University of Houston
Oral History Project
Mexican American History, LULAC

Interviewee: Mary Ramos
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Interviewer: Natalie Garza
Transcriber: Carol Valdés

NG: Natalie Garza, I'm interviewing Mary Ramos on July 9, 1010 at the LULAC offices on Airline Drive. Can you begin by telling me your full name?

MR: My name is Mary Louise Ramos.

NG: When were you born?

MR: I was born July 15th, 1950.

NG: Where were you born?

MR: Here in Houston, Texas.

NG: In Houston?

MR: Uh-hmm.

NG: Where did you grow up?

MR: I grew up, I was a baby when we moved into Clayton Homes which is down on Runnels and we lived there 'till I was eleven, then we moved to 5th Ward which is on Lyons Avenue and Elysian. I lived there for a few years then moved to another house in the 1st Ward, which is on Houston Avenue and lived there until I got married.

NG: When did you get married?

MR: Gosh, 1966.

NG: So is Ramos your maiden name or your married name?

MR: No, it's my married name.

NG: What was your maiden name?

MR: Palacios. Mary Louise Palacios.

NG: Do you have brothers and sisters?

MR: Yeah, too many of them. I have eight brothers and sisters— there are eight of us together. I have 7 brothers and sisters, including myself it's eight. I have 2 brothers and 5 sisters.

NG: Okay. Do they all live in Houston now?

MR: Well all accept my favorite one. She lives in Dallas. Her job moved her over there so, I miss her a lot.

NG: Can you tell me about where you went to school?

MR: Yeah, I went to Anson Jones Elementary when it was in 5th Ward, where they now built the I-10 through. I actually remember when they were doing that, but, many, many years ago. By that time I lived under the Elysian bridge right there close to Lyons Avenue and I went to Anson Jones. I went to Marshall Junior High when I was eleven and then I went to Jeff Davis High School.

NG: What were those schools like? What was the population of those schools?

MR: You know what, I don't remember any African Americans there at all and I actually remember only three Anglo kids in the whole school. It might be just my age but I don't remember. Actually, I'm trying to think of Tammy and the Rogers, Kenny Rogers brother— little brother and sister went to Marshall Junior High with me, and there was another little white girl that was really pretty that I actually saw them beat up… I guess because she was Anglo and she was talking to one of the Hispanic boys there in school. That was the first time I ever got in trouble too.

NG: Why is that?

MR: Because I had a fight. I was real scared. There were a lot of gangs at Marshall, a lot of gangs. It was probably the roughest junior high in the whole city of Houston and I went there when I was only eleven, so I remember I used to just keep myself quiet and not talk to anybody because I was scared. There was so many gangs there, you know, girl gangs—so I tried to stay out of the way. I think but when I was in 8th grade there was a new little white girl that came in to school and she was real pretty and she was very nice. I remember we were walking out to the baseball field and she was walking maybe, about five feet on the other side of me, but right in front and there were a bunch of girls behind us and they threw a hardball in her back as hard as they could and she just stood there crying and it bothered me so much I couldn't stand it. I went home and told my sister who had just gotten out of the state prison for girls, my sister had, and so I told her what I had seen and how much it disturbed me and she said, "Well then do something." I said, "How can I do something? There are six girls. They'll kill me. I've seen them stab girls across the street. I'm not gonna, you know, it's not my fight." She goes, "Well obviously it is because it's bothering you." So she told me what to do and I did it and I ended up getting in a big fight and they kicked me out of school.

NG: Were you suspended or did you have to leave the school?

MR: No, they suspended me. They suspended me.

NG: And how do you feel about that now, about your actions now?

MR: I was glad because it broke up that gang of girls, you know, because I kicked the ass of the big one, the only one that backed down from fighting me. All the other five backed down. They wouldn't fight me, even not knowing that I was the biggest coward in the world and the fact that I won that fight was only because I was so scared of her, you know, I just kept thinking

about what they're going to do to me if I lose. That's all I kept thinking about. So that's the only reason I won the fight. It wasn't because I was courageous or stuff, but I couldn't let them keep going around the school doing that to other people. They were so mean. I mean, they just kicked girls in the hall. They used to wear razor blades in their shoes, like in the front of their shoes and they'd kick girls in the back of the heel with the razor blade. I just couldn't stand the unfairness so when I went back— they suspended me for I think it was like three months or something— when I went back then I had the respect of all the kids in school and they knew that you don't pick on anybody in front of me 'cause I'd stand up for them and they knew it. So everything changed when I went back and I was really proud of that.

NG: What did your parents say about being suspended?

MG: I only had a mother and my mother always said, "If you have a fight, you better damn win because when you get home I'll get you if you lose." So she didn't say anything. My mother's way of punishing us was keeping us home, keeping us from going to school. That was her way of punishing cause she knew we like school, so.

NG: What about you said you went to Jefferson Davis?

MR: Uh-hmm.

MR: What was that?

MR: That was, that was real calm. It wasn't anything like Marshall. Marshall was really, really, really, rough. I'm hoping that maybe by the time kids get to high school they're more calmer. They're not more likely I think, I mean— it wasn't half as bad as Marshall was. Marshall was really rough, Jeff Davis was pretty calm.

NG: Ethnically, the break-up, the make-up of Jeff Davis you were saying was …

MR: Oh, 95% Hispanic, absolutely, just like Marshall.

NG: Can you tell me about the 5th Ward? What was that like, that area of town growing up?

MR: Well we were really poor. We lived right underneath the bridge back-to-back with the old St. Patrick's Church. We were real poor so my mother, when I was 8 years old, I started working at Tony Tortilla Factory which was walking distance from my house. My mother worked there during the week and then on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays, at 5 o'clock in the morning, I'd get up and me and my mom would go clean up the factory—clean the machines and stuff— and the money I made, my mother took every cent away from me. We never got to keep any money or stuff so and I remember at Marshall, I was so poor that a lot of times I'd go outside because my stomach would be growling 'cause I was really hungry and there was nothing to eat so— and I didn't have any money to buy lunch with, so I'd go outside so the kids wouldn't hear my stomach growl, but we had food at home.

NG: What did you eat at home? What was…

MR: Lots of beans and tortillas and *fideo,* things that I love. I love beans. I'm a bean freak. I'd make a very good poor person because I love beans. So we had beans and tortillas and normal stuff that we had, but we started getting commodities when we were living in 5th Ward. I don't know whether people remember, but we didn't have food cards like they do now. They had commodities where you'd go stand in line at the old JD hospital that was right off of Dart Street and when I was a little girl, my mother would give us a dollar and me and my sister Joanne would walk all the way to the old JD Hospital, from 5th Ward all the way to 1st Ward, and we'd be there by 5 o'clock in the morning and we'd fall asleep on the benches there until they opened up the door so we'd, at least, be the first or second ones in line. She'd give us a dollar so that we could go get somebody because there were always a bunch of men there with cars that would take you home with your food that they gave you for a dollar. That's what they charged. So we

only had one dollar to take all our food home and they'd give us like, maybe, two or three cans depending on how many were in the family, they'd give us two or three cans of pork. It was delicious. They'd give us powdered milk, powdered eggs, they'd give us some sugar, they'd give us, oh, cheese, lots of blocks of cheese and butter, the big old blocks of butter. I remember all that good time. My mother used to sell the cheese to a store that was down the block from us and he'd give us potatoes for the cheese and vegetables that we didn't have. So we lived like that there until we moved to 1st Ward by that time we had already stopped getting— working on getting commodities 'cause by then I had a job working at Scientific Roofing Company which was like a block off of Hogan and Main. I think I was only like 13-14 years old. I was working there.

NG: Were you the oldest?

MR: No. I had two older sisters.

NG: Did they work as well?

MR: No, both of them were smart. They got out, Joanne was the one that was sent to reform school when she was like 12 or 11 and she never came back after that. But my older sister got married at 15 years old and got out so I was the oldest one there at the house. That's how come I had to earn a living— so that my mother, so that we could eat food, so we'd have food.

NG: The 5th Ward, I don't know if it still is or, because I'm not from Houston, but has been labeled the "Bloody Fifth" before. I don't know if it still has that name, but did you feel like it was a dangerous place growing up?

MR: No, I never felt in danger there. There was a bunch of nightclubs there on the corner and I know there was a lot of prostitutes there. That I remember. I remember there was a little black boy that lived right up above one of the bars, "El Miramar" was the name of it. His name was

Steven. He was like 5 or 6 years old and he had a little sister that was like 2 years old and their mother was a prostitute there. I guess she was a druggie too, I don't remember because I was only like 12 years old then, but she used to leave them sometimes for, you know, days there locked up in their little apartment up above. So he'd be out on the street begging people for food and stuff and what little we had I always made sure I gave him some because I felt so sorry for him because one time I saw him with the little sister, she must have been about two I guess, and they were hungry so, you know, I started giving them bologna sandwiches or whatever we had, or if we had leftovers or whatever I would give them to him so that he could go feed his little sister. But I saw a lot of poor people in the area, but I never felt in danger at all, never. I actually felt pretty safe there. I think I felt more in danger on Houston Avenue, 1st Ward, than I did in 5th Ward.

NG: So there were gangs in school. Were there neighborhood gangs at all in any of the neighborhoods where you grew up?

MR: No, I don't remember any gangs in the neighborhoods where I grew up, just in school at Marshall. I'm sure there were gangs in North Side, but when I used to walk through North Side I used to say, "Ooh, this is where the rich people live," and now I see it now and I'm thinking, "Oh my God, what was I thinking?" But then when I got married I lived in 1st Ward with my husband and for the first time I drove through the Heights because we went to buy groceries at Studewood Food Market which used to be on the corner of Studewood and 14th Street and when I drove through the Heights I said, "Oh my God, this must be the River Oaks everybody talks about." So I decided I wanted to— when I grew up I was going to buy a house in the Heights and I did that.

NG: That's where you live now?

MR: Yeah-huh.

NG: But growing up you never went to any of like River Oaks or Heights neighborhood or anything like that?

MR: Never, never; just stuck to 2nd Ward, 1st Ward, and 5th Ward. That's the only neighborhoods we ever went to.

NG: Where you, you said you remembered the building of I-10?

MR: Uh-huh.

NG: What was that experience like for people in the neighborhood?

MR: Lots of people were upset because they were knocking down a bunch of houses and stuff. That's the actual underneath the bridge where they, you know, they dug out. I remember when it rained the hole that they were digging would fill up with water and we would use it as a swimming pool. So we loved it, but it knocked down our school. That's when they knocked down Anson Jones and they moved it to 2nd Ward which is right there between Canal and Navigation, right there close to Jensen, that's where they built the new Anson Jones and now it's abandoned because they built it horribly. It's a dump. I really hated to see the old school go 'cause I remember I always thought it was such a beautiful building, you know, it had the hardwood floors and the thick windows and you could see the freeway 'cause the freeway, the viaduct, the Elysian bridge viaduct was right up against the, our classroom. You could see the cars going by and stuff which was really neat.

NG: And the building of I-10, how did it change that whole neighborhood?

MR: A lot of people moved out. Especially, there was a lot of rental houses, and I still dream some of those rental houses sometimes, where a lot of poor people lived because I know where we lived we only paid like $40 a month rent for where we lived underneath the Elysian bridge in our house. So when they got rid of all those rental houses a lot of people had no place to go. I

don't know where they went. Obviously, they didn't get to our block because we stayed there, but right up to the end, the start of our block is where they took all the houses down and the park used to be full. Hennessey Park was right across the street from the church, which was back to back with my house and I guess that's why they stopped because there was a church there and a park for kids so that just, right there at that street is where they stopped taking all the rental houses down. So it got rid of a lot of kids in the neighborhood and stuff so it was really kind of lonely because a lot of my friends that I had back then moved when they tore down all the homes and stuff.

NG: Did you continue your education after high school?

MR: Yes, but I didn't do it till I actually started working for K-Mart when I was 18 years old. By then I was married and had two kids. I was working at K-Mart and I worked there for almost twenty-two years. Then when I left K-Mart I went back and got my associate degree in real estate.

NG: Where did you go?

MR: To Houston Community College Without Walls.

NG: What is that? Is that a program?

MR: No, no, no it's called "the Campus College Without Walls" and it was right off of Westheimer and Dunlavy somewhere right in there in the real nice part of town. I really loved it because the teachers there were so good. I know you can get an associate degree going to one of these champions school of real estate and all this, but they don't really teach you anything and I think Houston Community College's program for real estate was really a good one because I learned a lot and it made me successful.

NG: Why did you decide to do real estate?

MR: Because I loved looking at homes and stuff and I had a friend— after I left K-Mart I had this friend that had an apartment locating business and then she told me that I couldn't work for her unless I had a license, so I went to go get my license. Then I realized how much I loved doing this and it ended up a wonderful career change for me. At the same time, I was used to working hard, but it also gave me the pleasure of helping families find their home, you know, and I think, to me, the most rewarding one is when I sell a house for the first time to a Hispanic family that never thought they could ever own a home 'cause we never did when we were growing up, we never owned a home. So the first thing I did after I got well, my first husband and I bought this house in the Heights and we gave it to my mom for her to raise my little brothers and sisters in it and then we waited a few years and then we bought ours which was one block down from the one we had bought for my mom— best investment I ever made. At that time, I think I paid like $9,600 for my mom's house and then mine… in 1972 I bought mine and I paid $14,500 for it which, I mean, was a great investment. So I realized I liked that at that time, especially looking at all the homes in the Heights and how beautiful they were compared to the neighborhoods I grew up in. I was always interested in stuff like that so I picked a career that I thought I would really enjoy and to this day I have really enjoyed being in real estate.

NG: Were there very many Mexican Americans doing real estate at that time?

MR: No, actually, when I first started I went to work with ERA Home Brokers and they only had one Hispanic in there. Her name was Berta Allen and she would charge all the other agents to translate for the people that came into the office that wanted to buy a house or list a house but couldn't speak English. Then they'd have to ask Berta to translate for them and Berta wouldn't do it for free. She wouldn't do anything for free. So she made them pay her, you know, to translate everything, so all the agents were crazy about me because I always volunteered to

translate for them and talk to the clients for them and stuff. I think they treated me really, really good only because I was a lot more helpful than Berta was, but they didn't like her and they mistreated her. There's not enough Hispanic agents, but, I hate to say this, but I find that a lot of Hispanic agents are more worried about making money than really helping the client. Maybe it's all agents. I don't know, but I have found that too many of them— I guess I notice it more in my own people. When I see my own people try to hurt my own people really upsets me. So there's not enough. There's not enough good Hispanic agents. So then I went to work, ERA Home Brokers became Prudential, Gary Greene. Then they started hiring more Hispanics there at Prudential Gary Greene, but because I was a top agent and so they saw, "Hmmm, I guess Hispanics can do a lot of sales" and so they started hiring Hispanics, letting Hispanic agents come in, but they wouldn't let them sit on the first floor. We had a two-story office building right there on Yale. Our brokers would say that you had to do at least two million dollars in sales in the first six months in order to have the privilege of sitting on the first floor, but I noticed whenever a new white agent would come into the office they sat on the first floor. It's just all the Hispanic agents that had to go to the top floor where there was sixteen desks in one room, which was ridiculous. So finally, after years of taking this, oh they also expected me to train the new white agents that came in, but they didn't want me upstairs on the top floor helping the other agents. So I finally got pissed enough to leave them and I went to Keller Williams which I find a lot more fairness, at least the broker we had at that time was wonderful. She was wonderful and you could tell there wasn't a racist bone in her body. She was just wonderful to every agent no matter what color they were, I mean, even if you were a top producer or not a top producer she treated everybody with respect and I loved working for her.

NG: Did you have any mentors or inspiration to go out and find like a professional career? What made you motivated to do that for yourself?

MR: My kids. I wanted my kids to not hurt for anything and I didn't want my kids to go through what I went through. I realized I was going to have to do something to make more money, you know, to make more money, to spend more time, because when I was working for K-Mart at, you know, two, three nights a week at least I'd work till like 10 o'clock. We'd close the store at 9:30 and I was locking up the doors and stuff at 10 o'clock at night. I wouldn't get home till 10:30 and so I was spending a lot of time there. Then nobody got Saturdays off and then when we did inventory, twenty-two years I did that and I thought, "I'm missing… my children are missing me the whole time I'm gone," you know, so I wanted to spend more time with my family and stuff and I thought that was the best career, loving to show houses and look at houses and yet making your own schedule, when you can go sell, when you want to, if you want to. That's the best profession I could have thought of. So I was doing two things that I loved at the same time.

NG: So you worked for twenty-two years at K-Mart?

MR: Uh-hmm.

NG: How many kids do you have total? Is it…

MR: Three.

NG: Okay, you have three.

MR: I have two daughters and a son.

NG: What about— I want to move on to how you got involved with LULAC. When did that happen?

MR: In 1980. I joined LULAC in 1980, I joined the council. By then I was like the advertising manager for K-Mart. The manager at the store, he was a real good friend of mine so whenever I told him when I joined LULAC in 1980 I used to get them TVs and all kinds of stuff for free for us to have raffles and stuff. The manager would give me just about anything if he knew it was for charity, so he'd give me Easter baskets to take to MD Anderson Cancer for Kids and Ben Taub Hospital where the children's ward, and then at Christmas he'd give me little stockings filled with stuff and I'd go to the hospital again and I'd take the employees with me. So, 'cause he knew that LULAC was a charity, charitable organization, he'd always give me stuff. It wasn't 'till like 1983, I think, that I actually, just as far as my one council, where I stayed in 'till like 1983. 1983 is when I finally realized what a good organization this was. What it had actually done for Hispanics, that Hispanics have no idea, you know, everybody says, "Oh the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Oh NCLR, Oh all these La Raza," none of them, it was LULAC who opened the door for all the Hispanic organizations to start. We have, at our last state convention last year, our state director put together a film and we paid a producer to put it together, on all the bullet points on everything that LULAC has accomplished. None of these organizations had started before LULAC started in 1929 and the things that we went through and lots of kids now say, "Well I don't see racism like you did." It's still there. People just don't notice it like they used to because they don't treat us now like they used to, but they don't because of LULAC. They're the ones who opened the door. They opened up Fair Jobs for Progress, they opened up the Little School of 400. The Little School of 400 was a Council 60 venue. Felix Tijerina, who we just honored and put a historical marker last month at the Council 60 right there where his old restaurant is on Westheimer, this man started what was called the Little School of 400. John F. Kennedy came to Houston the night before he was shot [and stayed] at the Rice Hotel. La

Council 60 was having a banquet and to raise money to keep the Little School of 400 open. John F. Kennedy asked him about the Little School of 400, what was it for? It was to teach Hispanic kids 400 English words that they were going to need in their vocabulary, which is now called pre-school or Head Start Program. After John F. Kennedy was shot, Lyndon Johnson came to get the program from Houston and with that he started Head Start. So LULAC also started Head Start. So, I mean, there's a lot of things that LULAC started that people have no idea that it was because of them, you know, putting Hispanics and African Americans on juries, you know they were a big part of doing that too. You know, it's unbelievable, but if you ever got a hold of this film, I might be, I can get it for you, it's a film that you want to see. It is awesome. It'll tell you all the accomplishments of what LULAC has been able to do and accomplish for Hispanics.

NG: Why did you decide to get involved in the first place? What made you want to join the organization?

MR: Because I was single then and the gentleman that I was dating had joined and then he told me that he didn't like it 'cause it was boring. So I thought to myself, well it seems like to me that it's sounds like a great organization. So I went to one meeting and I like what I heard so I belonged to the Council, like I said, for years I worked helping the council and then I think in 1983 was the first convention I ever went to was the district convention they held in League City, yeah, League City and there they put me on the awards committee and I really liked it. I liked going, branching out and seeing other parts and then I started going to the state conventions then I started going to the national conventions and it's never stopped, you know? Then I became District Director for the Houston twenty-five county area and I was a District Director for four years. During those four years I was able to bid and bring the 2002 National LULAC Convention which brings ten to fifteen thousand people to Houston. We actually took five hotels in 2002: at

the Westin Galleria and the Westin Oaks, we took the JW Marriott, the Doubletree down the street and the Intercontinental Hotel. We took all five hotels and filled them for the LULAC National Convention and we were the first successful national convention where it actually— every time somebody holds the convention they get a part of the money that's raised by bringing the convention. That's how come everyone bids to get it, but nobody had ever made money on the conventions. What the national did was they'd give them a $25,000 stipend for the work that they did, but they made no money, so you got no money and that year our convention was very successful. We broke from the norm and we brought so many people to Houston and we actually got a check, I think, it was for almost $90,000 for this district. That's when I opened up this office here that we have in Houston. We were the first district in the nation to have a LULAC office and to this day we're the only district that I know of in the nation that has a LULAC office.

NG: That's a big accomplishment and didn't, so you're the one who found the space, the office space and got it purchased?

MR: Uh-hmmm. Uh-hmmm, made a deal with the bank.

NG: Why was it important to you to have this space?

MR: Because you can't be a successful district director and run it like a business without some place to work from. There is too many things that have to be done and if you're a district director and you have twenty-five counties, the calls are— Oh my God, hundreds of calls, hundreds of calls. How are you going to handle those? With that money we opened up this office, we hired staff— first time ever. Everybody in LULAC is a volunteer. Nobody gets a cent. The only person that get paid is our secretary that runs this office for us and she works for the district. The district

is the one that raises money every year now and that was like ten years ago. I think I opened up this office in 2002, so 8 years ago, with the money that we got from the convention.

NG: What is the role of the district director?

MR: Well they have to actually run the district; they have to pick committees that are supposed to get things accomplished. You pick a civil rights committee and you name a chairperson for every committee. The civil rights committee meets once a week here and we actually have folders and we get hundreds of cases, hundreds. Now keep in mind that we're not attorneys, but what we do, we can accomplish so much with just the letterhead, you know, LULAC. So like people that are getting thrown out of their homes, that's a civil rights issue, if they feel they're getting fired because of their— you know we send them to the EEOC, we work with the EEOC on these cases too. Anytime that we feel somebody's civil rights have been violated, that's the civil rights committee and when I was the district director I made myself the chair of the civil rights committee and honey, that's when all the cases that we were doing started because now we had an office to work out of. So we were very successful in doing that. When I opened up the office too, we finally started going and setting up meetings to meet with the mayor, the police chief, our congressmen, our senators; they all knew LULAC now. I mean, we had an actual relationship and so I got the mayor at that time, Mayor Brown, I started working with him on making sure that they put Hispanics on the boards and the commissions that the city has and so he opened that to me when I was the district director. So anybody who wanted to be on a board or commission for the city, all they had to do was hand in their resume. They put me on the Police Advisory Commission that I've been on for 10-12 years now and we got to get on the Citizens Review Committee… we got to appointed to many, many boards, all LULAC members so that we could get our people in there and the grand jury. Oh let me tell you, that's

when we started getting Hispanics on the grand jury. They always said, "Well, it's not our fault we don't have Hispanics. They don't want to sign up to, you know, donate all that time," which was bull because, you know, there are people, but nobody's ever knocked on the door and said, "Can I get you to come sit on my grand jury?" So I sat on the grand jury at that time too, and I realized that not all our DAs are honest. So, I mean so many, I opened the door, I wanted to leave a legacy when I left as a district director, not only opening up an office, but actually opening doors for our people to be able to meet with the mayor when we wanted to, be able to call the police chief and say we want a meeting tomorrow and meet with the police chief—which we have now— and it's up to the district director to make sure that they open doors for our people and in civil rights and housing. We had a housing seminar in September last year that I helped put together and was very successful. We were hoping that we'd get at least fifty people. Well we had fifty people there, but we had to turn away seventy because the room was not big enough to hold all these people. At the same time while we had our housing seminar we also had them certified to jump on some of the loans that the city gives to homebuyers of middle to lower income, you know there, you can get $10,000, $19,000, $37,000 if you buy a home here and your already certified through those classes and they give it to you. You don't have to pay it back. The only thing is that you must live there a certain, no less than 5 years because if you move out before 5 years, you must pay back part of the money that was given to you. So I mean there were so many programs. There are committees in everything that you are supposed to head. I mean civil rights, education committees, people that deal with educational issues, we also get to sit on the mayor's Hispanic advisory board, the district director does. Also, we meet with the FBI on cases. I started a very good relationship with the FBI on one of the cases that I took on, the Mexican man that was beat to death by the police officers in Baytown. I started going over there

and I actually, Sylvia Gonzales was my deputy district director at that time, so I took her a couple of times with me, yeah, a couple of times. But I kept going in there meeting with the police chief and the mayor of Baytown because they had beaten that *mejicano* to death and the media was portraying it like they only hit him a couple of times, you know, they beat him for 2 seconds and he died so there must have been something wrong with him. So I actually had a relationship with the FBI and a friend over there, Al Tribble, who's a friend of mine from the FBI, we stay in contact and I asked him if he could look, investigate that film that the police had of him beating this *mejicano* to death and they did enhance the film and they realized that they beat him for four minutes and sixteen seconds, and by the time the one police officer got up from beating him he said, "Don't move, don't move" he was already dead, you know, so we won that case. Unfortunately they didn't do anything to the police officer, but at the same time we went to meet with Chuck Rosenthal and kept going back into Baytown too because we had evidence that this police officer that beat that *mejicano* to death, the first one that took him down, had other charges against him for excessive force two or three different times. Chuck Rosenthal told us, he laughed in our face and said, "That's not any kind of evidence that they even think about. They would not bring that out. It's irrelevant. The fact that he's beat other people is irrelevant to the case." So that's when we started working on getting people on the grand jury and that was the one case and actually they didn't charge the police officer with anything but they did end up giving the family I think it was like $750,000.

NG: When you say we won the case, what do you mean by that? Were there LULAC lawyers that were fighting on behalf of the family or on the prosecution?

MR: No, no, no, no, we, lots of times, we don't like to recommend lawyers when it comes to something like that. Now with different issues we'll go to pro bono lawyers but we ask them,

you know, we might say, "We can't do nothing against the officer because they found him not guilty," but what we do suggest is you go get a lawyer and civil lawsuit which is how they won the $750,000. We suggested they do a civil lawsuit. If the jury or the grand jury finds out that there's no reason for indictment— and let me tell you, being on the grand jury twice, I can tell you it has a lot to do with the way these DAs present the case, and when they present the case to you, they lie. They actually lie to you. I know for a fact because when I was the foreman of the grand jury, every time I thought they were lying to us—they have to leave the room and leave the files with us—so we would pick up the file and read it completely and everything he said about the case was totally wrong, made no sense at all whatsoever. It's unbelievable. All they want to do is get people indicted when half of the things they say are not even true. You know, it's, anyway… That's how come I think we need people on the grand jury that really care, not just, you know, think about, "Ooh, I'm sitting on the grand jury." Listen and if something doesn't sound right, then pick up the file and read it— you're dealing with people's lives. You can't do something like that without really, you know, they have two minutes to go over an entire case. How can you indict somebody with two minutes if you're not clear on exactly what happened?

NG: How did you get appointed to the grand jury?

MR: I went to fight the DA, Chuck Rosenthal, and then I met with the mayor, Mayor Brown at the time, and he told me, "You want to get on the grand jury?" I said, "I want for us to be able to get with the grand jury, be on the grand jury. So get my people on the grand jury." So he said, "Okay, okay." So what he did he contacted a couple of judges and see the judges are the ones that appoint like a representative that goes out into the community and gets about forty people and then out of the forty that they interview, they pick twelve to start a grand jury with. There is

five grand juries going at the same time. So through the mayor, through working with the police chief, which at that time was Bradford and Brown and stuff, I started getting people on the grand jury.

NG: So, I'm not at all familiar with how the legal system is set up— so the grand jury is not at all, you know, a jury of your peers as they say like selected from random people throughout the city?

MR: Yes it is, but not the same way. Anybody that is charged with a felony or higher has to go through the grand jury. Misdemeanors don't, but every felony must go through the grand jury. The grand jury has to indict. If they decide to indict then they pursue the case, but if the grand jury no bills it, then they can't. Now, my beef was with Chuck Rosenthal because he, what Chuck Rosenthal was doing, if he took it to one grand jury and they no billed it, he'd take it to the other grand jury, and if they no billed it he took it to the other grand jury. He'd move it until he got an indictment for people that he wanted to get indicted.

NG: The specific case that you were talking about where the man was beaten in Baytown, how did you develop a relationship with the FBI to have them investigate it or was that a previous relationship?

MR: It was a previous relationship. We'd worked on a couple of things. There was a shooting and a stabbing at a filling station off of Aldine Westfield, this has been so long ago, and these white supremacists, they walked up to this black man and they stabbed him and this Chicano guy saw that so he got in for the black man and when he got in for the black man, they pulled a gun on him and, now I don't remember *mija* it's been so long, but they either stabbed him to death or they shot him. The black man lived, but the Hispanic guy died and the wife called the LULAC office because, you know, they left his body. The only reason she called us was because they left

the body there laying on the sidewalk at the filling station for hours investigating it, you know, and that's when I stepped in because they killed him because he was defending someone else and that black man was really nice, you know he was so happy that the only reason he was alive is because the other guy stepped in but it unfortunately cost his life. Then I called the FBI and they sent over Al Tribble and Al Tribble and I went in and investigated together. He took me with him when he investigated the family of the guy that they killed and the other families and that's how we started the relationship, that one case. So by the time Al got into the Baytown case, I got a letter at my house, it was thrown at my door and there was a rock around this letter and it said, "Bitch, come back into Baytown you're dead" and it was just signed KKK. So, I said to myself, "I don't give a shit, I'm still going." So I went back into Baytown, but I did call Al Tribble and Justo Garcia. Justo from the Department of Justice was going with me because I was trying to mediate with the mayor and the police chief from Baytown so every time I'd go, I'd go with Justo, but once they sent that letter to me at my house then Al Tribble jumped in and he'd go with me too. So it would be Justo and Al that both would go with me to Baytown.

NG: The Baytown case, did you, how did you get involved with that? Was it a phone call or is it because a big event that LULAC knew about it that you got involved, that LULAC got involved?

MR: I don't remember how, whether it was a call or not. I really don't, but from what I think, I think one of the family called our LULAC office and told us about it and…

END TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

MR: And he was on the police officer's side and so they wanted some help, you know, but they didn't just beat him for a couple of seconds the way the media was saying, but they beat him

forever and the actual tape, I mean, it shows where the one police officer was talking to him about what he was doing. He was disoriented or something and he said, "Oh," and he started talking to him and they shook hands, him and the other officer shook hands and said, "Okay well see," you know, "Thank you" he said to the police officer, he turns around and walks away and here comes this other big white cop and just jumps on him and starts beating him. Excuse me, that's how we got the tape on actually what really happened, and then two other cops come and jump in and start beating and kicking him in the head everywhere, but I think it was one of the relatives that called us because he was visiting here from Mexico. He was visiting here. He wasn't from Baytown. He was visiting his relatives there and it was a relative, I think, that called us.

NG: Was that tape not presented at the grand jury?

MR: I don't know, see I got in there after it was presented and he wasn't indicted.

NG: Okay.

MR: But I wanted justice and unfortunately we weren't going to get it through the jury so we got it through civil.

NG: I'm going to go back to the other case you were talking about of the man that got shot when he was defending the other man. You said you don't remember when it was, but do you know around what year or what position you had at LULAC at that time?

MR: I was the district director so it had to be, I was district director from 1999 to 2003 so it… and I'm trying to think if we had the office already. I think it was 2003. I'm almost sure it was 2003 *mija*.

NG: Do you remember how that case turned out?

MR: No, I don't at all. I did have the police officers reprimanded for leaving the body out there so long. That's what the family had complained about you know, that the way they treated the body because he was Hispanic. I know that the police officers got reprimanded. I don't think they ever filed a lawsuit or anything, but I know that all the police officers that were out there doing all the investigating, and the thing was that the body was not just there, it was uncovered. You understand what I am saying and that was very disrespectful to not only him, but the family, and so once me and Al got everything done, from what I remember, Al's report was going to the police chief and stuff and making sure that all the police officers were reprimanded for leaving—I mean it stayed out there hours *mija*, more than five, six hours the body was out there just laying there uncovered. The family was all there looking at, crying, crying asking them to cover up the body. They said they couldn't, that was touching evidence, so... I know other than the police officers getting reprimanded; I don't remember them filing a lawsuit or anything. I think the first lawsuit that we had recommended was in Baytown.

NG: What kind of has been your philosophy as district director of how you want to work with the community?

MR: There's a lot of ways. I like helping people, but my philosophy is that everybody deserves a chance, everybody deserves to own a home, everybody deserves to be judged fairly by a jury of their peers, and I hate injustice, I hate unfairness, and that's all I want. I just want the same doors to be able to open for my people as for anybody else and every time I hear someone tell me, because my own people have told me, quote, "Why do you care so much about wetbacks?" It really insults me and I say to them, "Where in the hell do you think you came from originally, buddy?" You know everybody is a human being and everybody deserves to be treated with respect and that's all I want, for people to have the same opportunities that everybody else

has, especially our kids… And education, that's so, so important. I truly believe that if everybody gets educated, especially higher learning education for our kids, they're closer to getting on an even playing field with everyone else 'cause how you going to say something to a Hispanic that's got a masters or a doctorate? You know, that, that's awesome for me. I think education is the key to everything for you cause no matter what they take from you, they can't take away your education. So education, fairness, respect for all our people.

NG: In terms of education, what has LULAC done in the time that you've been part of the organization?

MR: Well, we give a lot of scholarships every year. Not all councils, but I'd say at least 10 councils in District 8 give scholarships to kids from $5,000 a year, one counsel may give to—like Counsel 402 is giving over $105,000 this year in scholarships to kids. My counsel gives about $25,000 a year to scholarships for Hispanic kids. Higher learning— very, very, very, very important. About two years ago, three years ago, I took a bus load of kids, I loaded them up at the Gulfgate center, we took kids from the University of Houston—Main Campus and Downtown, TSU University, then we stopped off and picked up some kids from St. Thomas University and then we stopped and picked up some kids at Prairie View University and we took off to Austin. We got there— we left at 5 o'clock in the morning, I forgot what time we got there— and then we were there to testify because they're trying to get rid of House Bill 1403. 1403 is the bill that State Representative Rick Noriega got through and passed in 2001, I think it was, and this bill enabled kids that were here illegally to go to the university of their choice at in-state tuition. They're living in the state, why should they pay out of state tuition? They're living here, so they're in the state, so they should be in-state tuition, so Rick Noriega got that passed through in 2001 and now some of the people that sat on the education committee in Austin were

trying to, you know, throw his bill out and making sure that they killed it. So, I took a bus load of kids from Houston, District 8, and one of the council in Dallas took a busload of kids to Austin and we were there 'till 3:30 in the morning testifying on the bill and it passed; it went through again and that bill is so important to kids. Can you imagine a child having to pay out-of-state tuition? How are they going to get an education? And that's how come we're also have jumped in on the Dream Act. Dream Act is one thing I took on real strongly when I was district director. It depends on the district director whether they really care about issues, you know? We've had district directors that don't give a darn about the issues, but then we've had district directors that all they cared about helping people: you know, civil rights issues, education, stuff that's important to us. If you'll read, you know what we stand for it tells you education, economic development, and civil rights issues. Those are the three things LULAC stands for and that's what we're supposed to be doing too. So I've also started a coalition that I started, gosh, how long ago? I think in 1999, I started the Black and Brown Coalition together with Howard Jefferson who was the President of the NAACP. Howard and I got together and we put Hispanics and blacks together to start the Black and Brown Coalition and we fight issues together. I then took it as a resolution to our state convention we had in Laredo in 2000, I think it was, and we passed the resolution that the Black and Brown Coalition would be all over the state of Texas. It was passed as a resolution and Gary Bledsoe, who is the state director for the NAACP, signed the resolution with our state director at the time, together, you know, we stand stronger together, and so you can imagine how scared the people in Austin are when black and brown walk in together on the same issue, and so Gary has always stood by us when we go to Austin to work on a specific, you know bill or something. He's always there, they're always there with us to fight for the things… and that Black and Brown Coalition is one of the things that I loved that I started

too because I think unfairness against anybody of color is bad. So I not only care about my people, but I care about everybody else and especially kids because kids don't know any better. They're taught by their parents to hate people of color. You know kids don't grow up hating somebody. So I started that coalition and together we've done so much. One other thing we did, this coalition, we started working with HUBs. Do you know what HUBs are?

NG: No.

MR: It's called Historically Unutilized Businesses. Those are businesses that are owned by black or browns or women-owned businesses. So they get certified as a HUB, Historically Unutilized Businesses. The state of Texas must, anybody who gets federal funding, state funding, any business, hospitals, the UT Health Systems for instance, 35% of their contracts their buying their using up anything for building, construction, paper work, I don't care what it is, cleaning staff, anything, 35% must go to HUBs— Historically Unutilized Business— black-, brown-owned, women-owned businesses, and they're not. We did an investigation into it and we found that, for instance, the UT Health System was, 6% went to HUBs. Six percent. They were violating the law, the state law, they were violating it. So we started setting up meetings, we started a coalition with the black ministers and Yolanda from the NAACP and me from LULAC and we met with the UT Health Systems. They fly the doctors down and the head of HUBs from Austin to meet with us quarterly and to see how far we've gotten it up. I have been put on classes at the George R. Brown to certify HUBs, Hispanic and African American businesses, and women-owned businesses to get them certified as HUBs so that these people that have to use them will use them. They'll say, "We would have hired that HUB, but they weren't qualified to take care of it." So what we did, we put banks together and these banks fund these businesses through the UT Health System. So, for instance, this is the way we explained it to them: like if,

you know, Juan down the road is going to be hired to take the, when they're knocking down a hospital or construction is being done on a hospital, well, they need dump trucks to take them away. Well, if Juan can't get the contract because that contract calls the RFP that's gone out requests, the formal request asks for a person with five trucks, well, Juan can't get the job done because he only has two trucks and the contract calls for five trucks. Well, so the UT Health System, together with these banks, are guaranteed the money in payment from the UT Health System and they buy Juan the other three trucks he needs so that now Juan cannot only pick up that contract, but more contracts in the future. Do you see what I'm saying? So that's, anyway, so our last meeting we had with them they were saying that, "Well, we're up to 22% now. We're doing great." Yeah, you're doing better, but your still not up to standards. The law says 35% honey. The law says 35%. They still don't abide by it, but we're still constantly on them over and over, and over, and over. So and it's still very— they don't listen. The prison system too. You know we setup a meeting to meet with Brand Livingston who heads all the prisons and stuff. You know certainly 87% of the men and women that are locked up in the state prisons are black or brown. We sure as hell should get the contracts and they're not getting them either, which is ridiculous. So, that's economic development that I fight for and there's a lot of things *mija* that I really believe in and I think the district director should get involved into all of them. We have the new district director that was brought in, April, she was voted in, and she's a very fair person, I think, and a hardworking person. She works two jobs. I'm hoping that she'll retire this year so maybe she can dedicate a lot of time to this job because being a district director is not easy, but it's so fulfilling, you know. It gives you so much good feelings on everything that you can do and you do to help people you know. So I'm really hoping, 'cause I know that people have been complaining to me for the past two years that LULAC has gone dead in Houston,

LULAC's gone dead in Houston, they're not doing nothing, they're not doing nothing, they're not doing nothing. Well, I'm hoping that will change now with the new district director that we have cause we do indeed have to have a presence out there so that our people can get an advantage in something, but I've moved on to the state board. I'm on the state board now. I was the deputy state director for the whole state of Texas. I am now the Texas Chief of Staff for the whole state of Texas. So that's… I can still keep going forth. I'm also the National Civil Rights Commissioner for national LULAC, so I can still get into any cases even though I'm not the district director here. I can get into all the cases because I am there. I'm fighting the jail system, the overcrowding of the jail system. We went down there, the NAACP, the Black Ministers for Justice, and LULAC, we went down and demanded about three years ago that they let us into the jails to look at them, and the black lieutenant said, "You're not getting in there." Well, they had just hired a new guy to run them. I think his name was Smith. He was just hired on to run all the jails that we had.

NG: In Texas?

MR: No, Houston, in Houston, the county jail and the city jail. He was hired on as the big guy then and we were meeting with him. He'd only been there like two, three months and so he was the first one that said, "Ya'll want in?" and we said, "Yes" and he said, "Let them in" and that black lieutenant was pissed. He told him, "No sir. We're not going to let them in cause la la la la." He goes, "Look, I'm the boss here. I said let 'em in. They want to see because they know that I'm new here, so everything that's there, that's not my doing. I'm trying to change it, and I'll change it and clean it up as much as I can, but I can't do it without help, so maybe help from the community will help me clean up this jail." So they let us in and it was so scary because I thought they were just going to let us look into the cells and stuff, oh no honey, they let us into

each cell. You know, where they keep, they have cells inside a cell. Well, they let us in there and we went to the women's floor and there was like seventy-one women in one of the big cells that holds, is meant to only hold 48. So there was women sleeping on the floor, underneath the table, it has one table in the middle and it's got all the cells around it, and so they were sleeping on the floor, underneath the commode, in the shower stall because they had no place to stand and you can't walk because there is no place for anybody in there. They were so overcrowded it was inhuman. Then they had the toilets covered with cardboard and I said, "How can you leave all these women here without a toilet that doesn't work? You know, these are women!" And they said, "Well" they said, "Well, they break it themselves. It's their own damn faults." Excuse me? And so we talked to the women and they said they wouldn't give them tampons, they wouldn't give them toilet paper— they'd give them nothing. So the women were having to use newspaper and when they use newspaper it clogs up the toilets. One women was crying, crying, crying and she told me and they—a lot of them slipped a bunch of papers in my hands so when I left I called some of the families to let them know that they were okay—and there was one lady in particular that she hadn't even been to court and she'd been there nine months, nine months, without being charged with anything, and one lady that kept crying, I went over there to talk to her and she didn't want to talk to me in front of the other women so I went to the side over there and she told me that she had full blown AIDS. She picked up her blouse and showed me her stomach was like eaten meat. It was horrible, but she said that she, every time she went to pee, she felt bad because there's women sleeping underneath the toilet and if they found out that she has AIDS and they, they're getting her urine on them they're going to get it too, but they'll kill her if they find out that she's over here spreading it. Could I do something to help her? So that was the women and the men were just as bad. They were stuffed in like pigs and they took us up to the top floor,

these were a different kind of cell, this one had real thick glass and stuff, like bulletproof glass and you could look in. They said that was the floor for gays. They had one black man that was crying. He was crying, crying, crying and I couldn't figure out, you know, and he, we looked, we didn't, they didn't let us in there into that floor because a lot of them were sick… and one guy had his leg up, he picked up his leg to show us, the whole meat was gone from his leg. You could see the bone. The meat was gone from his leg and he was there like that. They don't let them see the doctor unless they have fifteen bucks in there, when they're in jail. One lady had, when I was in the women's cell, she was so sick, she said she had the flu, I mean, or pneumonia or something, she was, she couldn't even get up off the bed and I said, "Why don't you go to the doctor?" She goes, "They won't take me, I don't have fifteen dollars." That's the way these men and women are living. You know, I know that they're criminals, I know that they have to pay for what they've done, but they are human beings too. So, I mean, we got a lot accomplished with doing that. Then we asked the FBI to step in, and they did, the FBI came down and went to the jails and checked. That's another way we got Tommy Thomas out too, and now we have a new sheriff in town, so…

NG: What did, what was done with the jails after that? Do you know?

MR: Yes, actually, immediately after our visit they closed, the FBI went, they closed some of the jails surrounding Houston like Clear Lake, Kingwood; they closed up those jails and moved those deputies to the jails here because those jails have one or two men in them, these have ten thousand. Do you understand what I am saying? So they just don't have those jails over there anymore so that they could open up another floor. There was two floors, *mija*, that were completely empty, but yet they those, all those people stuffed in those jails like pigs when all they had to do was hire more deputies, but there's not enough money to hire more deputies

because the county commissioners won't give it to them, but now, you see, we have so many men in jail, so many, and the county commissioners now, our sheriff is having to send the prisoners to Louisiana to be housed and so we're spending millions, millions sending them to another jail when all we have to do is, guess what? Hire more deputies. Makes no sense.

NG: There are a couple of issues that you've talked about, like this, that make no sense, and that are very frustrating like, for example, when you were talking about with the grand jury that the DAs you feel like they lie and things like that. How do you reconcile that it's such a frustrating situation that it feels like it's not going to change? How do you continue to keep working even though it's so frustrating?

MR: Well, you have to because if we give up because we get frustrated, what is it going to accomplish? Not a damn thing. You have to keep caring. You never give up. Never, never give up. I don't care. It gets very frustrating, but you know every time I'm on the grand jury I make damn sure I get the truth and I'll tell that DA off. You can ask them. They don't like me at all. They call it the renegade jury, and let me tell you, when we went to the child assessment center we, like three of us, three grand juries went together, 'cause we're separated you know, so when we went together one of the jurors from one of the other jury panels said they had one black and one Hispanic on his jury. Us, we had five Hispanics, two African Americans, one Asian, and three whites. Anyway, but and anyway, aw I forgot his name. His last name was, oh God darn I can't remember his last name, anyway, but— Guillory… Guillory, that was his name— anyway, so he saw me at the trial assembly, he says, "Are you Mary Ramos?" and I said, "Yes sir" and he's like 6'7, tall, and he picked me up and hugged me. He goes, "Girl, I heard your jury is kicking ass!" And I said, "Yes sir, we are." "They hate ya'll." I said, "I know." But hey, I don't care and the DAs say, you know we're asking questions and they roll their eyes cause we're

asking questions, you know, because, "You know if ya'll keep asking all these questions you're going to be here until five." Hey, not a problem. We brought lunch. Keep going. Answer our questions. "You know I— we're only supposed to spend two minutes on a case?" "Unless the grand jury tells you different. Then you spend whatever time we ask you, right?" He goes, "Yes ma'am." I said, "Okay then continue." They get very frustrated. Now they, I have met a couple of DAs that were real honest and they're, the ones that I have found to be honest are women—women DAs. Not all of them though, but the ones that I have found that were honest were women. We actually, I can't tell you a specific case because we're not supposed to, but there was one where she actually proved to us that we should let him go and I'm like, it was awesome to get somebody who cares that much, you know, and it was about hitting a police officer, attacking a police officer. Anyway, she got us to let him go, no bill him. So and she brought us the evidence to do it with so, you know, there are honest DAs. I'm not saying they're all are dishonest, maybe it's just that they're not spending the amount of time they're supposed to on their cases. I know this last grand jury I was on, we actually asked one of the DAs to leave because he was so unprepared. He knew nothing about the cases he brought in, nothing. He must have just got them handed to him because he had to open up every folder and look, look, look, look. He didn't have anything written on the outside of the folder so he could do the presentation. So we told him, "Get out of here. Get out. Go study your cases and bring them back." And, you know, he was offended, but hey, you're dealing with a person's life so... Just keep staying, *mija*, keep badgering, keep doing whatever you get, get more people on the grand jury that look like us because we're 87% of the people that are locked up in prison are black and brown. So the juries need to reflect the people that are locked up. You understand what I'm saying?

NG: How long do you get to serve on a grand jury?

MR: For 3 months. You serve 3 months. Two days a week for 3 months and now they, they started paying you. Maybe more people will want to be on there.

NG: Let's see. There are some things that we talked about. I wanted to ask about the organizational structure of LULAC. Can you talk about that? There are districts within the city?

MR: Yes.

NG: Is there anything smaller than the district?

MR: A council.

NG: Okay.

MR: You start with councils. There is a council like District 8. This is District 8. District 8 covers twenty-five counties. In the twenty-five counties, we have thirty-eight councils, thirty-eight councils in this district, in this district. After councils, come districts. After districts comes state. After state comes national. So there is council. Everything is a council. Council is grassroots— people from your neighborhood, your brother, your sister that are all get together to do these things that we need to do. We go to state board meetings every quarter, we go to state board meetings and the state goes to quarterly board meetings for the national. Like we have a district director, so all the district directors from the twenty-one, we have twenty-one districts in the state of Texas, twenty-one districts and every district has, you know from four to five councils to San Antonio which is the District 15, they have eighty-three councils, eighty-three councils. That's a lot *mija* and we had forty something except we've gone down in the last couple of years, but and so you've got the district and they go to state board meetings, the state directors, which, is Joey Cardena our of Louise, Texas, he's our state director. Joey is over the twenty-one districts and the whole state of Texas and all the councils. So, and then he goes to the

national board meetings and the national has, we're in forty-one or forty-two states. There is LULAC councils in forty-one or forty-two states, we have the map up there. We, actually, opened, we have some in Hawaii so and I don't think we have one in Alaska yet, but anyway, but we're covering forty-one or forty-two states. We have LULAC councils in all of those. So they meet quarterly also, the national board does and which, we're, now, and then we have district conventions cause you elect a district director and then we have state conventions which we just came back from in Austin. Our state convention was in Austin. Joey was elected again as our state director and then we have the national convention which we're going to next week where we elect a new national president.

NG: And, even at the state director level that's volunteer as well?

MR: Everybody. Nobody gets paid. Nobody gets paid. Just people that work in our offices like we have our LULAC national offices in Washington D.C., and we also have our LNESC centers is, the offices are in Washington D.C. Our director, our executive director of the LULAC national office in Washington D.C. is Brent Wilkes. Brent Wilkes has probably about fifteen employees that do nothing but LULAC in our office in Washington D.C. and our LNESC is LULAC National Educational Service Center. They're the ones that put all of the programs together all over the United States to help Hispanics get a college degree, teach them how to do resumes, they teach them how to pass the SAT test… they do all kinds of counseling and stuff to help our kids graduate and go on to college. Also, LNESC Center has matching funds. If we raise $25,000 and send it up to LULAC National Educational Service Center and office in Washington D.C., and he's got about Five employees there, then they send us 60% more back. So if we send $10,000 up there they send us back $16,000 in giving scholarships to kids. They match us 60% of whatever we send. So those are paid back, but that's it, and like if the district, like I told you, I

think we're the only district still in the nation that has a district office, and so we have a secretary here. We have to *mija,* otherwise… I mean nobody has time to volunteer to sit here all day. We all have to have a job so you can volunteer so.

NG: How do the councils within this district get along? Is there, do they work together or is there in-fighting or has there been in the past?

MR: Oh yeah, in every organizations we, every organization has in-fighting, absolutely. We actually are dealing with an issue right now that's on impeaching people because they've gone against the constitution. They violated our constitution. In our constitution section, Article 8 Section 8 it tells you that you can be impeached, suspended, or thrown out of LULAC completely for violating any of these things, and one of them is going against a resolution that has passed at a convention, and at our state convention the entire state assembly voted to go against CEP, Community Education Partners, the people that get $24 million of our money every year from Houston Independent School District to house kids that are supposedly bad kids, lock them up like a jail, you know, to for our kids in there and we decided, the whole assembly voted to go against CEP. Well, when we went to the school board cause we fighted the school board. Anyway, so when we, and we also sent our committee for the school whoever the superintendent is, LULAC district director does too. So we opened up that door also cause when Kay Stripling was the superintendent me and her became really good friends because I wanted her to help me start youth councils. We also have youth councils *mija* and these kids learn so many good things: how to work in the community, how to… and, mostly, all of 'em, mostly all of 'em go on to college. I can tell you that most of the kids that join LULAC when they're youth have all gone on to college which is really a good, good percentage. So that's what I sold to Kay and Kay opened up the doors for me to be able to start youth councils in the schools in HISD and so we

went to the school board meeting to announce that at our state convention we voted against CEP because HISD was considering re-doing their contract, did an investigation and supposedly they're supposed to find out, you know, about how many kids are really housed there because we're paying for like 1600 kids and they have like 600, 700 but we're still charged $22 million dollars a year, and so and then we found out that Community Education Partners, they have two schools in Houston. They're letting Tejano Center, Raúl Yzaguirre School house over 300 kids of theirs and that's a charter school, not an HISD charter school. It's a charter school that gets paid by our state, our money, to open up that charter school. They're housing their kids in our CEP centers, which HISD is paying for. So, I mean, it's all around, there's so much crooked things going on honey. Even on our school board, it's unbelievable. So we're fighting them all the time too. Unfortunately for us though, we went there to speak against CEP and we had a president of another council here in Houston get up with another member of that council got up and endorsed CEP to get the contract. They went contrary to the constitution and the resolution that was passed unanimously at the state convention. So that's the reason for impeachment. There is, and, and because CEP throws around a lot of money, a lot of money, a lot of money, and this council, in the past, has gotten lots of funding from CEP so, you know, money talks, and a lot of people will sell their soul to the devil for money. So, yeah, there is in-fighting on issues like that, but issues that are important that *mija*, it doesn't matter. We need to get rid of people that care more about money than they do about our children and our education. You want to get rid of the dropout rate? Do you realize that CEP, in the past ten years that they've been operating making $22 million dollars a year off of us, our taxes, through HISD, they have been sent 14,779 kids. Again, in the ten years, they've had 14,779 kids. I might be off 1 or 2, but it was pretty close to 15,000. Out of all of those kids that have been sent to CEP, only 811 have graduated

from any school. Do you see a problem there? Because I sure do. HISD should have gotten rid of it, but there's too many school board members that are friendly with CEP because CEP has money, money.

NG: How does LULAC become alerted to certain issues, to very specific issues and how does the council or the district decide which ones they're going to handle?

MR: Well, a council can bring up an issue, you know, one person in a council could be like, this began, the CEP issue has been brought up by Council 402 for years, for years and, and they actually tried to, well CEP actually had given a donation of $10,000 to LULAC district 8, when Rick Dovalina was our district director and then Council 402 brought it, at a district board meeting, brought that we should not accept those $10,000 because of what they're doing to our kids, but see they didn't do it the right way too and I told them, to this day, because they presented this figure, you know that out of 15,000 kids, you know, only 811 graduated from any school, well they didn't say that. They said, "Out of 15,000 kids only 811 graduated." These kids are not graduating from that school. Well, of course not. CEP is supposed to be for 30 days, 60 days, 180 days. They're not supposed to be sent there to graduate. They're sent there to be suspended, but not keep them out of school for that long. They're sent there for disciplinary issues which is another total issue by the way, but when they throw these kids over there to CEP, and then these kids, they didn't do it the right way. If they'd of said, "811 have graduated from any school" now I understand what you're saying. It wasn't until I started investigating that I jumped in with 402 against CEP because, hell yeah I care about education. I go fight for the Dream Act, I go fight for House Bill 1403, all these things that are really, really important to me— starting youth councils and all our kids, so our kids will graduate, all those things are important to me. Education is right up at the top there. Hell yeah I care about that now. If you'd

have said it that way from the very beginning I wouldn't have been fighting you for CEP and I wouldn't have accepted the $10,000 damn dollars that they gave us. Do you understand what I'm saying? So, I think one council can bring an issue and one member brought it to their council. So one member can bring an issue to the council, the council president will bring it to the district board meeting where all the presidents get together from all the councils, then make the decisions for the district. The presidents of each council meet at the district quarterly board meeting and then they make the decisions what the district is going to stand for. The district director cannot make their, the decision on their own. They can't, they've got to be told by the board to do it. Now, the district director can take on a case and then tell the board that " I'm doing this case la, la, la, la" and then all the members will say, "What can we do to help you?" you know. Like the case I've took on, but you know, that was as a civil rights committee. You have different committees— the educational committee, the civil rights committee, the housing committee which I right now I'm the housing chair for District 8, all of the district. So, I mean and I help people that our losing their homes and stuff. I have one coming in at 3 today. It's almost 3. Anyway, but I'm going to try to help her save her house so.

NG: Is it almost three?

MR: Uh-hmm, it's going by fast.

NG: Okay well let me see if I can get to my other questions. You know you mentioned, that when we first started talking, some of the other organizations like La Raza, NCLR and things like that, LULAC gets criticized sometimes for not being radical enough.

MR: I thought we got criticized for being too radical.

NG: Well, for some of, for some of, I think, for other either Latino or Mexican American organizations, sometimes LULAC gets criticized for not being radical enough and so you, you don't think that, that's at all the case? I mean you don't, you don't, that's not your perspective?

MR: Yes, it can be because it depends on who the district director is *mija*. A lot of it has to do with that. A lot of it has to do with the district director not wanting to do anything. What do you do? Vote 'em out, that's what you do. We need to get into these issues, need to. You know, when I was a district director, I spend 40-50 hours a week here in this office and out in the community. My job went to pffft for four years, but you know what? It didn't matter to me. I still needed to get this job done, it's important. So it all depends on the district director and the people that we elect to go out there and represent us to actually do something. So yeah, that could be true. So like I said, I've gotten a lot of complaints lately: where, where is LULAC? Where was LULAC on this? Where was LULAC on that? We didn't see LULAC there. Not my fault.

NG: Also, I was going to ask you about other organizations either national or local organizations that there has been conflicts with other organizations throughout the Mexican American community. Have you been witness to that or…

MR: With us with other ones?

NG: With LULAC, uh-hmmm.

MR: Not that I'm familiar with, no, not really.

NG: And LULAC, I, the position of LULAC is that it doesn't take a political stance on candidates, correct?

MR: That's correct. You can as an individual. You can't as LULAC. You can't endorse any candidates.

NG: Do you feel that's the appropriate stance to take?

MR: Absolutely. Absolutely because I know which way I'm going to vote, you know, and I do get out there, I endorse a lot of candidates and I meet with all the candidates. When Mayor Parker, I had a private meeting with her and three other LULAC members to do a, you know, jump on her campaign, but not as LULAC. Mary Ramos, people know me, they know Mary Ramos, you know, so they, and when they see me they might associate LULAC with me, but it's not LULAC, it's Mary Ramos helping that candidate.

NG: But there are times when there is a candidate that does things that work against LULAC or that LULAC is opposed to, so how do you deal with that?

MR: Oh, we let them know we work against them.

NG: But if you can't endorse how do you…

MR: We jump on their campaign and help them like, Anna Eastman who ran for school board, right? Remember Anna Eastman? They thought she didn't have a chance in hell of winning. Well, guess what? When we met with the other candidates that were running and Alma Lara was the Hispanic candidate, now you've got to understand that I want Hispanics in every key job, I want a Hispanic to be president, I want a Hispanic governor, I want a Hispanic everything, everything for me. That would make me very happy, but it's got to be a good Hispanic *mija*. Do you understand? I don't want *uno que se vende* [One who sells out]. I hate that. I hate that worse than anything because my people selling my people down the river…

END TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

MR: Alma Lara, she told us herself that she was endorsed by the Federation of Teachers. Gale Fallon had given her money and all the teachers were endorsing her and I said, "All the teachers are endorsing you?" and she goes, "Oh yes, Gale Fallon's already promised me all the votes."

We already know that Gale Fallon is CEP. She's the one that's pushed CEP on HISD by threatening them. You know, so I told— we told Alma, "Will you do something about shutting down CEP?" "Oh I can't do that. Oh no, I can't do that." Okay, you answered our question. You answered our question. Not for us. Not for my kids. So we went and talked to each candidate and all the other candidates were saying, "Heck yeah, we don't think CEP is good," I mean, la, la, la, and let me tell you something. Anna Eastman was the one that said, "I will be vocal against it. I do not want it." These kids are being sent to CEP *mija* for stupid things like their shirt was out— shirt was out! Oh, *mija*. You know, just to get kids in there. One of the principals who is now the CEP principal at one of the CEP schools, she came to LULAC years ago and complained that Gale Fallon had gone to her office at Sam Houston High School and told her that she wasn't sending enough kids to CEP. Do you understand me? Oh hell no. So when we knew Alma Lara was going to vote for CEP we sure the hell didn't want her representing our kids. So a bunch of LULAC members jumped in to help Anna and we worked the, we walked the streets in the Hispanic area, we went and put up signs, we worked the vote polling places, we went everywhere for her and she won. When Alma had all the money, she had all the endorsements. You should have seen her cards she was mailing, all the endorsements from everybody, but Anna still won. So can you get candidates out that are bad for our people? Sure you can. You just have to really work it, so.

NG: Historically also in Houston, working grassroots level and working with the communities, there have been conflicts between the black and brown communities and a lot of people say, you know, that, or have said in the that they can't work together because they're fighting for the same thing, fighting for the same resources. How are you able to bring that coalition together and why did you know that it was so important?

MR: Because I grew up in a black neighborhood, 5th ward was black, and so I've never been racist at all. My kids aren't either and I realized, way back when, that I wasn't going to be able to get anything accomplished on our own—really important things—but if we joined forces, you know, just like there are racists against Hispanics there are racists against blacks too. So I had a meeting with Howard Jefferson and we hit it off real well. We started working together and then we got other peoples on there and Reverend Bill Lawson—who I sit on his board, the WALIPP board with him—I mean, Al Green before he was a congressman. I mean, all of these people—Robert Mohammed—I mean all of us started meeting and realized that we actually have the same issues. Yolanda Smith who is the Executive Director of the NAACP, she is one of the hardest working women I've ever known and when I really got to know her even more when we started working on issues together, I realized that together we can accomplish so much. That's how we started the HUB thing with the UT Health System. That's how we started the Dream Act and the House Bill 1403. Terry Bledsoe was down there in Austin fighting with us for that bill. I mean, together you can accomplish a lot. Are there blacks that hate *mejicanos*? Sure there are. Are there *mejicanos* that hate blacks? Sure there are. You're not going to stop everybody from being a racist *mija*, but I think it starts with us on the way we teach our kids that everybody's a human being and everybody deserves to have respect. I remember there was an article in the Houston Press years ago and it was talking about that the rich blacks hate Mexicans, they want to get rid of them, all the rich blacks hate Mexicans la, la, la… and blacks hate Mexicans because they take their jobs and la, la, la and then at the end of the article it had a quote from Yolanda Smith of the Executive Director of the NAACP and that, that's what the whole article was about— blacks hating *mejicanos*, that's the whole article was and so at the end they had a quote from her and she said, "These people are still, everybody needs to remember these people are

still human beings. The only reason they come here is for to, to be able to feed their family and to live the American dream. They're the hardest working, kindest people and I don't see a problem with them" and, actually, the NAACP I heard was trying to get rid of her because she said that in that article against the rich blacks. But she still said, "Too bad, that's the way I feel." So there is always going to be conflicts *mija*, but I think it's worth putting up with if there's people like her around that really don't see that. Do you see what I'm saying?

NG: LULAC, it's members, do you feel like it's members are of a different class than the people that's it's serving?

MR: No, no absolutely not. We meet members of every class and, you know, I think it's a good way, we do have people that join LULAC only to put money in their pocket because they can open doors with the name LULAC. You know that as well as I know. Are there people that do that? Hell yeah there are, people that couldn't care less about the next Hispanic whether they have money as long as they have money— they don't give a crap about anybody else. There's people like that, but I think basically all the people that join, basically, are because they really want to do something in the community and help other people. I think I can pretty well say most of them are like that.

NG: Well, we'll go ahead and finish. The last thing that I want to ask you is why is it so important for you that you are helping your own community?

MR: For my kids. I see when I get something accomplished like the little boy that they shot, that the police officer shot in the head, remember that? That was another one of our cases. You know, all of LULAC was in a rage because of that little 13 year old that was shot in the head by the police officer. The police officer said his gun went off when he kicked him in the groin, his gun went off. What the hell was he doing with his gun pulled and pointed at his head? That little

boy had the mentality of an eight year old. He was slow. He had him handcuffed and he was crying on the ground when he shot him in the head. First time *mija,* ever, LULAC pushed that case. We had press conferences, we had community forums, we had, we put them together all over this damn city for that issue. You know, they had shot that boy at the theater a week before and then they shot that little boy, again a police officer, he did that too and for the first time ever we said we were not going to let go of this case. If you saw that mother, the way she was hurting so bad that her only child was now dead, you knew, we had to do something and so I was on the grand jury at that time. That's all I got to tell you. But, every time I'd walk into the jury room in the morning there would be cameras out there, "Can you tell us anything about the LULAC case? Can you tell us anything about the LULAC case?" The media called it "the LULAC case." To this day they call it "the LULAC case." Those three serial, remember those three serial killers that were killing people in the north, in the southwest part, southeast part of town? Remember those? Do you know that that's called "the LULAC case"? LULAC is the one who broke it open. LULAC is the one that gave them the ability to catch those serial killers that were killing *mejicanos* in the southeast. And you know what the police chief told me when I demanded that he put that community for a meeting together, I demanded it. He said, "Well, I'm in Dallas at a…" I said, "I don't give a shit where you are. You will come down here and put this thing together or I will tell the media that there is a serial killer loose." He says, "No, no, no, we can't do that because they'll move on." I said, "That's wonderful. Move them out of the Hispanics. Move them into River Oaks. Let them go kill people over there." Bullshit. So we caught those serial killers only because they let me announce there that we were going to give a $15,000 reward for any information leading to these killers, and the boy that was killing with those two grown men, he went to the police department to give information, but he didn't think he, but he

knew too much, too much of what had actually happened. That's how they found the killers. He went after the $15,000 the *pendejo*, but that little boy shooting, first time a police officer got indicted and actually charged with murder and found guilty of murder. But tell me how many times, how long did he serve? None, none. He caught two years probation for murder, for killing a little boy, but the family got $1.5 million dollars and a statue of the little boy at Guadalupe Plaza and they have to now start different classes at the police academy.

NG: When was that case?

MR: 2005… 2005— five or six, something like that. Remember Escobar? I can't remember his first name. All I remember is his last name because his mother, every time I saw her face I wanted to cry so badly like, because I mean, just looking at her. She was hurting so bad and I knew it, just to look at her face. So that's still called the LULAC case.

NG: Is there anything final that you want to say about, about LULAC within the city of Houston or it's role in the Hispanic community?

MR: I think we need to get more Hispanics into office, but again, the right Hispanics. I think that's very important, but at the same time, I think that our people need to get out and vote— need to get out and vote. That's another thing we do is voter registration, a lot of voter registration, a lot and that's so important, but not just sign up to vote, but actually get out and vote because until the day that we get out and vote, we're never going to have a say in what we do, ever, but I guarantee you if we all got out and vote, everybody signs up to vote and gets out and votes, hell yeah, we'll be a power nobody can go against. All we need is that vote.

NG: Okay. Well, thank you.

MR: You're welcome.