become a U.S. citizen, it is by an act of congress and it's a funny situation because if you are in the island you can only have a representative in congress that has a voice but has no vote but if you move to Chicago you can vote and then have a representative with a vote in congress. So they are highly political questions. Regan, for instance, when he invaded Grenada, he basically issued an executive order that anybody from Grenada who would pick up arms against their own government would become United States citizens and 29,000 people in Grenada became United States citizens by an executive order by the president. It is a highly political question, who is a citizen and who isn't and how you become one. So if you understand that then anything is possible as long as you are able to organize effectively to attack the political system. That is where it is complex.

NG: Well is there anything else that you think needs to be mentioned in terms of immigrant organizing in Houston?

MJ: Well, in closing I suppose I'll share my experiences that I know that communities organize with us. They organize without us as organizers and activists. Sometimes they even organize despite us. So for me the important thing is that communities are organizing and I have a great deal of, and this is where my belief system is, my belief system. I have a great deal of faith in people to understand their situation and to be virtually and to decide to act even under very difficult circumstances so that… I remember somebody, something that Mao Tse Tung said… this is what I got from when I

lived in my leftist circle in Mexico. He was asked if he believed in God. He said, "Well…" He said, "The people… they say that God moves mountains and so the people of China have moved mountains so yes I believe in God." It is the same concept it is humanity and its ability to recognize contradictions and injustices and inequalities and to move forward to try to redress them and to establish better societies on a historical continual. So I just have a great deal of faith in people's capacity to do that. I do think that even if I don't see it in my lifetime we will reach a point, I think, where human beings will have achieved a heaven on earth.

NG: Okay thank you.