University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
"Mexican-American History – Environmental Justice"

Interviewee: Juan Parras
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NG: This is Natalie Garza. I'm interviewing Juan Parras on August 18th, 2009 at the TEJAS offices on Harrisburg in Houston, Texas. Can you begin by telling me your full name?

JP: Yeah, my full name is Juan Hernandez Parras and I was born in Big Spring, Texas.

NG: When were you born?

JP: A long time ago, 1949.

NG: What's your birth date?

JP: 12/26, the day after Christmas.

NG: Where did you go to school?

JP: All my elementary years I went to, it was called Bauer, Bauer Elementary. Then, I went Reynolds Middle School in Big Spring, Texas and then my high school years were spent in San Antonio at St. Anthony's Seminary.

NG: Why did you go to San Antonio for school, for high school?

JP: Well, for, for a number of reasons. I'm the oldest of ten children and we were obviously, very poor. My dad was a World War II veteran, but back then you know, they had a difficult time finding jobs, and so anyway, the church was always giving us some kind of assistance. You know my dad didn't ask for help but we would always get, you know clothing donated or food donated because there is so many of us in the family. And then, there was an opportunity when I was going to the ninth grade, okay, and the local priest suggested that, well basically, what he

said was that, "You know, you're a good kid and you're smart, and we'd like to see you are interested in a priest, a priestly vocation." So, they gave me the opportunity to go to San Antonio and study on the, at the Saint Anthony's Seminary and it was paid by the parish. Otherwise, I couldn't, we couldn't have afforded it. So, that's how I ended up in San Antonio.

NG: Did you continue your education after high school?

JP: Yes, I graduated from Saint Anthony's Seminary in '68 and then I went to a Saint Mary's University because that's where they send you when you go to the seminary and I went to the Saint, Saint Mary's for a year and then I got out and I went back home and I went to Harvard County Junior College until I got all my, all you can get at junior college, and then I came back to Houston and I went back to the University of Houston and, right now since 1978, all I have is seven hours to go. Never went back.

NG: Well, what did you want to study, or what were you studying?

JP: Well initially, I got in there to study optometry and then as they, I changed two or three majors and anyway, I ended up with 154 hours of college work with seven hours from a degree. So, I, I understand I can get a math degree, or biology degree, or a este, a psychology degree. But, I never took the time to go back.

NG: Why did you stop going?

JP: I stopped going because you know, that was like in the seventies and I was lucky enough to be offered a job to be an international union organizer, and I took the job and as it turns out that job you know was, it's a well paying job, it's a good job, and it was paying more, a lot more than college degrees, guys that I went to school with were earning and, so I felt like, well, I would like to have a degree, but you got to consider about, you know maintaining your family and upkeep and all that stuff. My salary was very good compared to all the college grads that I

went to school with. So, so, I didn't see a need at the time and at one time when I was working for the unions, I wanted to go back, pero I started you know, on those seven hours, I started and I had to drop out because they transfer you to different places. So, as long as I worked for the unions, I didn't care about going back. I had a good paying salary, a stable job, and I didn't have the time to finish off what I wanted to finish.

NG: So, you said you worked for an international union. What was, did it have a name?

JP: Yeah, the union is American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. It's a public employee union. It's like city workers, county employees, hospital workers, school, HISD, that's the kind.

NG: And it's nationwide?

JP: Yeah, it's, all unions are nationwide, basically, but what they do is, see, locally, they have a local. They call it local, like "Local 716". That's with electrical workers and then, the electrical workers in the state, they belong to a state affiliation and then, from the state they belong to a national affiliation. It's just like a little pyramid. In the organization that I worked with, it has a local here in Houston. It was Local 1550, but see I wasn't working for the local. I was sort of in a way, jumped all the way to the top to the international union, and the international union pays you to help the locals all over the state, I mean all over the nation. Wherever they have problems they can theoretically, send me and I would be like their [ ].

NG: How, how did you come into that work, youknow, it seems like, like you would need a lot of qualifications to be able to help all of these unions?

JP: Well, that's, that's, another interesting question because what happened is that when I was going to college, I used to work for the welfare department, Harris County Social Services. That's what it was called. Now, with the only Latino and the majority of the workers were

female. So, two things, you know, that I saw then is that social work is, in the seventies, was mostly women, and so, anyway, I got this job because they needed somebody that was bilingual. So, I got the job working for the Harris County Social Services and in working there we encountered a lot of employee issues. You know, as far as salaries, as far as benefits, as far as working conditions, and then, me personally, being the only Latino with the Harris County Social Services, I had to interview all of the Latinos that came in there and said, "We don't know how to speak English." So, my caseload, on a number of days, was three or four times bigger than the average person, and think of it this way, mira, you have thirty employees and you have two hundred people that come in for welfare assistance, and out of those two hundred people that come, if, if fifty say they don't speak English, I have fifty and the other twenty-nine individuals only have a hundred and fifty to look at, right? So, I was overwhelmed and overworked, and pero that was one issue. That was just because you know, I was Latino and I had to do that. But in addition to that, the other problems that we had at the welfare department was that, if you had let's say, three hundred people come in on a, every day, three hundred people, at five o' clock, if you still had like thirty more people that needed to be interviewed, at five o' clock the applicant doesn't know it, but at five o'clock we can do the interviews or we really can't give them any help because we need to verify where they live and, generally they're in apartment units and you can't call the landlord at five and say, "Hey, I want to verify you know Jose and see if he lives here." Uh, if you needed to pay a utility bill, you couldn't call the light company and say, "I understand the lights are off on this family unit. Can, can we, how much is it going to take to turn it back on?" because they didn't work after five. So any person that we interviewed after five, they, they thought that they were going to get help. But, then we couldn't help them and they would get belligerent with us. Some of them would tell us, "You know I've been here all

day long and you'renot going to help me and I'm this, need this and that." So, because of those issues, and they always talked about them. The employees always talked about them, but they never did anything about it and, finally, you know, just naturally, because nobody trained me, but just naturally I said, "Well, we got to get together. We've got to, at least, tell management what's going on," because what used to happen was at five o' clock the management, you know, the people in charge of us, they would tell us, "Well, I'm going to go home, but you guys stay and work overtime and we'll see you tomorrow." So, we didn't even have supervision after five because they would always go home and, of course, the custodians and other people would lock up the doors, and we were left with that situation, okay. We couldn't help people and they thought that they were going to get help and they were belligerent because we didn't help them. So anyway, in the short story, I organized the employees. We started having like meetings among ourselves, and, and we started discussing problems that we have and, finally we all had a meeting and we told management we think you ought to change all of these things and initially, they didn't want to change anything because they said this is the way we've been operating forever, and it's been good, and we're not going to change it. So, anyway, instead we continued to at least file grievances, you know, not really grievances, pero oral grievances and they started to at least, listen to us, and they basically found out who the instigator was or who they thought was the trouble maker. So, over a period of four years, I ended up getting terminated three times. But, every time I got terminated I was lucky because somebody at the county commissioner's courts, they would go to the department and say, "Well, why do you want to fire this individual, because you know, he's doing good work and this, and that." I found out este in the end que, the county commissioners, they knew they had problem with the Harris County Social Service, with the leadership there, but they couldn't fire them, or they didn't have any ammunition to fire

them. So, we were now becoming their tool to get rid of the supervision there. They were saying, "Well, we have too many employee complaints, they have issues, and you're not dealing with them" so, eventually, they got rid of the leadership at the Harris County Social Services, but I also ended up getting fired, with conditions though. They made them, uh, they forced them to pay me until I found another job and they made them recommend me to, for employment wherever I went, and I ended up working for Kathy Whitmire then, the mayor of the City of Houston. So anyway, based on that activity, then I went to work for Kathy Whitmire with the Housing Development Corporation is the CDC, Community Development Corporation, and they were having también employee problems, and I didn't know we had a union see, but anyway they were having employee problems and we started addressing those, we started organizing, and, and it's during that time that a union employee actually came up to me and said, "Hey, look we've heard a lot about, you do naturally what we pay people to do. Are you interested in working for us?" and I said, "You mean I'm going to get paid for doing that?'' This is fun. And so they said, "Yeah." So they hired me in 1976, and I worked for them for fifteen years just helping people out.

NG: What made you, what do you think makes you what to do that naturally, wanting to organize people naturally?

JP: Well, I think, over the years there's been several things este, my parents were very helpful with our community. I mean, they didn't go out and volunteer, but again look, being the oldest of ten and we, I remember still living close to the railroad tracks and back then they had a lot of, what do they call those hitch hikers on trains, uh…

NG: Hobos?

JP: Yeah, hobos, that's when they called them hobos. And they would get off in Big Spring,

Texas and we were real close to the tracks, like I said, about a block away. So we had a lot of hobos that would come and ask for food and coffee and donations and what not. I always remember my dad, you know, he didn't care who they were, "Hey, you know, make them a taquito, or give them whatever you have" and we were ten, we barely had stuff to eat, but, but he was always kind enough to feed them because he said, you know, "If ever something happens like that to us, I wish somebody would help you all. So, anyway, I think that was like an imprint there. I became like socially conscious of how bad their situation was, and then how my dad and mom were kind enough to, even give them, though they didn't have enough for us también to, at least, share what they have. And then the other part was I had a scoutmaster, and he's still alive, se llama Bird Andrews. I got to know him because he would go to church everyday. Everyday he went to church, but he got us into the Boy Scouts. And when we got into the Boy Scouts, and I was about ten or eleven, one thing that I learned from him too was that he was very, very helpful and very generous. Again, you know, to be in the Boy Scouts you have to pay to go to summer camp, you have to pay for your uniforms, and all this stuff. And again, we couldn't do it, but he offered to pay for the family, you know, "If you want your son to be a scout, don't worry about it, you know, I'll pay the expenses." One thing that I learned about him that I think sort of lead me into environmental work, which is what I do right now, is that I remember going camping and this old bus, we call este, what's that little mouse, Gonzales, Speedy Gonzales right, that's what we called our bus, Speedy Gonzales, but we used to go camping because this bus was real slow, an old bus, but we used to go camping and one thing that, that I learned right away and we all used to getmad, initially, but if we went to a state park, or even a national park, we would camp out like two or three days, and before we left, when we were getting ready to go home, he would line us up in a single file, you know, he said, "Spread your arms and everybody just line

up" and he would make us walk all the way through our camping area and beyond the camping area and clean up everything. He says, "If it doesn't belong in the dirt, pick it up" and initially, we think, well, what doesn't belong in the dirt because you're not used to it, right? Pero what he meant like, like if you saw a can you know, that doesn't belong in the dirt. If you saw paper that doesn't, if you saw cigarette butts, that doesn't belong there. So, he made us clean up, and as a young kid, we would say, "Yeah, but, you know, this was filthy when we got here and now you're making us clean up" but, he said, "Well, you enjoyed it and if we clean it up, others can enjoy it" and that's how I, I think I got into the environmental movement.

NG:You mentioned a couple of times that you started your union work in the seventies, why do you think, do you think that was a different time that, what made it different that you would start at that time?

JP: Well…

NG: Like if you started at a different time, do you think it would have been a different experience?

JP: With union organizing, uh, the experience changes with the loss of the nation, you know as far as labor unions are concerned. But back then they had public employees, let me tell you a little history. In our fifty states there is still eleven or thirteen states, I'm not sure if it's gone down to eleven, but back when I was working there were thirteen states, okay, they have what they call "Right to Work Laws," and Right to Work Laws means that an employer can terminate you at will. Now, the other states have contracts, or they negotiate contracts so, at least, you, you're protected from it when your outside of this thirteen states if you work for anybody in that state, at least you have some kind of security because before you get terminated they have to you know, let you know that your not doing the job right, you have a right to grieve, you have a, you

know if you get suspended you have a right to grieve that. But, right now in thirteen states we still have laws that say it's a right to work state, and Texas is a right to work state. And, basically again if you're a public employee, a politician runs for office, you know, like, any of our politicians right now, our city councilmen right now is James Rodriguez, when he takes office he can let all of his staff go and bring in new staff because you know, it's a right to work state. So, anyway, one of the differences back then was that we're still in a right to work state. So it's very hard to negotiate because when you have a right to work state, the city doesn't have to negotiate with the union. Now, it has changed then, since then, but if you call right now, the City of Houston actually has a contract with public employees where they come together and they negotiate wages, working conditions, and benefits, but it's really, it's kind of like laissez-faire contract because it's really a memorandum of agreement, where they agree to, to settle down their issues. It's really not a contract. So that has changed and now, under the Obama Administration okay, well, I'll tell you another thing. When you organize a union, you have to an election, that's by the Fair Labor Standards Act and if the majority of employees decide they want a union, then you get a union. But now under the Obama Administration, and this is long time overdue, you don't have to necessarily have an election to decide whether you're going to have a union. All it should be is that the unions, I mean, the employees, basically said, "We want a union to negotiate on behalf of us and we think we have enough people that are interested in it. So, let's start talking about forming a union." Because the other way, what happens is that the employer will, they'll start intimidating people that are talking about a union, and the easiest way to do it is if you're interested in becoming a union member and they find out that you're the leader, just like when I was in the early seventies, you know you're on your way out. They're going to fire you, or they'll come in there and they'll tell you, "Hey, look if you start a union, we

are not going to accept the union. We're just going to move our business somewhere else." So, so things are changing now, but back then and, and still, it's still hard in a lot of states to organize because management or the company always uses the other debate against unions. "Why do you want to pay the unions thirty dollars a month when you can just come and talk to me about your problems, you know and talk about pay raises," but it doesn't work like that, you know, because a company is not going to negotiate individual pay raises with anindividual, or vacation pay, or sick time. So you actually need a union, but that's another way to intimidate folks from joining the unions.

NG: Do you think that working for a union that negotiates with city and state employers, is that very different from other unions that would negotiate with private employers?

JP: Well see, there's really not a difference once you get a contract and the private sector is very easy to get a contract because the, in the private sector you know, because they're not a federal agency or they are not a county employees, or city workers, or school workers, private industry has always had the right to form a union and have collective bargaining. On the other side, public employees have always been denied that right, and they call that like being second class citizens just because you have to like you know, just like right now, if you work for the federal government este, and if you openly speak out too much against the federal government people think like you're not patriotic, that you got to do this because it's in the interest of the whole nation, right? But, they're also public employees just like the private individuals. If the private company is paying you to be an electrician, thirty bucks an hour, and you work for the city and you're getting paid minimum wage doing the same thing that electrical workers doing over here you know, it becomes an issue of livelihood, the same trade, but you're getting paid less just because you work for the government or a government entity. So, so there are

differences, and the difference, again es que private industry does have the right to collective bargaining, and all we're saying in the public industry is that these employees too deserve the right to collective bargaining. They don't want any more, just collective bargaining. Let's sign the contracts.

NG: So, your work with the union, can you give me an example or, maybe is there a memorable event in you organizing that kind of sticks out to you?

JP: Yeah, este I can tell you a couple, but I'll, I'll give you one that is a good example. I was sent to Corpus Christi to help a local that we had there, you know and our local had about, I guess, three or five hundred members. I don't remember, it was in like 1989, 90. But, anyway, here's this local, it's a public employee union and, and they're county employees. The, again when new politicians come into office they, they want to replace a lot of county employees, and we don't think that's right to begin with. So, anyway the county employees, they read a piece of legislation and, and a lot of this too, it has to do with legislative laws that we have in the state, but anyway, there was a piece of legislation and I forget what house bill it was, but it says that county employees can petition county commissioners for a right to organize and a right to have collective bargaining agreements and a right for civil service. Porque civil service protects employees, right? So, anyway, este we had an organizing committee and we organized all the county employees. We had about sixty- nine percent of the employees said, "We want civil service." So, we then submitted this petition with sixty-nine percent of the employees saying "We want civil service" to the commissioner's court, and you know what commissioner's court is, right? Como aquí tienen el judge, y luego tienen county commissioners. So, we submitted this petition to the court and the judge, Judge Barnes, that was his name, Judge Barnes, he looks at the petition and basically he said, "Well, we have sixty-nine percent of the workforce wants us

to give them civil service and we're going to let the attorney, the DA decide, the county Attorney." So, they gave the information to the county attorney and, of course, the county attorney already knew what we had been working on. So when he looks at the document he tells the court, "Well, look the legislation says this, 'That you,' it says, 'county Commissioners *may* grant the petition to civil service' they, they *may* grant, but it doesn't say *shall* grant." So then the judge says, "Well, okay, that does it," and threw the petition in the trash because the key word was he *may* grant civilservice. So, then what we did is, we, we were like at the time that that happened right before the next legislative session took place because our legislative people meet every two years. So it just so happens que when he denied the employee civil service, we turned around and we started working with, Senator Carlos Truan, and he was senator, y luego Hugo Berlanga in the house and we got those two and there were Corpus Christi house reps and senate, we, we told them, "Look, here we want civil service for our employees, but we can't get it because of this word *may*." So, they re-wrote the legislation to where it says "If county employees petition for civil service, county commissioners *shall,"* and this is what they have to do. They have to either have a public referendum, let the people decide, whether they should get civil service, or they can outright just give them civil service because they've got a lot of you know, people saying that. So, then we did a petition again and it took us about another six months, seven, seven months, but this time we almost had eighty percent of the county employees sign the petition, and when we submitted it to the court they had no choice. Now, now they had to do something. Either let the public decide, or just let them have civil service, and the county commissioners, what they did is, they said, "Well, you know we have all this county employees, they want civil service, and we think it's about time. I've always thought the employees have the right to, you know grieve, and they don't have to be terminated at will. So,

we approve this legislation." They twisted it on us. They got all the media saying that they had been wanting this all the time. So, that was a huge victory. Because we changed the law at the state level, that law applied to Dallas County, and applied to Cameron County, and it applied to Corpus Christi Counties because, at that time that law became applicable to cities that had populations of two hundred and ninety thousand, to three hundred thousand. So, they were in that gap and those three counties qualified for that. So, so now county employees in Nueces County, they have,civil service, just like the city workers here in Houston. They have civil service, and that way if you get terminated or if you feel like you have been disciplined unnecessarily, or been suspended unnecessarily, you file a grievance and there's a commission that hears you out, and if they decide in your favor, well you get back pay just like HPD officers, suspended with pay and what not. But, that was a big victory.

NG: Did you, what, you said you moved around for, to different places, where you always in Texas?

JP: I told you I had several things I could tell you about, but the other memorable thing that I remember about working for AFSCME was that in 1987, they sent me to work in Tucson, Arizona, and, and two things. One was that we wanted to get collective bargaining for the state of Arizona employees and the other one was that they had a governor, Governor Mecum that got elected, and the first order of business that he did is he did away with the Martin Luther King holiday. Now, this is before MLK was a recognized national holiday. Some states already had, in fact, some cities already had you know, a holiday for Martin Luther King, and some states had the state holiday. So, anyway, in Arizona they had a state holiday for MLK. The governor did away with it, and because this holiday impacted public employees, right, state, city, county workers, AFSCME said, "We're going to send you to Arizona. You and a whole bunch of other

folks that work with us, and two things you are going to do. We got to sign a petition to impeach the governor, and we've got to sign up union members." And we did both. We signed up union members, and we ended up impeaching the governor. The first governor of Arizona got impeached when we were working that campaign because he did away with the MLK holiday. And the reason that AFSCME was so adamant about doing that is because Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis at a rally for sanitation workers. He was there to speak on behalf of sanitation workers, you know, the right to unionize, the right to organize, the right to [ ] wages, working conditions, and benefits. And that's when he got assassinated. So our union, being the host party that invited Martin Luther King to speak to these people that we were trying to organize, instead, made it an issue. Every, everywhere we went they said, "We are going to ask for a Martin Luther King holiday because he died helping our workers," and that was their mission, at least, one of their missions, and we were successful.

NG: In Houston, have you had difficulties unionizing or with any particular issue that needed to be addressed?

JP: In Houston it's always been a problem, in fact, the whole state has been a problem with public employees. The, the most successful public employees in the state back then were like the Houston Federation of Teachers, and then also, maybe some county employees. But, in the State of Texas again, it's a right to work state and Houston is a big city, and it's very difficult when you don't have collective bargaining because, in a sense people do feel worthless like, "Why are we going to pay you if you can't negotiate for us a contract?" But, the other aspect that you always got to look at is that not given a contract or not having the right to collective bargaining, there is still strength in numbers. And, if you're a public employee, one of the things we tell people is, "Look, you vote?" "Yes, I vote." "Well, that's your strength right now because the

people that are, actually, are your bosses, are elected officials, and if we have enough people in the union we can vote that individual out," and so, when you have that strength, okay, you have like four or five thousand union members in the City of Houston. In the City of Houston, I think right now, and I'm just guessing, pero it has to at least have about thirty or forty thousand employees when you look at the entire city. And, so if you represent thirty of those, thirty thousand of those employees, you can elect your mayor, you can elect your city councilmen, you can elect whomever you want to. And once you elect those individuals that are going to be good for the union or supportive of the union issues because we helped them get in office, that's where the strength comes in even though you don't have collective bargaining, or the right to strike, and that's the other issue. Unions are strong when they have the right to strike and collective bargaining. In the state of Texas, right now, if you tell the teachers to walk out, you know, "Let's do a strike because, you know, you have too many students in your classroom or you don't have enough books, or the school facility is inadequate." The teachers will tell you, "We can't do that. We don't have the right to strike." And it's sad because that's a good tool to have, you know the right to strike, and if you can't have your employees walk off the job, again it shows like a weakness there in the system.

NG: So, within Houston, you think the power of the union is in their numbers and their…

JP: Well, about three years ago, maybe fours years ago because I've been out of the loop for a while, but SEIU Service Employees International Union. They came in here and they challenged AFSCME. Basically, it's not like a "I'm here to fight against you" but, another union came in here, SEIU, because they also represent public employees, and they came into the city of Houston, basically bad-mouthing AFSCME, and basically saying, "Hey, look, AFSCME has been here twenty, thirty years. What have they done for you? We're a new union, we're more

aggressive with this, and this, and that" and a lot of people did join SEIU. And SEIU, actually, was very instrumental in getting a contract with the city of Houston. So, now there, there's two public employee unions, and one of them, like I said SEIU, and they're basis for organizing the employees with the janitors. They target the janitors in the hotels and in the other public entities. But, when you go for public employees or when you organize janitors, like in all the hotels, that, that's different than the public employee that works you know, for the city or for the county. But anyway, they got them, they got them organized, they got contracts, they got good working conditions, they got overtime, they got sick pay. They even opened up a health clinic for their members to go free and use, and they want to use it. So they made a lot of progress. AFSCME is still around, but I think now it is called HOPE, Houston Organizing Project or something like that.

NG: Why did you end up getting out of working for the union?

JP: Because I was transferred to Santa Fe, New Mexico. They wanted me to permanently move down there, and the state, if you look at the state back in 1990. In the state of New Mexico, it's a very low, it's not very populated. I think they had like less than a million people in 1990, and here I was stationed in Houston where the population is almost four million and there's a lot more that you can organize here than in an area where you only have a population of one million, total population, and public employees is less. But, the reason they wanted me to move up there is because even though it's a very low density populated state, the governor there passed a collective bargaining law, basically saying you know, "Public employees, if you organize, you have the right to collective bargaining." So, that made it an issue, okay they wanted, of course that, that's like somebody giving you a hundred dollars and if you don't take it that's your fault because now you have the right to collective bargaining. So, anyway, they sent

me up there and I worked there for about three months and I didn't like it. So, I finally decided that it was time for me to quit. I like the area though, but I, I feel like I didn't have a purpose there and I knew we had serious problems here in Houston.

NG: When you came back from Houston, back to Houston, what did you start doing?

JP: Well, that's another good question because I'll tell you what I did. After I resigned working for AFSCME and I came back, for the next three years I had a very difficult time finding a job because as an international union organizer, first of all nobody could pay me what I was earning for the unions and then they were afraid of me going to work for them because they were afraid of you know, afraid that I would start a union. Then, in a lot of cases, they would tell me that I was over-qualified you know, for the kind of job that I was applying for. But, again, if you look at any situation, any individual that, I mean we're, we're going through this experience right now where a lot of people are losing their jobs right, because of the economy. Well, I didn't lose my job because of the economy. I lost it because I resigned, but I was in that predicament, okay, people didn't want to hire me, they didn't want to pay me what I was earning, and they didn't even want to give me a minimum paying job because they was like, "You're over-qualified." So, I had a lot of, three years of hard luck. Almost lost my home, got on food stamps, went to work at Jack in the Box, and also at a Stop N' Go as a cashier. And you know, when you go, again you know, from sixty thousand to minimum wage, with no benefits, it's tough. So, three years I had three years of hard luck, yep.

NG: And after that, what did you end up doing?

JP: After that, there was a job opening that my wife read about in the newspaper here in Houston, but it said, "Looking for organizer to work with communities of color in Baton Rouge, Louisiana." So, I took a chance and I called them up and I told them I would like to apply for the

job, because I could use my union organizing experience to maybe organize communities, right? And so anyway, two or three interviews and they decided to hire me. So then I went to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to work for Louisiana Labor Neighbor Project. And, as it turns out, the Louisiana Labor Neighbor Project here, here's how that came about. BASF is, a refinery okay, and, at BASF they had the oil and atomic chemical workers working there, OCAW, Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers. But when the, the refinery folks were negotiating with a company, because you can negotiate because they have contracts, you can have either a strike or you can have a contract, and the opposite is true, the company can have what they call a "Lockout." Un lockout means that the company just tells you, "Well, you know what? We're not going to negotiate with you and we don't want you to come back to work." So they basically terminate all the employees in the chemical plant and they start hiring new folks. That's a lockout. So, this lockout persisted for five years, but legally the union that was in place, they have legal rights you know, but it took them five years to finally get to a contract agreement with BASF. So, at the end of five years, BASF reinstated all the employees that had not gone off somewhere else, and you've got to remember again, okay, because this, these employees, they were out for five years, basically went through the same process that I went for three years that I couldn't find a job, well they couldn't find a job. They lost their homes. A lot of them lost their cars, their boats, their families because of divorces, they couldn't send their kids to, private schools, if they could. But, anyway, after five years those that still remained there in Baton Rouge were offered to return back to work. So when they came back to work, the union members, they wanted to do something for the community that had supported them. So, they started taking some of their own money and put it into what they call Louisiana Labor Neighbor Project. And these employees that work for Louisiana Labor Neighbor Project, their job was to

go into the community and to basically say, "Hey look, thank you. You were there with us for the five years that we were locked out and now how can we return the favor?" And, it turns out that the, what the community wanted was they wanted to deal with environmental pollution because you know, that's what they call "Cancer Alley," Baton Rouge to New Orleans. So, most of the community este when you go out and visit with them, they say, "Well, can you help us with this? Can you help us with that?" And that's how, in a sense, I got involved doing environmental justice issues, because that's what the community wanted.

NG: And what were you doing exactly, I mean, you were meeting with the community?

JP: Well, for the next almost three years, from 1994 to 1997, and again look, just like the MLK, Governor Mecum, that I happened to be there and we got him impeached because, I mean, that's in the books. That's history. It doesn't say like I did it myself, but I was part of that campaign. In Louisiana, in 1994, President Clinton signed an executive order stating that "Communities of color, primarily Latino and African American Communities that are already overburdened with pollution, that, that is wrong. And if you bring an industry into a community that's already overburdened with pollution, this is the criteria you basically have to pass." But, it's not an automatic. It's not a given. So, like, in Baton Rouge there was this African American community. It's, Convent, Louisiana. That's the name of the town. The population is only about 2500, very little community, right? So, you have a community of two thousand five hundred people, but they have five chemical plants surrounding their community, very much like Manchester. So, you have these chemical plants surrounding this community and now, here comes another huge company that's, Shintech. That's the name of the company. This company wants to build a seven hundred million dollar chemical plant in this community, you know, increasing the levels of pollution now. They are creating dioxin which causes mimics hormones,

birth defects y todo. PVC, they make polyvinyl chloride. So, here this community says, "Well, now we have something we can at least, fight against this company coming in." It's called Executive Order 12898. So, we filed an environmental justice petition with the Environmental Protection Agency and this took three years. You know, the, the, because you've got to prove a lot of stuff you know, that it's going to be harmful to the community, it violates the intent of the law. So anyway, we filed this issue with environmental justice on behalf of the community. The people that were leading the charge were obviously, the community. We were providing technical support, moral support, and you know just things that they need to get their act together. But, the lady, Ms. West, she appeared on Time magazine, on the front page, we were able to send her to Japan where the main company is you know, Shintech, and she talked to the board of directors and finally, after all this struggle with the community, the company decided, "We're not going to build. We got the message. You don't want us here, we're leaving." So, they went and built somewhere else. And, the leaders in that fight, Ms. West, Imelda West, she had a fourth grade education. She's still alive. She's in her eighties y la otra is Gloria Roberts, and she's still alive and see that's Ms. West. She's on Time magazine. And I have that because they sent, they sent me that stuff, see? And now, Ms. West, mira Ms. West now is in the museum with Martin Luther King's museum in Memphis, Tennessee. As she walked through there, they were, she's showcased, because it's an African American of her community, and we won the battle. So she's on there. And of course, it, no crees que no mas nosotros era, there was two main universities that was involved, the South Center for Environmental Justice. Green Peace was involved. So anyway, in this particular case, again, I feel like I was at the right place at the right time because this is what got the national attention right away. And the community, they dealt with the issue. If they didn't want a company there, they got them to move out. And that's,

basically, what started, oh, and during this time también I'll tell you what happened. Green Peace hired me. And the history of Green Peace is you know, basically a, what they are always referred to as, as a white male dominated rich folks that have the time and this is how they spend their time and money on. You know, being activists because they don't have anything else to do. But anyway Green Peace hired me, and, from, what I understand was that I was the first Latino that they hired as a permanent employee to work for Green Peace in the nation. Now Green Peace is an international organization so they have obviously Green Peace Mexico, Green Peace Canada, Green Peace Germany. But here in the states, they had never really hired a full-time staff person Latino, and, and I was the first one to work with Green Peace. So, I thought that was good too, coming, when they said, "You want to work for Green Peace?" I said, "Oh yeah man, that's, I can't believe it you know, working for Green Peace."

NG: What did you do for Green Peace?

JP: Worked on this campaign that was called the "Toxic Campaign" against PVC [polyvinyl chloride]. See, the polyvinyl chloride is a big industry. They're the ones that make this PVC for the homes right, for plumbing and all that stuff. Pero, PVC has dioxin in it, and dioxin kind of leaches out of the pipes. And also, a lot of your vinyl like you're windows right now, they have those vinyl este shudders. That contains PVC. All this is toxic. When it burns and even while it's there because it leaches out a dioxin, called dioxin. Pero, that's what we did with Green Peace. We worked on this campaign, we were successful, we went to Mossville and Lake Charles, and we fought the PVC industry there también, and we were able to, with other groups, relocate an entire community, because they would have been exposed to cancer–causing chemicals and other

[End of tape one, side one]

[Beginning of tape one, side two] And I was telling you earlier in Mossville and Lake Charles we

were able to, and these are our attorneysokay, but we're all working together, relocate four hundred and ninety-two families, primarily all African American community. They got relocated because they were too close to the exposure.

NG: Were, was the community already there when the PVC plant came in?

JP: Yeah, in most cases and, and that's a good question because a lot of folks want to know like, who was here first and a couple of ways you can answer that first. It really shouldn't matter who was there first. It should be about health and safety issues. That's why the EPA was created because, you know, the EPA was just founded in 1970. So, it hasn't been around a long time. But, the purpose of it being created was because it dealt with those issues. It didn't matter who was there first, but why should, like again, I reference to Manchester community, why should they bear the burden of cancer-causing chemicals that has an impact on their community where kids get leukemia, they get cancer, they get tumors, they get rashes, when the company, all it has to do is do what they call "Maximum Available Controlled Technology." All they have to do is spend money, install better equipment in their cars, I mean in their exhaust, so that all these chemicals won't be released into the air. Now, as far as who was there first, in a lot of cases though, the community was there first, and then it has to serve the needs, so then the industry comes in for a particular need. And now, all along the Gulf Coast of Texas, you know Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Florida, there's a lot of pipelines, there's a lot of oil rigs, but the problem, the bulk of refineries is in Corpus Christi, Port Arthur, Houston, and New Orleans. That's where practically everything that feeds the entire nation. All the refineries that make the gasoline, the oil products, even the make-up, makeup too, they're all along here and they are creating a lot of pollution.

NG: What, how do you deal with people who say, "Okay, we're not…" people who are arguing

that they don't want the company there, but people on the other side who say that they need the jobs in the area, how do you deal with that?

JP: Well one, one way to look at it es que, like when we were fighting for the Convent community, we, we didn't want to make it look like we didn't want the jobs, porque, see, the company Sintech, they were promising then, to bring you know three or four hundred jobs. In the beginning phase of construction they were promising that they were going to need like two thousand workers. Then once the company is built, or the refinery is built, all that trickles down to about sixty-five or a hundred workers because nowadays everything is basically automated and you also have to be educated to keep those jobs once you get to you know the construction phase has been over and done with. So anyway the, we called ourselves there, Saint James Citizens for Jobs and the Environment to make perfectly clear okay, we're not against jobs, and we care about the environment, and that we could work together if the company wanted to, but if the company chose not to work together with us, then, we were going to fight the system. Pero, we would tell employees, "Hey, we're not against jobs. But, wouldn't you rather have a company that comes in here and you get hired, but it doesn't have an impact on you, it doesn't pollute you, it doesn't cause cancer in the community, no birth defects, tumors. That's what we want. We want a clean environment." So, so that question is tough. It's tough when an industry is trying to come in to your community because they come in here with promising you all kinds of jobs and it seems like the community wants to throw them out. But, the, the reverse is opposite too, you already, in our nation, we have a lot of polluting industries, no, no mas refineries. Dry cleaners are polluters, believe it or not. Este so, so there's a lot of industries that we don't know what the chemical impact of the releases are on us because to a large degree we are an uneducated population when it comes to environmental issues. And one of the reasons is

because, look, sometimes you can smell a chemical like natural gas you know, they put, like a deodorizer so you can smell when it leaks, but otherwise if you didn't have that deodorizer in there you wouldn't smell that gas and it would kill you. And that's the thing with air pollution and chemicals being released from the companies. Here you have like they say benzine molecules in the air, you don't say, "he there's benzene, there's [ ] but you're breathing all these chemicals and they get thrown into your system and some of them cause cancer. So, it's pretty hard to fight issues like that and then to figure out whether they actually are a clean environment for the community or not because the community doesn't see that. So, you have to have meetings.

NG: Why do you think it is that, that, when you were saying, you are saying the community there, are you referring to the Mexican American community, or what are you referring to?

JP: Well the executive order that, that was issued primarily, addresses low-income African Americans, low-income Latinos, and low-income poor whites, because, and there have been studies done by this, where they show okay now, "Why is it that poor communities have all the waste water treatment plants? Why is it that they get all the chemical plants? Why is that they get you know things, as they say, we don't want those things in our backyard." And the conclusion on this study was that those businesses come to low-income communities, African American, Latino, and poor whites because they don't have the political resistance, in other words, right now people in Manchester, which is inundated with chemicals, they don't have a good relationship with their congressman, where they can call Gene Greene and say, "Gene Green, we don't want this company here because it's just going to create more pollution, and it's going to harm us." They don't have the political connections. That's one thing. And the other thing is they don't have the resources. Because if you want to fight an environmental issue, you're going to

have to retain an attorney that deals with environmental issues, and it's going to take a lot of money. So, that's why they say low-income communities, because they cannot afford to hire somebody to represent them, to either get rid of the company, or to negotiate. Now, in the River Oaks area, if you're familiar with Houston. I do toxic tours for our community, and I can take you right now and show you all the nasty things in our community like that scrapping yard there. They won't build that in the River Oaks, or they won't build that in, the Medical Center. They won't even build it downtown. But they'll put it in our backyard, see. So, so that's what environmental justice is about is that all these things that nobody else wants in their communities go into low-income communities because they don't vote, they don't have political clout, and they don't have the resources to fight it, and that's basically the essence of what environmental justice is all about. And it says you shouldn't discriminate just on those issues.

NG: How did you become involved with environmental justice in Houston?

JP: Well, after we were successful in winning this case with the EPA, with the Green Peace then they had like a four million dollar deficit, and the reason that they had a deficit is because after Clinton and Al Gore got elected, which seemed to be very environmental friendly individuals, right, and in fact Al Gore has a book and a movie right, about the environment and how we need to take care of it and all this. He even got a what, Nobel Prize for it. So, a lot of people that gave to organizations such as Green Peace stopped giving because they saw you know, somebody's already working on that, the executive order is a good example. We wouldn't have won this case if it hadn't been for Clinton passing an executive order. But anyway, people stopped giving and so Green Peace was going, uh, four million dollar deficit because they also, USA Green Peace practically funds all the international organizations. I think Canada, Mexico, you know, Europe, Asia, wherever they're at, they're the main source of income. So anyway,

they had a deficit. So they laid-off seventy-five employees. Green Peace laid-off seventy-five employees, and I was one of them because like, they always say, "Last hired, first to go." So they laid-off seventy- five of us, and what I did was I started looking for a job, and TSU had an opening at the law school. They said, "We need somebody to do community outreach, to do environmental justice work," and so I went to work for TSU.

NG: And what were you doing there? What kind of projects were you working on?

JP: Well, the first project that we started, having come down here, was the Ceasar Chavez High School. The Ceasar Chavez High School again, I don't know how familiar you are with it, but it is a quarter of a mile from an, Exxon is no longer there, but Exxon Mobile used to be there. We still have Texas Petrochemical and we still have Goodyear Tire and Rubber. Those three major facilities are within a quarter of a mile from the school and it has, and there's numerous studies, right now, that you can look at in harms way, you can look into Leukemia studies, you can look at a lot of studies that have been done, and that area right there, the Milby, the Chavez school, the Manchester community, out of twelve what they call hazardous air pollutants, out of twelve, they found eight are cancer-causing, and they're daily been exposed to those eight cancer-causing chemicals there. So, what started us here in Houston, when I came to work at TSU, that was one of our first projects, was that we did not want the school to be built there because we know that over time, people are going to be having cancer and birth defects, and leukemia. But, the school district, they claimed they made an air sampling study, and that you know, we didn't have anything to worry about. The, we complained to the city because initially the city said, "Well, what do we have to do with that? I mean, we're not building the school and, and those are not our industries?" But, we said, "But, you do have something to do with it because you're the one that gets permits. I mean, you can deny permits for health and safety

reasons." So anyway, we complained against the school, the city, and the county, and everybody we could. But, in the end, they went ahead and built the Chavez high school. And we even complained to the United Farm Workers because we told, "This is somethingque, it's an honor that Chavez is getting a school named after him, but it, also, is a dishonor because of his struggles." He always fought against pesticides you know, a health and safety issue against cancer you know, because of the pesticides, and so we told them to help us out, but they didn't help us, and again mira, here's how environmental justice links. As a Latino community, when they say you don't have the political clout, well, we didn't have the political clout, but we went to our politicians for help. Back then, it was Lionel Castillo. Lionel Castillo used to at one time be the, well he was the City Controller for the City of Houston, and then he got promoted to, uh, the head of immigration under the Carter Administration, and then, he came back and he was a liaison between HISD and the City. Whenever there was an issue he was like the middle man, right? So, we went to Lionel Castillo and we said, "Lionel, help us. You know we can't have this school here," and we talked to him about all the environmental issues because we have waste water treatment plants over there, we didn't have sidewalks going up to the school, we have Sims Bayou, we have the three chemical plants that I talked to you about, we have the railroad tracks, we had about a list of ten environmental issues that we really were concerned about. And Lionel was the one that basically told us, "Well look, there's so many environmental issues in that area that I'm going to recommend to the school district that they make this an environmental magnet school." Like a slap in the face. Because of all the issues he should say, "Well, we need to move this school, but being concerned about the environment, maybe we ought to have an environmental magnet school, but certainly not here," but his thinking was that if all those issues exist here that you are saying, well maybe the students learn by themselves, get educated, maybe

they'll walk out one day. You know because they'll realize what a mess it is. But he, it was upon his recommendations that they made it an environmental magnet school. I don't know if you know John Castillo. He used to be city councilman for this district. We approached John Castillo too and we said, by the way, John Castillo and Lionel Castillo are in-laws, or brother in-laws. We asked John Castillo, "Can you help us stop the construction of the school?" and during that time, it's unfortunate again in this case, John Castillo was being accused of taking bribes in exchange for city contracts. And he wasn't the only one, era John Castillo, Felix Fraga, Josh Pevey, uh, who are the others? There were six going, there were six city councilmen that at that time, the FBI did a sting operation and they found them, oh, Ben Reyes was one of them, and Betty Maldonado. So anyway, The FBI said, "We did a sting operation and these guys are taking bribes." So they all went to court, you know they had their day in court, and the only that had to serve time was Betty Maldonado and Ben Reyes. They were sentenced to federal penitentiary for taking bribes. The other four, you know I don't want to say they got away with it because you know I wasn't there, pero basically, that's the way people look at it. Luckily, they didn't have to go to jail, doesn't mean maybe that they weren't taking bribes, but in a court of law you've got to go with the facts, right. So, they can't prove them so they didn't have to serve any time, pero unfortunately, in Ben Reyes and Betty Maldonado did serve some time. So, that was one issue, okay. Politically look, we went to Lionel Castillo, John Castillo, we went to Senator Mario Gallegos because he's a senator to representing our district, and we said, "Senator, help us out, we don't want this school here," basically, and we wrote letters. And we finally get a response from Gallegos, and he sends me documents that the school district had sent him of doing what they call the environmental, it's an environmental impact statement. It was a document about the real document was about two inches thick. The document that Gallegos sent me was about eight

pages. Basically, that report stated that there's no environmental problems that we should be concerned about at that location. So, Mr. Gallegos submitted that to us thinking that that would be okay you know, there's no problems. But we personally, and me, I think that one of the reasons he did not pursue it farther is because at the time his mom was the school board president. So in my situation, or at least the way I was thinking is that we had asked for help, but then if he gets us what we wanted, he's stepping on his mom's toes because she's the school board president. So politically, I think you know, he just backed off and said, "Well, I'm going to have to go with what they supplied me with. Which, is okay, I can understand that, you know, "Here's what they told me, it's okay." But, again we found a lot of documentation to show that it, it's not a safe school, and it's still not a safe school. So mira, Gallegos, Lionel, John Castillo, and then we even went to, at that time, Carol Alvarado, she's now a state rep, but back then she was a community liaison for Mayor Lee Brown. And her deal was, "I grew up in the neighborhood. I am from Manchester. I live over there, and you just have to get use to the smells" and that's, you know, how can you say we have to get used to the smells when nobody else has to, and these are cancer-causing chemicals. But, she said you get used to the smells, and, literally sabes que people do get used to smells because after a while, your system kind of just doesn't recognize it anymore because you're so used to it, but it doesn't make it right. Just like, you know, the trains coming through our neighborhoods, they're always honking and after a while, they're just like oblivious, you don't care. But, they're there. For somebody that's new in the area say, "Oh man, how, how can you sleep with the trains" or they will, they'll go into a neighborhood, "Man it stinks, how can you?'' "I don't smell anything" because your immune system you know, that's what your body defenses does, it teach you how to protect yourself. But, you still inhale it, inhaling it still. So mira, politically, the people that could have helped us did

not help us. So then we even extended our, I guess, petition or request for assistance at the national level. We called National La Raza Council, right? We called the United Farm Workers, we called MALDEF in San Antonio and we said, "We need help because they're building a school in a very dangerous toxic zone." The National La Raza Council, they told me, "Juan, we don't have anyone that does environmental justice work and it would take like a lot of research and study to get you help. So, we don't have anyone available." And all three Latino groups, basically told me the same thing "We have other priorities when it comes to environmental stuff. We have teenage pregnancy, we have high Latino drop-outs, we have immigration issues, we have separation of families. The environment we care about, but we don't have anybody to help you with that." And, and that's why the environmental justice is defined as we don't have the political clout or the political connection. So, anyway, pass came to, because everything passed and they built the school. And we're stuck with it now, until somebody, either a major accident will happen, that you know, causes injury, harm, or death, or as time goes by, a lot of those students going to that school are going to end up with cancer and leukemia, other issues. And they will because there's already other cities that have gone through what we're going through, that have schools right next to chemical plants and there's a lot of cancer rates because you know you don't get cancer from one day to the next, sometimes, it just continual exposure. And there's one in Port Arthur. Que llama? It's, the community actually calls it "Leukemia High." Instead of Port Arthur High School, they call it "Leukemia High" because a lot of kids have leukemia, and this is over a twenty year span. So again you know, that's in a nutshell how I got involved in the school here. That was a big issue.

NG: What do you think the solutions would be at this point?

JP: The solution I think is to, well depends on views, right? Because the Environmental

Protection Agency, what they say is, "If we get them to reduce their emissions of toxic chemicals into the air, won't that make the school a safe place?" and I told them, "Yes, as far as exposure, yes, but what, what about the case of an explosion? You're too close." So, as far as I'm concerned, if there, if the potential of the risk it says, that there could be an explosion, I'd rather the kids, or that school be shutdown, and relocate the students. Because if they reduce toxins, that's one thing, pero you're never going to get rid of a possible explosion. Just like in BP. They had an explosion and seventeen employees died. And this school, I'm telling is so close to the chemical plants that if there is an explosion, something is going to happen. I can't predict what, pero it's too close. And those are just studies based on the EPA. I tell you what the EPA did in 1996, and this is nationwide, okay. Anywhere, there's chemical plants, see mira Texas Petrochemical, Exxon Mobil, Goodyear Tire and Rubber, and here's the school. They said, "Produce the worst thing that can happen in your school." They call it the "worst case scenario." But, the industry, and this is how the industry twists some of the wording, Instead of producing the worst case scenario they said, "Well, we're going to give you a risk management plan." You know it kind of makes it more accepted that way. So, risk management, instead of the worst case scenario. But then, that doesn't mean if there's still an explosion at Texas Petrochemical and let's say twenty-five thousand pounds of chlorine are released into the air. What can happen? And the EPA had all this data. They said, "Look, look, just give us a scenario. The wind speed is ten miles per hour, so it doesn't matter which way the wind is blowing. But, it's ten miles per hour and it's twenty-five thousand pounds of x chemical, what harm could it cause, and how far would this have an impact, right?" So anyway, they have the, here's the end point. If there's an explosion here, and the end point is like nothing happened. You didn't even know an explosion happened because the chemicals and the impact of that explosion didn't get to this point. But,

then they have what they call the "near point." The near point again, is injury, bodily harm, or death. The school is in the near point of those three facilities. So already, just based on what the EPA and what the companies are saying, in my opinion anybody with sense would say, "Well, why do I want to put three thousand kids so close to harm's way, when I could put them at the end point or the far point?" but the school district says, "Well, that's the only place we could find this amount of land to build a new school in. So, for that reason I would say the community needs to wake up and just demand that they get another school. And financially let me tell you another reason they could demand it. In 1996, we had an election to approve the building of the Chavez High School and the West End high school, and it was going to be almost four hundred million dollars for the construction of two new schools, right? The voters, they said, "No, no way. We're not going to approve the bonds." So, then, that looks like it's already a done deal because the school district doesn't have the money to build the schools, and because they rejected the bonds. But then the school district, what they did is they went to the city, they said, "Well, we don't have to go that route. We can do it by creating a tax increment reinvestment zone." And the tax increment reinvestment zone, the first thing it does, you don't have public participation. It's kind of like a new way of spending money without the voters having to approve it. So, they created a tax increment reinvestment zone and, and here's the zone, and the zone includes the three industries and it includes the school. So that way, again, nobody voted. They built the school at nearly a hundred million dollars, and the way that school is supposed to payoff by itself is when you create a tax increment reinvestment zone is that when you have a zone here, and the taxes go up, that new tax that is created every month, it pays off for their school. That's the theory that, how it's supposed to work. Because, you know taxes, if you own a house, inevitably, every year your tax rates go up, right. So it's that extra income, increment,

they call it an increment, over a thirty period that would be used to pay for the school. In this area, you have Exxon, Goodyear, and Texas Petrochemical and their tax base let's say is at this level. What happens is that it started going down, and in order for the school to get paid, it has to be at where it was in 1998, and anything above that goes to pay the school. Right now, the taxes are so ridiculously low, for companies that are making billions of dollars in profit, there's no money been generated. So in a sense, mira, financially it's a hundred million dollar investment and we haven't even made a penny in taxes to pay for that school. So, it's not economically good to have it there, and it also is harmful for those kids that are going there. To me, this is fiscal irresponsibility because we spend a hundred million dollars and we're not making any money to pay for that school. So, money is coming out from other areas to pay for this school. And the other thing, we have now nearly three thousand kids in harms way. So if people say, "Well, if we close the school down, we spend a hundred million dollars," yeah, you spent a hundred million dollars that you thought you were going to, as an investment, that you thought it was going to pay for itself. So that's not being done, why worry about ten million dollars, I mean, a hundred because you don't even have it. You lost them already, and you're never going to get it. To me, I tell folks, it's like Enron, este you invest money and you expect to get something in return, but in this case, they invested our, our children's lives are being invested, money has been invested, and nothing's been done. And if you talk to the city about what they call the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones, they'll tell you, "Well, Juan that's only in paper now. That doesn't exist. It only exists in paper." It doesn't. To me, it exists in lives and money. Somebody has to be accountable for that. But, that's how they get away with it. Now, another issue that I didn't tell you is que, when we were, when I was telling you about the politicians, mira, our school board member, at that time, was Esther Campos. And I personally went and I met with Esther Campos

and I said, "Esther, why are they building this school here? I mean, it's not a good area," and she said, "Well, Juan, you know it's, they're going to build a school there," but, let me tell you what she said, "I have documents. Every board meeting, I have documents talk about this high, three stacks of documents. Dijo, "I can't go over those documents. You know, the school district doesn't provide us with personal secretaries, it doesn't hire anybody to do this," dijo, "so all those things that you're telling me about the school, it may be true, but I don't have time to go through all those documents. We rely on paid consultants that they hire, you know, to come in and make recommendations to the school board and, then, the school board makes a decision." But, in a nutshell, you know, what she told me is that she ain't got time to read all this stuff, she doesn't have the help, and she says, "And what am I going to tell the public now, if I have to tell them we wasted a hundred million dollars?" "Okay, well what are you going to tell them if two or three kids, or more, die because of us building a school there?" "Well, we hope that never happens." I go, "I hope it never happens too but, the risk of it."

NG: Why do you think environmental issues are so low on people's radar?

JP: Well, there have been studies that indicate, it's low con los gabachos, los negros, or Latinos, and when it comes to Latinos it ranks pretty high. The environment, they care deeply about it. Now, when it comes to African American communities, they have been able to network, more closely with the NAACP, with church ministries, to fight for environmental justice issues, and I think it all has to do with just the simple fact of you know, going from slavery issues, to discrimination issues, to continued discrimination issues, to lynching, and, so when they see something that has an impact on their community, they're more used to coming together, I think as a race to fight an issue. Y con los Latinos, we've always been split. So why the environment is good for all ethnic Latinos, you know, sea de donde sea, Guatemala, we're not as united as the

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African American community is. Not even with LULAC, or NACLA, or GI Forum, or national organizations. We're not as united as those groups are. So, I think, that's one of the problems. All these national Latino organizations don't come to the aid of a community when it comes to environmental issues as the African American community does. And, in fact in Louisiana, when I used to work in Louisiana, one of the key factors down there in helping us change the laws at the state level in Louisiana were the African American elected officials. They actually, mira, they would come into a community and they would say, "Well, you know, we know have this environmental problems here. I'm not an expert on environmental issues, but I do represent you at the state level and if you contact this organization, you know to sort of help you with your issues and they bring out those ideas to me, then I can propose legislation." So, they work with the community in that way. They, themselves, you know, "Contact this organization and this and that, and they'll help you." The same thing with the NAACP, we had marches in Baton Rouge with at least, I would say ten to fifteen thousand people would march with us around the capital to protest you know, environmental issues. But here, in our state and other states, where you have Latinos that are in the same situations as those African American communities, we don't have first of all, the politicians that actually will go out into the community and say, "Hey look, get together with ONE, or get together with GASP (Group Against Smog and Pollution), or get together with CLEAN (Citizens League for Environmental Action Now), and let them help you out, and then you all come and talk to me, and I'll help you out" We don't have it. Our key instead, you know, our politicians say, "Hey, there's nothing wrong here. I grew up here, and besides you live in Houston, it's the industrial capital of the nation, you know, this is what you have to live with because this is who we are. Houston is a big shot in industry." And then we're having to fight the Greater Houston Partnership también. They always have good advertisement

about you know, how the port brings millions and millions of cargo, industry, jobs, and it's all good for Houston. But, but, I think, that's what Latinos need to do. They need to be more active, and they need to, and another thing they need to do, anyone who cares about the environment, they ought to be supportive of groups like us, and others that are trying to change the environmental situation. Pero aquí we're non-profited and I'm telling you, we are working with nickels and dimes. And there's some other, I mean like take a national organization Sierra Club, Audubon, Green Peace, National Wildlife Federation, every month they get literally millions and millions of dollars from private individuals who want the environment preserved. And there's local groups también like us that are in other states that are you know, they're trying you know, they're, they're not, they're not getting rich, but at least they have money to fight the issues that they care about for their communities. Aquí no. I have a lot of college students that come in here, they volunteer, in kind and then I have a lot of other groups that say, "Well, you guys are doing a good work and keep it up," but no finances, and that's what it takes. That's what I'm telling you about environmental justice is, even the poor people can't give you the money to help them out.

NG: You mentioned a couple of times, Manchester?

JP: Um-hm

NG: Do you mean Magnolia?

JP: No. Este Manchester, if you go straight down Harrisburg, the next community is Manchester. It's adjacent to Magnolia

NG: And that community, is it along the ship channel as well?

JP: It's bordered by the Houston Ship Channel to the north and then, it's bordered by Valero to the east and then, it's bordered by railroad tracks, train yards, y luego there's one or two entrances into that community. It's literally a hub surrounded by chemical plants and train yards

and everything that again, nobody wants it. And it's the worst community in the city in addition to Deer Park area. And I'd be glad to take you down there to show you. 'Cause that's why we do the toxic tours because visually, right now see we can talk about all these things and some people will get a concept idea of what it is and where it is because they live there, but if you're just new and I'm telling you all this stuff it's like it's amazing, but once you see it you say, "Yeah, this ain't right. It should be changed."

NG: When you moved to Houston, what neighborhood did you move to?

JP: Gulfgate area. You know where that is right?

NG: Uh-hm.

JP: Okay, yeah, the Gulfgate area. By Telephone Road and Spanky's, that little section right there. Almost by Hobby, the turn into Hobby Airport, Park Place.

NG: So, do you still live around there?

JP: No, I live down here. I live in el segundo barrio by Eastwood Park.

NG: Okay. And did, is it important to live, that you are working in the community that you live in?

JP: Well I think it's important for all of us to try and improve our communities 'cause you know that's where we live, that's where our kids go to school, that's where you, probably work. Pero, as an individual, to me it's important that all communities in a sense be treated equally. You see, we all pay for city services, but if I take you, that's what I'm telling you, we do the toxic tours. If I take you to some of those neighborhoods, again they all pay taxes, they're all entitled to good city cleanup services y todo. But, if you see the neighborhoods and they're not getting it, you wonder, "Well, why not?" and it's because economics, social economics como dicen, poor people versus, you know the rich, La Raza, because it's African American or because

it's Latino. So, you have all these issues still in existence even in the city of Houston. A lot of people that I take on toxic tours, they think, "Man, this is like a third world country" "Yeah, it's because you live in a third world neighborhood."

NG: The people you take on toxic tours, are they people from this neighborhood only or outside?

JP: No, they're mostly, there's, mostly a lot of outsiders, college students at Rice, este UH, Houston Community College. We have people that come in from Bhopal de India, de China, de California, because once you start connecting with other environmental groups, there may be like a conference going on in Atlanta, and there's a caravan of buses going there. So, they'll call you up if they know you and they say, "Hey, Juan we're coming through Houston. Can you show us este the East End, and can you tell us issues that we can take on to Atlanta, or take on to New York, or DC?" So, we get a lot of people like that too, that are coming through here for a mission and then they get exposed to what's here. And that's how you are able to network. Like with the US Social Forum that took place in Atlanta, we even had, I'll tell you what we had, we had about three hundred people that got on the caravan in Albuquerque, New Mexico, they went to El Paso, they went through a whole bunch of major towns, and they finally ended up here. By the time they get here they had about five hundred people in three or four buses. And we were able to invite the mayor to the Manchester community because the mayor also had a study done on the levels of you know, toxins in the air, and Mayor White has been very active in trying to reduce the level of pollution. Pero, Mayor White, at that time, his committee had done a report and that's the one I was telling you about, okay. They found twelve hazardous air pollutants and eight of which are cancer-causing chemicals and so he was on the news about he wants to reduce levels of benzene. And so, when we had all this caravan of people here, they wanted to protest, it

could've gone two ways. They could've have come in here to do a protest which then we don't think the mayor would've come because you know he doesn't want like five hundred people from various states coming in and protesting on his city. So, what we did is instead of making him an enemy we made him an ally. We said, "Look, here's people that believe in your study and support the community, and they're here to rally for you, you know keep doing the good job." So he actually spoke you know to the crowd you know, and he told them what he was doing as to why he thought it was important to the communities, because he says, "Everybody's entitled to clean air," and that's a human right you know. You're entitled to clean air. And so, instead of us turning against him or giving him a hard time, he was there cheering us on, and I have pictures about that tambien.

NG: I read in the *Texas Observer* there was a story about you and the Chavez school in 2007, and it said that the city health department was going to be doing door to door studies to document the prevalence of cancer. Do you know anything about that?

JP: Este I know there's a program right now called HEATS, and I think it's Houston Environmental, I don't know. Anyway, there is a study that's being done jointly with the University of Houston, I think UTMB, and someone, a couple of researchers. But, they haven't been successful because they've been going into the houses, and one of the criteria's they develop for themselves is, first of all mira, cigarettes have benzene, okay. So, if they're going to go house to house on, in the Manchester community, once you find a smoker, they're not eligible. That household doesn't qualify for the study because that's what they want to find. They want to find benzene in those houses, but if you smoke, you're going to find it. So, anyway, they were having a hard time, pero the, the city health department really hasn't done any studies in that area. I wish they would. And, and the other thing is here, there's already too many studies

that show that we have a serious problem there. We, we actually don't need anymore studies to confirm you know, the previous studies. When I tell the folks and the EPA, and other organizations that, or government entities that can help us, I say, "Look, we got to deal with solution solving now. You know this is happening. How do we react now? Not let's make another story to confirm que what we want to do is what's right. But, there's money in research versus money in actually solving the problem. And, in fact there's people, mira, and maybe you've heard this, there's people within our circles that say, "Okay, there is a cure for cancer," but there's no money, and once you start dealing with cancer patients and you cure them, then the doctors don't make money, the hospitals don't make money. Some you can go to all those extremes también. And, and that's what communities are always saying, "Look, you are always studying us, but you're never helping us" because studies only show a symptom, but they don't solve, come up with real solutions. And real solutions would be to "Hey look, if you believe this is going to cause cancer and you know it's a cancer-causing chemical, well the best thing to do is relocate people, move them out." But then, they say, "Well, who pays for the relocation?" Well, the polluters. We are known in our state for having the least fines on industry than any other state. We do uh basically a slap on the hand and say, "Okay, you owe us a thousand dollars for releasing all this amount of pollution or, or causing all these problems." Because we have a very friendly commission towards industry. Now, one of the things that Lisa Jackson, the director of the new director of the EPA, administrator, we were fortunate to have a meeting with her in June of this year in Dallas, Texas, and she says she is a firm believer in environmental justice and that she's going to make it a priority and that also, she's going to make sure that Texas changes it's "good ole boy" system of dealing with the industry. And that's, actually coming to pass porque there's already a few changes that she's made. We're seeing that she's coming down hard on this

industry. In other words, they can clean up their act. They just don't want to spend the money because they're talking about profits. And again, it's even hard to prove that this company caused cancer to an individual because we have so many of them it's like, "Well, who, who's really the culprit here?" So, so they've been getting away literally with just polluting us and making the profits, and then the people have to pay a huge burden on healthcare. Pero, she's coming down on it.

NG: Can you tell me the name of your organization?

JP: Ours is TEJAS. It's uh, the acronym is TEJAS, but it stands for Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services. And we named it, when we were trying to think of a name you know, like there's another organization called CLEAN, Citizens League for Environmental Action Now. Now that sounds like a good organization, but it doesn't really denote like a geographical area, right? It could be anywhere, so anyway, we thought of an acronym that, because we want to deal with statewide issues, communities of color, in Mission, Texas, as well as Odessa, Texas, and Lubbock, Texas, and the east you know, west Texas. So, we made it a name that's going to be like, we're not just for Houston, or we're not just from Manchester. It has more of a universal tone than just simple one location. Because some, some folks initially thought like in our group I'd say this is our group, they wanted to call it well, "Houston Environmental Justice Center." Then, if you're outside of Houston that means that we couldn't help you out. And when you create a non-profit organization, your mission statement and also the name has a lot to do with what you're allowed to do by IRS stuff. So, we're kind of like uh, we have on there educational programs, technical assistance, legal assistance, and if necessary, maybe, legal action. That's if we can find somebody to pay.

NG: What is the goal of the organization? What are the goals of the organization?

JP: Well the goals are to fight environmental justice issues. That's the goal.

JP: And then the way to do that is to do it through education, through workshops, through training, to teaching people who to call in case there's an accident or, or who to contact if they have a certain environmental issue because you know in the greater Houston area, all the way from here to Texas City, then Galveston Bay, we have a lot of water quality issues también, a whole bunch. And there's some groups that are dealing with water issues, there's some that are dealing with land contamination, you know, [ ] the Super Fund sites, but our focus right now is on the environmental justice communities all around the Houston Ship Channel. It's a big mission.

[End of tape one, side two]

JP: Well there's, there's three of us, four of us that started it. The, I told you I was working at the law school at the Environmental Justice Center, and it, not all law schools. Pero mira, law schools have clinics right, where they offer like young attorneys that want to be attorneys. It's kind of like uh, an internship where they get into family practice so, so then the law school provides family, or helps somebody that has a family problem by coming in and they get free services, right. So anyway, the TSU had an environmental justice clinic, and what we did is we provided legal assistance, technical assistance, and education. But then after nine years of working there, they had some layoffs también, and I got laid-off again. But they, if you remember President Slade got in trouble, where theyaccused her of mismanaging monies and personal use. So, because of that, all the departments were told that they had to layoff x amount of employees, you know to deal with the financial crisis. So, I got laid-off. But, even before that layoff occurred, we had been thinking about starting our own non-profit, and the reason we wanted our own non-profit separate from the school was because, when you're the school and

any university gets, they get a lot of money from corporate, from the corporate world, now, they might make three million dollars donation for a new building, or another five you know for research, so even though it sounds good working for a university, fighting for environmental justice, they keep an eye on you and if you're going beyond what they see as trouble for them getting money from the foundations or the corporations, they'll say, "Hey, you need to back off of this case, or you need to not do that, or you can do this, but don't do that." So, there's a lot strings attached, right. So, because of that we were thinking that about coming up with an organization that nobody can tell us where to go into. You know, anywhere we want to go, we can go because nobody's going to stop us unless somebody shoots us. So, anyway, it was my son, Brian Lucas, or Lucas , and then my wife Anna, and then I have a real good friend named, Krish Navini, she's Indian from India, she got involved, another guy named John Sullivan, and we had another young lady, Pakistani, that helped us iron this out, do the non-profit application, and we finally got non-profit status in 2006. And once we got the status, then we got this building, and the way we financed this building was that each of us contributed to pay for the rent. We split it up, and so we maintained this building until we got a little grant for twenty thousand dollars, and we used most of that money, we use it for rent, because everybody is practically, volunteers here. And, and we have a lot kids who come in here. I say kids, but they're college kids because I'm an old mule, right? Pero sí, so it's mostly volunteer driven and out biggest expense is the rent. But, that's how we started.

NG: And what kind of activities has TEJAS been involved in since then?

JP: There's a lot of activities. Do you know channel eight aqui in UH, Patricia Gras? Do you know Patricia?

NG: No.

JP: Patricia does interviews and then she puts them on PBS, and they're like thirty minutes to an hour long. So, we got several interviews with her that actually have been on air. We've done also Green Watch. We've done KPFT, where they get us on the radio to talk about issues. We've done the *Texas Observer*, CNN did a story on us, I mean este, the Center for Health and Environmental Justice has featured us on their national magazine two or three times. We, I have served on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, which is a federally appointed position to be an advisor to the EPA, and then, I'm on several boards, national boards, Alliance for Healthy Homes, they deal with childhood lead poisoning. You know the Gulf Restoration Network? They deal with coastal issues, erosion, wetlands, over-fishing, the oil rigs, the wetlands, so I've been on a lot of boards that deal with you know, environmental issues, but we've done a lot. In, in, in the short time that we actually have existed on our own, from 2006 to 2009, we have done a lot, and one of those I guess successful things I can tell you about es que look, there's environmental organizations here that have been working here for the longest, and now that there's a new administrator with, uh, the EPA, Lisa Jackson, and she visited Dallas, Texas, and when she came to see our staff in Dallas, she wanted to meet some I guess activists, and out of anyone they could have picked, they you know, they elected us. They told us, "Come on down, we want you to meet her." There were about ten of us that were invited to a personal meeting with Lisa Jackson, and I think that says a lot for our organization because in a very little time we've made an impression or we've at least been noticed to where now we've beeninvited to the table. When you get invited to the table, that is what, even when I was working with the unions, that's what you want, because if you're not at the table, you're not making decisions and you're not influencing anyone. So, that's, that's why I think that what recently happened is good because, at least, we did something to get noticed.

NG: What do you think you did to get noticed?

JP: Well one is that Anderson Cooper did a good story when they did is the Planet in Peril. That featured the Manchester community and the high rates of leukemia with the people that we have been working with. That gave national attention and luego también, the Center for Health and Environmental Justice, when they posted the Caesar Chavez School in their front page, and, and ways dealing with schools, school citing issues. That gave us national attention. And then being on this national board también, it gives us an upper hand to, to deal with people, that we can get more exposure. And, we have a good board, a good volunteer board que like Krish Navini, like I told you, she was the international organizer for the Bhopal incident. You know, that was the accident at Dow Chemical and Union Carbide had in India. It killed about twenty-five thousand people just overnight because of the plant leaking. So, she's on our board and she brings an international presence. We have an attorney, Martina Cartwright that works at TSU. She's an environmental lawyer. So, she's got a lot of history también, and she's on our board. We have probably, who you are going to interview también, Maria Jimenez, she's on our board and she's known for all her immigration activities. She's still you knowadjunct professor at UH. So, we have some good national figures that have been recognized nationally for their work on our board, and I think that also helps.

NG: What, who's on the staff here, or maybe not who, but how many people do you have on the staff?

JP: Well, if you're thinking staff like paid people, we don't have anyone. Pero, we do have what we ourselves want to call our staff people. Like, I'm the executive director, okay, and then, we have my son, Brian Lucas, who does all the videos, documentaries for us. He's done a lot on Katrina y Hurricane Ike, y Rita, and then also went to New Orleans and filmed a lot of the Ninth

Ward, and even here at, in Galveston, right after Hurricane Ike, they were not allowing people in there, pero he was able to get in there because we work closely with University of Texas Medical Branch, UTMB, and so they had badges to get into the hospital, so we were able to get in with them to do some filming about the destructions. So, there's a lot of things that happened to give us national exposure.

NG: What did, what are you all doing with those films that he's taking?

JP: Well, we've done a lot of things. One of them actually was sent to nearly twenty-five hundred doctors throughout the nation, the documentary that we did on Katrina, and health exposure, and then there's some film series that we have participated on all that, on New Orleans because of Katrina that, that's been documented by TEJAS, and we also did a film here called este "Wish, Wishing You Were Here, in the East End," but we actually had kids, high school kids that went out there and filmed it themselves. They did the interviews, and we turned it into a cassette. That's been recognized también aquí. It's been on PBS. So, he does a lot of documentaries like that. And basically it's going into the community and interviewing, just like you're doing an interview right now, where we tell them, "Okay, how long have you lived here? What are your concerns, and have you seen any action done?" And most of them will tell you, "No. It's like nobody cares about us." And we want that on film so that we can convince foundations that look, this community needs help, or these individuals need help.

NG: And you mentioned a little bit about funding, but aside from the money from the board members and that grant, where else is funding coming from?

JP: We have two grants from the EPA, Environmental Protection Agency, and their money was, it was quickly received and quickly spent because there was some really poor programs. It was to deal with two conferences, and when we do conferences and invited what they call

"Activists in Region Six," and region six is Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, Texas, okay. So, they gave us money to invite people to a weekend conference where you pay you know, their meals, their hotels, their planes, their travel, so, but it was enough because you also get a little bit of money in indirect cost, and that indirect cost we used to pay the office space. Pero, yet it brought together two or three hundred people that are having similar issues throughout in these states to talk about how we can network and be effective. So, we did that twice. That kind of kept us going. And then we got I told you a twenty thousand dollar grant to begin with, and on and off we'll get help from the Environmental Support Center, and they don't provide any money. What they do is they provide us with equipment, with cameras, with computers, with the screen that's here so we can do Power Point presentations. But most, mostly we've been struggling on very little money for the last three years. And then, the other thing that kept us afloat es que we all had individual jobs and this was like a side job where we come in here and just bust our tails off trying to do something. But, everybody sort of has a full-time job and recently I don't have a job because I got laid off at TSU. So now I'm trying to raise money to pay myself at least, to continue doing this kind of work and keep this place open.

NG: And is it pretty difficult to raise money?

JP: Well,

NG: Especially, in this economy?

JP: Well see there's going to be a lot, a lot of money for green jobs now, which is kind of like what we're going to go into. But it's difficult because most non-profits, you almost have to have a ten, fifteen year history of existence before people can actually trust you with a lot of money. So, the grants that we got, or we get, are anywhere from fifteen to twenty thousand. And then other organizations that have been around for a long time, basically are doing the same thing

we're doing, getting anywhere from two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand. So, that's what we have to build, pero that, that's going to take time because they're not going to give us you know, three hundred thousand dollars and say, "Okay, you're doing a good job." It just takes time. It's kind of like a credibility issue. "Are you going to really do it?" But, but we get money you know, on and off, and that's to at least keep us alive, keep us going. And then we get individual jobs you know, contracts here or there.

NG: What kind of contracts?

JP: Well like UTMB, they, they wanted to do a study, and I'll give an example. They wanted to do a study of take, take blood and urine samples out of fifty individuals in Manchester. They also wanted to compare that community to Aldine community, same thing, urine, and blood samples. But they didn't have the, the network or the connections in those communities to just go in there and say, because you know, nobody wants to, you, you don't want to get a call, "Hey, can you all come together and give us blood and urine?" People are, they say, "Well, why, and what for, and what are you going to do?" Right? So again, mira, in those communities, we have the trust, they know us, so then UTMB says, "We want to do this study, but can you help us get the community together?" So, they'll pay us like two thousand dollars per community to get them together, and then of course they, they pay for all the printing, the flyers that we have to do, and all we have to do is basically get the community out there, and, and that's a task in itself, and we've been successful in doing that. Right now, I told you there's another project that's going on mira, and they're spending three million dollars in the same two communities, and they haven't been able to get people to volunteer. It's because it's like researchersyou know, going in, going in there, que no los conocen, they don't know them and they want to come into their house and they want to do three or four hour interviews about everything you know. How many kids do you

have, how many marriages, who smokes, who drinks, who does this, obesity, and you know, people don't like that, they don't like you, they like a lot of research in a sense, pero they don't like you coming into their personal homes and being intrusive in a way. And again, that's, they got to, they have the money, but they can't do it. They haven't done it, and we did it for two thousand bucks. We're cheap, cheap labor.

NG: Is there anything else that you think is important to talk about, that you, that you think we should have on record?

JP: Well like you said, you're sort of doing like an oral history of the area. I think that the politicians that we have had serving this community and even to date, I don't think they're doing enough to really help the communities. Because right now the trend is gentrification and it looks to me like it's already starting. If you go down to Minute Maid,and you come down Harrisburg Street, or Canal, or Navigation, and even Leeland y Walker, we're getting a lot of condominiums coming in, and those condominiums are not cheap. You know, they're anywhere from two-hundred and fifty-thousand to three hundred thousand dollars. So, it's bringing in people that have originally left the inner city because they thought it was too crowded and too big, but they found out that living way out there in the suburbs is taking them a long time to get to work. So, a lot of those people that have money and the ability to pay for those condominiums, they're moving in, at the cost of low-income communities because then, the tax bases go up, and it's going to displace a lot of people. So that's one issue, gentrification. And then, the other issue that I think we face in the future es que we have a lot of historical houses here and a lot of historical buildings, but the city as a whole, the city of Houston really doesn't care too much about preserving historical places. I mean, that's why downtown looks so modern compared to other cities like San Antonio, you're from San Antonio, está bonito verdad? Because they maintain

those old structures, but we don't. So, I think that's what's happening too es que our communities are being totally destroyed. This part of town especially, we have high rail traffic, a hundred a thirty-four railroad crossings. We have eighteen-wheelers left and right, I mean when I talk to groups in better off communities I tell them, "If you go into my neighborhood, and an eighteen wheeler is like a family car, because you'll see it at a stop light fifteen eighteen-wheelers. You know one stop light and you'll see a couple of cars." That creates a lot of pollution también. Particularly the matter. And of course, we have the Houston Ship Channel and we have all these other activities que come on down here and then we have an influx of Latinos from all over that are not united, and in fact, the last time that we had a city election for even where Adrian Garcia, when he was replaced by Ed Gonzales, out of ninety-five thousand employees, four thousand voted. I mean that, that's ridiculous. Ninety-five thousand eligible voters and you get four thousand people to elect the city councilman. So we need to be more concerned. I think there's a lot of other issues that, that we need to address here that we are not addressing. We have, because we have no zoning, right, and because we have a lot of immigrants that just pass through here going to other the major cities because we're considered a hub for immigrants, we now have all these little bus stations cropping up along Manchester, Telephone Road, whether it's just makeshift Greyhounds because you know, I'm sure you know Greyhound, I grew up with Greyhound. Pero ahora tienen Turisa Mexico, Americana you know all these little bus station hubs and what that creates, of course most people around, but it also este contaminates a lot, because we have a Super Fund site, the Milby Bus Mart where they're building the Houston Community College where they named it after Lionel Castillo and Felix Fraga. That was a super fund site. That site cost sixteen million dollars to clean up, and for the longest, it was vacant because it's city property, the city owned it, and the city refused to give it

to Community Development Corporation, CDC, the Second Ward. And CDC, I was on that board tambićn, we wanted to build fifty-nine family units there, you know, for low-income people, fifty-nine new houses that people could afford, but the city, over the last ten, fifteen years, they refused to give us the land, to build those kind of houses because they said, "What if somebody gets cancer or gets?" because it was a Super Fund site. Contaminated, right? So, they refused to allow anyone to build there and then the idea was to build a Walmart there, just you know, just pave it and build a Walmart in the community because we don't have anything like that, but finally that was thrown out the window, and now they're paving practically all the land, and building the college there, and naming it after Felix and Lionel Castillo. But we have este, that was all, back to what I was telling, that was contaminated by buses. Because that's where they fix the buses, that's where they refuel the buses, that's where they have the gasoline and all that stuff. Eventually, that gets into the ground, and right now we have a lot of those little incidents here, that's what I'm saying, with all this bus traffic, I'm not against the buses, pero, because we have no zoning again, any little vacant lot, five or six buses are coming everyday and every week, and you know that stuff just gets dumped into the ground and the people, kids walk to school, they play there. So we're going to have a lot of Super Fund sites in this neighborhood pretty soon, in addition to one we already face. And light rail is going to make a difference. You know, if you just go a little bit further down to where the bridge is, that's the old town of Harrisburg. That's where the capital of Harrisburg used to be. And right here, if you go up to 73rd Street, if you talk to Frank and you make a left, you actually run into the original city hall, right here on 73rd Street. The building is still there, it says, "City Hall," that used to be the city hall of Houston. So, we have a lot of history, but it's all been lost because we don't have, well they're going to put down a historical marker. Pero there's a lot of places that are just torn up in this part

of the town, and people would probably love to see us out of here. Que se vaya la raza. But our politicians, I don't think they do enough for us as far as the community and cleaning it up. We still have a lot of streets que are not paved, they're narrow streets, the ditches are still open. We don't have sidewalks. We have a lot of abandoned property that instead of cleaning it up, what they do is, they put a fine there that says, "We going to fine you for not cleaning it up. And so a lot of older people lose their homes because they can't clean it up, you know, it's a levy on their property. Le ponen a lien on it and so then after a while they pass away, it just goes back to the city. And we sell a lot of cheap land to developers here because they want the land. And there's a lot of vacant space here. Que mas?

NG: Well, it's been very informative.

JP: Well, good.

NG: Thank you.

JP: Thank you.