

## CARMELITA GUTIERREZ INTERVIEW

Narrator: Carmelita Gutierrez

Interviewer: Eva Martinez

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Location: Oakland, California

Carmelita: Hello. My name is Carmelita Lonjina Gutierrez and I am 54 years old.

Eva: *Today is February 21st, 2016. My name is Eva Martinez and I am the interviewer. This interview is taking place in Oakland, California.*

*Carmelita, can we start off talking about your family life, where and when you were born, and a little bit about your family history, your parents?*

CG: Sure. I was born at Stanford hospital. My mom was a cannery worker and my dad was a welder at General Motors. So, my parents made it in a Low Income program... that is how I was born at Stanford University.

EM: *Tell us a little bit about where your mom and your father are from.*

CG: My mom was born in Calexico. Calexico is right at the border of California and Mexico and so it's Calexico in the California side and Mexicali in the Mexico side. Depending on where my mom was at, she would either say, "I was born in Calexico" or she was born in Mexicali... depending how things were going in California. My dad, he came over undocumented; I do know he was from Aguascalientes and came over and went to Chicago. He didn't like it there it was too cold, so he ended up in California.

What's funny is... my mom and my dad met at a club in San Jose...

EM: *A dance club?*

CG: A dance club. Many, many years later my mom had asked us, "Where do you guys go dancing?" We showed her where we went dancing, and she just looks at us and she says, "That's where I met your dad." [both laugh]

EM: *Earlier in the pre-interview you had said that your mom's father had passed away*

*early and she had to leave school.*

CG: My grandfather worked at the railroad tracks. There is a dam in that area, he helped make that dam. I remember mom telling me that my grandfather had a heart attack and he died. My mom was the youngest; she had a sister that was a year older and a brother two years older. My mom was the youngest of the family and she made the decision on her own that she was going to quit school and work full time so she could help my grandma. Because my grandma did not know how to speak English, she lost the house. My mom took it upon herself, "Since I am the youngest..." it is important for Terry, her sister, and her brother, Kiko, to go to school and graduate and "I'll go and work."

EM: *I know Calexico is in the Imperial Valley, that is a big agricultural area... did she go into ... [that]?*

CG: That is how she ended up in San Jose, they would work the fields and go up and down California. My mom would tell me little stories...like one time they got into Fresno area around midnight...they couldn't go to a hotel or motel. They found a bar and they went in. Somehow my grandma sweet-talked the owner to let them stay over-night and then they would clean up the bar...so they did. They came up and my mom liked San Jose and she told my grandma and my aunt, "When I get older I'm coming here, I'm going to make my home here," and she did.

EM: *You were born at Stanford... you were living in that area with your family at that time?*

CG: My mom was working in the canneries in Sunnyvale and also Santa Clara. At that time, we were living in Mountain View. I think my dad was already working in General Motors, I'm not too sure. We were there for maybe the first year of my life and then from there they moved into Sunnyvale. What I remember from there was a row of houses, not big house but little houses, and everybody there worked at the canneries. I remember that.

EM: *When we had spoken earlier, you had talked about throughout your childhood seeing incidents of racism or inequality...you had mentioned how your mom*

*played a big role in helping you to understand those things. Can you talk about that?*

CG: Sure. Even though my mom did not graduate from high school, she did have a political understanding of what was going on. What was very important to her was to make sure the news was on to learn what was going on. There's little incidents I remember...once I came home from school and I looked at my mom, I had the book up and I go, "Mommy when did we come here?" and she didn't understand me and goes, "What?" I said, "When did we come here, they don't talk about us," and my mom [says,] "Okay, we have been here many, many years-blah blah blah," but what my mom was telling us... we have a history here.

Another time was when we were watching T.V., the news. It was when the I-hotel incident happened. I was folding the sheets and I'm watching the T.V. because my mom is making dinner... ABC news... I see people surrounding a building and horses coming. I was kind of like in shock, I look at my mom and go, "What happened, what are they doing why are they hitting people?" and my mom is watching it and she goes, "That's how they treat us, when we try to fight for something, they come. They come."

EM: *And that was about 1977, I believe.*

CG: Yeah, it stuck in my head, it stuck in my head. My mom, again, was not [a] high school graduate, but she knew things. There was different things my mom would tell us through life. One of them... she had a fighting spirit, she says from the Yaquis, the Native Americans. I remember in San Jose, the immigration stuff was starting to get intense and they were doing road blocks. My mom if she sees a road block...my mom is short. So she is in her car, she always listens to Mexican radio stations and so what she would do was pump up the music, lower down the windows, and lower her stuff like she is low riding, and she would have her papers on her lap. When they stopped her they would say, "Where is your papers?" My mom says, "Well where is yours, I have mines." That fighting spirit is ingrained in my whole family.

EM: *When you went to high school, you were a student at Andrew Hill High in San Jose. Tell me a little about that school and, also, what you were involved in there.*

CG: At Andrew Hill High School, we were considered the second worst school in San Jose. James Lick was more in the east side of San Jose, and that was the worst... and then our school. Our school was predominantly Latino, some Asians, some White and some African American, mainly working class.

There is different little things that happened there. One was... Andrew Hill High School will be considered the worst school in that district and then Santa Teresa was on the other side of San Jose, south, rich, upper class...and so we had a football game, and it was varsity football. The coaches were letting us know that the folks from Santa Teresa were saying that they were gonna kick our butts, that we were too poor, that we don't know how to play football, blah, blah, blah. That was the first time where you see multinational unity because they even bussed us over there. They had to put the football game in a different high school for neutral ground...but this is the first time that you see Cholos, Whites, African Americans, everybody going over there to support Andrew Hill High school, and we beat them. That was so cool to me, to see that.

Also, I was part of La Raza student organization, it was mainly more of a cultural organization but it was an organization that you wanted to be part of, you wanted to do something. I do remember one little incident...we had two brothers, they were Conrad and Jesse Jimenez and they were wrestlers. They were like the champs. We were at a rally and the coach was introducing the brothers, he went "Conrad" and "Jesse Gimenez". All the Latinos in the crowd went "JI-ME-NEZ". So he went "Conrad" and "Jesse JIMENEZ". So, all those little things shaped me: my mom, listening to the Mexican stations, the community.

EM: *Did your older siblings, did they go to college?*

CG: I am the oldest in my family; it is myself and three brothers. I was the first in my family to go to college.

EM: *What pushed you to go to college? Was it something your mom pushed you to*

*or...?*

CG: Yeah. By that time, my mom was a single parent because my parents got divorced. My mom knew that education was important. I had that going for me, but then a second part of it... and that second part was... when I was thinking of going to college...you see your counselor. With my mom in the room, the counselor told me that I shouldn't look to go to college and that I should be like my mom and work with my hands.

EM: Really? [shocked tone]

CG: Both me and my mom were kind of like...we froze. We were paralyzed because you look at a counselor and you see them as an authority person. We were shocked and we let it go at that time, and we talked about it. I think we talked about it. Somehow I said, "I'm gonna teach that person." Even though it took a struggle... like the first three years of college was community college. [That] was basically my fourth year of high school. I had to prepare myself to go to a university because my high school didn't prepare me. It was a struggle, but those were my two motivating factors: your parents want to see you go to college and I wanted to prove this counselor.

EM: *At Evergreen Community College you had said your work was working with equity programs... what did you study there in addition to that?*

CG: I was preparing myself to go to college at a community college... the other part of it was Ethnic Studies. I knew I wanted to do some type of work that I could empower people. I knew I didn't want to be a teacher but I wanted to do something where I can empower people. I am looking backwards, in terms of organizing, and using their skills, you know either music, theater arts, whatever. They use those skills to empower the next generation. That's how I saw myself. That's why I did work like student outreach, you know...going to the high schools and helping them fill up the forms, doing cultural events. Even though I can't sing or dance, but I knew it was good. And that was my gift. That's what I wanted, I wanted people to be proud of who they are and show it either through

painting, ballet folklórico, lion dancing, whatever. I wanted to create some kind of avenue where they could do that and that is what basically I was doing.

EM: *Your life took on a path of empowerment of the community and other people?*

CG: Yeah. [CG's phone starts making noise, she shuts it off]

EM: *At Evergreen, as part of your job, you started going to San Jose State where you met people who would have big impact on the rest of your life ... talk about that, why you went there and what you were doing there.*

CG: I was working with student outreach, EOP, we went to San Jose State because we were doing recruitment and they told us about this event that was happening where they were bringing high school students from San Jose to come to San Jose State and have a day. The goal was to show high school students, Latino high school students, that they can come to college, they can come to a university... there are people like them. We went there and we had our little table, I felt empowered there. It made me know "I am going to go to San Jose State" and when I saw what folks did there... I've been to other events and I felt it was kind of dry or too administrative, but what impacted me about San Jose State and what MEChA was doing was that it was more cultural pride, it was more empowerment, it was more looking at the person and how that person decide "this is what I want to do" opposed to someone saying "you should do this." And that is what really impressed me from MEChA because I didn't know folks there. I saw that and I was like, "this is cool." So I went there and introduced myself and that is how I met Juan and Soledad, at that time. That really impressed me.

EM: *Did they continue to keep in touch with you? How did your relationship with them start to develop?*

CG: We became friends. I was learning from them but they were also learning from me because...I am not like a party animal. I am politically active but at the same time... and I think it's that cultural part of me, one thing I can say is my mom, she is not a singer, but she has a good voice and I used to remember this growing up... when people in the neighborhood would do The Grito. So it's these guys

doing The Gritos and at the end it's my mom. And then my dad, he played the guitar and he was a Mariachi singer and he had a voice. So, culture had always been a part of me in some form or fashion, so I think that Juan and Soledad saw me as person wanting to be more politically active but at the same time this other side of me of going out... I took them to Studio 47 one time. It opened their eyes to see another individual who is not from their community, someone different because I had my own little style.

EM: *Did they start talking to you about politics, about Marxism... how did the whole concept of Socialism and Marxism-Leninism enter your life?*

CG: I remember myself and one other person that was also part at Evergreen College and I think maybe we had a meeting of something, an event, or something connected to MEChA. After that, people left and we stayed behind and then we had more of a discussion of, politically, what was going on. And even though I don't know, at that time, the specifics I didn't know exactly what Marxism-Leninism or whatever was. My gut feeling... it was... what it was for me, it was the first time someone gave me some kind of context to look at what was going on. Why was racism? Why the working class or poor people? What Soledad was giving me at that time was the context of how to look at things and it just clicked. I didn't know what it was but it clicked. I just remember the person that had said something, he was more, I guess I should say, right rationale person throughout his argument and I even though I don't exactly what I said... but I knew what he said was wrong. I think maybe Soledad was like "oh, good..." [both laugh] I just had that feeling because I knew in my gut what he was saying was wrong and what Soledad was saying was right. It was just in there... in my body, in my mind.

EM: *Around that time, you also graduated or transferred from Evergreen to San Jose State; so you were working with them more closely. Is that when you entered a study group to formally study?*

CG: Yeah, if the timeline fits right. Because after that little thing, I knew I needed to know more. Looking backwards, I was looking for that context. I needed someone

to help me understand what was going on because anything I wanted to do later, I needed to have some kind of foundation... because then you kind of lose sense or you get disillusioned if something doesn't go right. You need to have that understanding. The study groups really helped me start building that foundation of how to look at the world, and how to look at people and how to move people.

EM: *In terms of years, this was around '81, '82?*

CG: Yes it was in the early '80s.

EM: *Do you remember things that you studied or discussed in that study group.*

CG: I just remember the [Mao Tse-Tung's] little Red Books. Remember the little books. And the beige ones. There is a lot of terminology that didn't [make sense], but when you talked to folks and they broke it down... that helped. Also what I miss today is debrief. I can tell you right now it is so important and I miss that so much because sometimes not knowing criticism/self-criticism... we are not perfect, right? Those things were so helpful because it put it into practice because something would happen and you don't know, you would step back talk about it and learn, make some sense so that way the next time that happens you figure it out quicker. Not having that today... I miss it so much.

EM: *How long were you in the study group before you were asked to join the League?*

CG: I think it was kind of quick. I think so because it had to be maybe two years at the most. Yeah... because I'm thinking time wise. I come into San Jose State and during the summer or spring when we are not in session we are helping Raza Si, a community organization around immigration. So it had to be quick.

EM: *Do you remember the recruitment process and how they asked you?*

CG: I think Soledad had asked me and I think I was in shock. And this is the reason I was in shock because [pause] as a person that comes from a Mexicanos family, we never went to college in my family. You don't see yourself as that important. So when Soledad asked me, I was in shock because I was like, "Me? Who am I?" So by the time another person asked me from Raza Si, at that time I was

partnering with him to go into the community doing door knocking, so he ended up asking me. By that time, between Soledad asking me and Jorge asking me, I accepted that maybe I do have something to offer... but I was first in shock because I was like "Me?" And I was proud, I was happy that someone had faith in me.

EM: *When you think about the commitment you were making, what made you make that commitment, because you could have stayed working with them and not been a member. What made you take that step?*

CG: I saw the League as something legitimate to try to make change. I saw the commitment in folks. I saw how they were there for you. I remember at that time I was driving, so I had a ticket and I had to go to court. And Soledad was willing to give up her day to go with me and we had just met. So I saw that commitment in her and I then as I was starting to meet other people... I didn't want to lose that. I wanted to be in a place where I can do that too. I saw the League was an organization that people were willing to put their life to help others and I wanted to be part of that.

EM: *When you joined you started attending a unit meeting, tell me about that. What was the unit based on and how was it to first walk into that room, into that meeting?*

CG: Well, it's scary because at the same time I always feel...and this is something I don't think I will ever get rid of... you don't feel secure. But when it came to the unit, if I remember right, it was based on the work that you were doing. So if you were doing student work, at this university, with Latino, or Asian, or African American... you came together, which I totally miss. Even though it was too many meetings [both laugh], I really miss that because not one individual is going to see everything. So coming into this group, and you have different people to share those experiences... that was one. Two, is understanding what's going on and also knowing the different individuals, different people... it's that information, right? Now looking today backwards, I miss that. I totally do.

EM: *They must have talked to you about the open and closed members and all that. Were you surprised when you started coming to internal meetings, who was there? Was it people that you had met?*

CG: Yeah. I was like, "Wow". It was a shocker, but at the same time it was a good shocker because now I knew who's who, and who I can run to if I need help...who I need to protect.

EM: *When you joined did you talk about functioning under democratic centralism and what that meant?*

CG: Yeah. I can't explain it, but yeah. In terms of the need for protection, the need of how things come back and forth in terms of the work, understanding different policies, that stuff yeah. I knew it had to happen because I knew during that time and just looking backwards of history in terms of the attacks that would come... you need to do this work but at the same time you need to protect. So, it just made sense to me.

EM: *Did your family know you had joined something or that your life had changed?*

CG: Not really. My mom and I were alike. A lot alike so we went through our little struggle there. I was doing my own thing. I know my brothers thought I was crazy but I think that was just brother talk because they were proud of me. I learned this from their friends. It was interesting that in my community where I grew up, a lot of the folks there, after they graduated from high school, they went into the building trades. So I'm starting to meet them now, because I work at the South Bay Labor Council and our office is right next to the building trades and I'm starting to meet these people and they would say "Hey, that's Carmelita that's Michael's sister." So I'm getting to know them, and they say "Oh, yeah I remember. Yeah your brother talked a lot of good things about you." So I learned now, 20 years later, that my brothers were proud of me.

EM: *Yeah, brothers aren't too good at verbalizing. [laughs]*

CG: Right?! Yeah.

EM: *Now you are in the League, I assume you are starting to meet people in the League, outside of your immediate area and it's a multiracial, multiethnic [organization]. What were your thoughts about that and what you were finding out about this organization that you had just joined?*

CG: For me, proud...because I knew we were bigger now and you learned more about the different struggles that people are working on. You see the similarities, but then you see the differences. So in terms of knowing things history wise, that was so powerful. Building multinational unity, for me, that's powerful because in my family we are trying to understand... we have Asians in our family, my dad is very light skin, so we try to figure out who he is, Native American... The League, for me, was the bomb because it brought together all these different people.

One incident happened at my brother's junior high school and, at that time, they called it a race riot between African Americans and Latinos. It lasted like three days. At the end of the third day, the school district fired the principle and the principle is Latino. And when that happened the kids stopped fighting and said "uh-oh". Then they came together, apologized for fighting each other, and said, "We got to protect Mr. Nava," and they had a school walkout... Latinos and African American hand in hand. At that time, I was trying to understand how people try to pit people against each other and to see the League and saw how it was majority people of color and women in power...for me it was the bomb. It was, because it was just the bomb for me.

EM: *Now you're in the League, you're continuing to do Chicano/Latino student work...was there any difference in how you did it now that you are a Socialist versus before?*

CG: A big difference for me was the context because outside of that you don't get that... you don't get that in school, you do not get that watching the news. You don't have an understanding. So, in terms of being part of a communist organization, for me, was being able to get an understanding of what was going on, how to make change, how you do that, and be able to give that information to others because they, too, are looking for that. That to me was so powerful

because, again, I'm looking at myself today. I'm not part of an organization, and that is what I miss—the context. That is where a lot of my frustration is.

EM: *Can you describe what you mean by context a little bit more?*

CG: I guess understanding... like why capitalism, how it exists, how it works, and how it pits people. Because a lot of time when people are looking at the Republican debates and all these crazy people, it goes deeper than that... or what happened at Flint [Michigan] with the water situation. People can get very easily disillusioned or lose hope, but if someone can explain to you why it's happening, why they pit people... even though you still feel disempowered because you can't change it yourself, but you have a sense of hope and when you feel you understand what's going on you can do something. You can sign a petition, or you can go to a rally, or a demonstration and you have hope. And to me that context helps people because, like I say, sometimes when I'm at work I'm frustrated and I just step it up...but [others] can't step it up because they don't have that context, or if something goes wrong they get disillusioned.

EM: *Now let's talk about the MEChA work, more of the statewide MEChA work and all the other activities that you were involved in on a statewide level. Because you had such a long period of a lot of activities [both laugh], we may want to just take it almost chronologically. Now you are a cadre and you were a close cadre, right? It sounds like, and correct me if I'm wrong... When you first joined, you were already working with Raza Si on immigration work through MEChA, connecting with the community. Can you talk a little bit about that, what was the work focused on and how were you trying to work with people?*

CG: Generally, it was immigration policy, trying to put a voice out to change policy. One was working with the community and I remember going a lot to the Sacred Heart community in San Jose and going door to door, going to the church and that's where my Spanish was picking up better, because I tell people I'm a passive bilingual, I understand it but I don't have... right? I was given that opportunity with the work and it was real helpful because the one thing that I liked about the League was being able to have the folks in the community, the ones who are

gonna be impacted by racist policy, a voice. There is one thing I really liked about the League, looking back, was that the League was able to give the people who were impacted a voice and our role was to create that space... because I'm not gonna be impacted, they are. The League helped me help them put up their voice.

EM: *How was that done?*

CG: Like when we had forums, the media would come and do a press conference... we were able to help folks learn to do a speech, learn to talk to the media, or if they had to go to City Hall we would help them be able to say what they wanted to say. Empower them, that they felt they can do something. Because I see other things. Where I work, they write their talking points, they may write it and then they say "read it." Or there is a rally, and it's not the workers on the stage, it's the head of the unions, or "we'll write your speech for you because you can't write" and I think that's the one thing I remember...was being able to talk to someone and help them figure out what they wanted to say and how to say it in their words.

EM: *Where there any statewide conferences? It looks like the first one I have down is 1986, but do you remember getting involved in statewide conferences or any significant thing happening before then?*

CG: Everything blurs for me.

EM: *Okay. Then let's go into the Jackson Campaign, the 1984 Jackson Campaign. How were you involved in that work because that was work that the League was involved in too.*

CG: One would be, in terms of college campuses, having the different organizations support the Reverend Jesse Jackson for president and then so that on the campus... that was one work...going to different organizations and trying to get folks to voter reg[istrate]...endorse Jesse Jackson. If possible... if there was a chance to have him come speak... then getting the campus ready for that in terms of the organizations. Other part of it, say with MEChA, was getting the different MEChAs around the state to also endorse the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and if say the Reverend Jesse Jackson is gonna come to one of the colleges in that area... and then we would help try get folks from your own campus but also folks from

other campus to go. And then later on, being delegates for the Reverend Jesse Jackson. That was one thing in terms of...for myself...I was a delegate.

I think my brothers, not that they knew about it at the moment, but they knew I was gonna be a delegate... I was running... so they were telling their friends to vote for me. I remember doing that, that's when I started learning to speak in front of groups, I didn't really... I mean I spoke in little groups, little presentations but never big. So doing the Jesse Jackson Campaign stuff I was going to...my very first speech was at San Francisco State. And that was funny too because I'm a public transportation person, so no one could take me to San Francisco State during the day because everyone either had to work or go to school, so I had to take BART. Someone was supposed to pick me up at the Daly City BART station and then take me to San Francisco State... but they forgot. So I get off the BART station and there was nobody there... and this was before cell phones and pagers. So I had to figure out how... thank God I take bus so I ask the bus driver, "How do I get to San Francisco State?" and they tell me and there you go... so I get to San Francisco State and I saw the friend that was supposed to pick me and I tap her in the shoulder and she goes, "Oh! I really forgot!" But that was the very first time for me to speak in front of a large group... so that was an experience. It was hard too... because San Francisco State... San Francisco is very political, so when you do a speech I had to get used to stopping and then everybody clap... and then continue going on... so that was so hard. [laughs]

EM: *In the student Jesse Jackson work, did you attend any internal meetings that talked about goals and how they were using that campaign?*

CG: Yes.

EM: *So tell me about what you remember of that.*

CG: I'm kind of blending it in with other things, but I do remember getting an analysis in terms of what's going on... say in the campaign, how is it impacting the different nationalities, what are the goals within your own campus, within your own community. For me, those internal meetings... they gave structure and they help you figure out your work. How do you talk to people? Also, it gave you information to help other people understand what we're doing and it provides a

direction... what we're doing, how can it impact, or if things don't go the way it happened or it should be... why? For me, it kept us centered and then at the same time knowledgeable of what is going on and the impacts.

EM: *Was that the year that the "hands-across-the-border" happened?*

CG: If I remember right, it happened right after the DNC in Georgia.

EM: *But it was in the '84 campaign?*

CG: I think so... was that the first one?

EM: *Yeah. Was that when you went to Tijuana or San Ysidro?*

CG: San Ysidro. Yes.

EM: *Tell me about that... you were statewide MEChA rep? Or what were you representing?*

CG: I think it was right after the Democratic National Convention. I think so. I remember the Reverend Jesse Jackson had a march, "hands-across-the-border." It was a rally in San Ysidro, which is in the California side, and then after the rally people marched to Tijuana. In terms of bringing Mexico... United States... because a lot of the immigration stuff, all that. What I do remember was they wanted to have a MEChA speaker because MEChA was able to have a delegate go to the Democratic National Convention. So they were trying to have me as a speaker or someone from MEChA, I can't remember if it was me specifically or someone from MEChA. So at that time the Rod. brothers who were part of one of the Communist organizations, I think it was Communist USA, but I can't remember exactly.

EM: *And their name was Rodriguez?*

CG: The Rodriguez brothers. I don't know if they were twins but I remember they look alike and they had green eyes and dark skin. They did not like the League and they did not want to have a MEChA person on that stage.

EM: *Well did they not want to have a MEChA person or they didn't want to have you? Because...*

CG: See, I don't remember that part. I don't remember that part, or they made the connection... it's one or the other. I just remember at that time I worked at Spaghetti Factory. I made the salads. And I got a call that they were gonna come

pick me up... Juan Montemayor and [redacted] were gonna come pick me up and then we were gonna drive down south.

EM: *From San Jose to...?*

CG: To San Diego... and we didn't know for sure what was happening because down there they were fighting to get me on stage. So they pick me up, I grab my stuff and there we go. And as we are going were going over my speech, what are the talking points for my speech... and Eric was gonna help write my speech so that way I can get rested up. So that way, if I get on the stage, then I'm good to go. We found out... I can't remember when we found out, but we found out I was able to get on the stage. So that morning, [redacted], he wrote my speech. And then he gave it to me in the morning and then he says "practice it." And I go "okay," so I'm all done, I get my speech and I start reading it... and I didn't know half the words because they were so big words. And I look at [redacted] and I go, "I can't do this." [redacted] goes, "I'll be back," so he rewrote my speech... more on a working class... and I got and I go, "Okay its good, I can do it now." It was funny. The dude was tired. He wrote real fast but he could type real fast.

What had happened was...so we get to San Ysidro... it was [redacted], and Juan and myself. As we get closer to the stage, they say, "Goodbye you're on your own," cause they couldn't go with me on the stage so they went to where the crowd was. So I made it to the stage. I knew who the Rod. brothers were, so I said I wanted to know where I was on the speaking list and they say, "We'll let you know, we'll let you know" and I go "Ok". So I sat down. So there's a couple people who went up before me, and I ask them, "When am I next?" and they say, "Soon, soon." Then it clicked to me what they were trying to do. Basically what they were trying to do was... since they couldn't stop me from being on the stage, another way they could do it was push me down on the speakers list, so when the Reverend Jesse Jackson came, as soon as he came, the rally is over because as soon as he speaks then you march. So I figured it out, eventually. So I started saying after each person who spoke before me, "When am I next?" I said it so many time that everybody around me said "When is she next?!" Because I'm a sweet, innocent girl child, she's been sitting here.

Finally, you have to give in. So he said, "Okay you're next." So now I'm next. I get to the thing, to the podium... and at that time, I write my speeches in big letters so I don't miss a word. So I get up there and like two sentences into the speech, I hear clapping and I went "oh shoot." I turn and here comes Reverend Jesse Jackson. And [inaudible] I just had to do this... I just ran to where he was and I ran into the front and I go, "Reverend Jesse Jackson, you interrupted my speech." [both laugh] So he looked up and said, "Reintroduce her," and I looked at him and the Rod. brother... and his face just went down. He said, "Shit." [both laugh] 'Cause in the back of my head was... people fought for me to get on this stage. [redacted] got a fucking ticket because that man on the helicopter spotted us speeding. No. So he had to reintroduce me. So what he tried to do, the Rod brother tried to do... to try to intimidate me... was put his head right here.

EM: *When you were speaking?*

CG: When I was speaking... to try to mess me up. That's the only thing I could think of because why are you gonna put your head right there, right? But this is what cracked me up... I look to the front of where everybody was... and who do I see? [redacted], Juan Montemayor, and other folks... so I could focus on them and do the speech. That's the love, the support that we had. I'll never forget that, and to me I didn't think it was that big. I just felt I had to do that, people fought for me, so I did it so...

I remember there was some kind of Democratic Convention in San Francisco... so we used to give out the newspaper, *Unity* newspaper. So we went up there to give the paper and different people said, "Are you Carmelita?" and I go "Yeah". And I knew they were part of the League, and they said "Man if I was you I would have shit in my pants." [Eva laughs] And I didn't know how powerful that was. To me it was...I'm doing this for everybody else. We fought too hard.

EM: *That was the first Jesse Jackson Campaign and then the aftermath because he continued to organize... and then in '85... well the cannery workers strikes starts in Watsonville but also the next year there is a Bakersfield MEChA statewide and then in '86, I think it was in Fall, there was a national Chicano student conference at UC Berkeley. That I think is where the League and the Cultural*

*Nationalists... the struggle there hits a high point. Can you talk about that National Chicano Student Conference and what happened there?*

CG: If I remember right... I think for us there is lessons learned that... like each organization had bylaws. There's a lot of time that sometimes we kind of let it go and not pay attention to it and when people who politically think different from you, they want to gain power and if there is a way they could use the constitution to do that, they will. And that was one of our mistakes... was that we forgot to always be on top of, not just us as a League, in terms of our own internal stuff, but then you have to think about the communal organizations you are with. So I learned that the hard way. Because they used it against us in terms of [inaudible], when you went through resolutions, voting... At UC Berkeley, the Nationalists took over the stage and we lost the conference.

EM: *Okay, I want to continue on that but can you explain what is Cultural Nationalism as you understand it, what they represented and what was the struggle over?*

CG: I had this understanding in terms of the Nationalists, a lot of them wanted power of the organization over the movement and they wanted to decide what issues MEChA should be a part of and it's like just for Chicanos and having different Chicanos. Like, one thing was your family had to be here in 1848, and that meant you were a Chicano. If you were from Mexico, then you should go fight for Mexican issues. If you're from El Salvador, then you should go back to your country. To me it was a racist view... and "this is a Chicano nation so we need to kick everybody out," you know? Because "this is for Chicanos." I just remember that they romanticized the Aztecs, and the Cholos, and later on I learned too, that a lot of them were more like middle class, upper middle class family backgrounds. And they wanted to put themselves in power and control what people, what issues, how people think, it's for Chicanos... So that's how I understood it and [pause] basically that's how I understood it.

EM: *And I know that one of the things... they didn't like the League because they felt the League was force coming into MEChA and taking over and partly that was due because, as I said, the League had a lot of secret members, which it did... and that they were trying to convince the students that were active in MEChA that this*

*was a really bad thing. So do you remember what the League's approach was to that struggle?*

CG: I can't remember specifically. I'm kind off looking backwards to it, I knew we had some open members who spoke and I think members who were closed and just general... Mechistas protected them because... it's a question, I think for a lot of folks was that these individuals... [pause] if they are or they are not [closed], are doing good work and they are advancing the struggle. They are empowering us. So it's a question of we're gonna protect them because they deserve it, because they are actually doing something that is good for our people. If they are or they aren't... that's not an issue. It's the people who are making things better... we gotta protect them, they're the leaders and we just need to protect them because that's what people would do. People who might not even understand it that well will protect so-and-so because they say so-and-so is the one doing everything. And so... you are the one who is disrupting.

EM: *Did you ever have an issue with being a closed member and what the Nationalists were saying about being a secret member and everything? Did that ever bother you?*

CG: It bothered me because I saw it as an attack. They are attacking an individual because they belong to this organization. They are not looking at that person and the work that they are doing. So that was the issue for me, looking at it from the outside... for me that was one. And then the other part of it was... you're doing all this shit, all this stuff. And we are too busy fighting with each other while they're defunding Ethnic Studies, or they are attacking people of color, or they are trying to increase the admission requirements to a higher level so people of color can't get it... you are helping the right wing do away with us. So who's really bad for us? Them or you?

EM: *The League was involved in MEChA, some campuses throughout the state, but there were a lot of campuses that the League had no presence and... Do you think that the Nationalists had an impact on those campuses that didn't know the people?*

CG: I think it did at first. I think, because... I always say this and I don't know if it's

true... that when people of color first become politically active, your first sentiment is more to be a Nationalist because you want to protect your people, right? And as you grow politically, you start understanding that it takes more than just you, it takes more than just your community... that we have to work with other folks. I think the campuses that didn't have League but were part of MEChA Central and got to know, closed or open, the ones who are putting out the analysis, the ones who are helping to organize, and provide direction, and how to do certain things.... when they start looking at them... because they're gonna say names... well they gotta say... well this person this school and this person that school. So when they start looking at them and that they make up their own mindset, and say wait a minute this person is doing so much and then it starts breaking down and they start protecting or uniting with us.

EM: *Okay, two points: Can you briefly explain what the MEChA Central is and also were you ever rebated or people that you were working with came to you to ask you if you were a member... so first, what's the MEChA Central?*

CG: The MEChA Central... so... you have either a MEChA either at a high school, but the majority were in the community college and the UC and State universities... so it could be the MEChA or it could be La Raza. So it could be a different Latino organization that was doing more of the political, cultural work on the campus because you had different types of organizations, some of them were based on the majors, so it was like business or engineering... but then you have the political, which the majority were MEChA or La Raza. But at the same time when I was there, we knew we have to have some type of body to help unite the different campuses. So then we had the Central. We had like the northern central... the different community college or college universities would meet like once a month at different campuses, so that way we learned about what's happening on their campus and then when we did like joint events or worked on a campaign... we all can come together and organize that way. So there was different centrals in California; you had the northern central, central central, southern central. And then we would have two conferences a year: one in northern California and then other would be in southern California and then you had the

National. The National would bring in the different organizations from the southwest and it would be in part of the southwest. Once I went to Arizona. That was fun.

EM: *So were you ever, the second part of the question, were you ever rebated or outed by...?*

CG: I don't remember being outed by the Nationalists. I remember them coming at me to, you know, try to get me to become a Nationalist... or I wasn't strong enough, you know? I think when I was at San Jose State, I remember more of that. They would come at me... or I was too friendly with the League, I was a closed member and they knew, like, Juan Montemayor was open... so they would... I don't remember them outing me that way but more attacking me because of my relationship with them. Also in terms of... because another part of the Nationalism is chauvinism, right? And for the women, they are not smart enough, or they should not be taking leadership roles... so it's more that attack that would come at me... in terms of when they would attack me.

EM: *I guess it was in 1986... there was a launch of a statewide educational movement, and the League played leadership role in that, bringing together Latino, African American, Asian and even White students to fight for educational rights. I know that there was a march on Sacramento in April of 1987... seven thousand people and then there was also a spring action in 1989 that brought eight thousand people together and I think you were on a statewide task force, educational task force. So can you talk about those years and what that represented bringing people together that broad array of people to fight for educational rights in California.*

CG: Yeah, that was very inspirational, very powerful because... oh God how do I say this... it was great because you do a lot of work within your own community, and you do know that in terms of education... there is a lot of people around you from different nationality groups. And it was just really powerful to see Latinos learning about Asian students and their struggles, and also African Americans... and just seeing the similarities, understanding how they try to pit people against each other and the strength of bringing all these people together was powerful on

so many different levels, it was just... very empowering. And you start realizing that when we come together that it's harder for people to attack and then when we fight that we can make change. Because you do see, at college when they pit people against each other, we are too busy fighting each other and everything else around happening... but during those years, it was just so empowering and seeing respect, the level of respect coming up. It was just great because at San Jose State we had like... MEChA had Raza Day and then the African American students, it's a smaller number, they wanted to do something for African American students. So they would come to us and then we help them, then the Asian students...and we did all our events but then all of each events always had a MEChA speaker. So that unity was just very empowering. And then we were doing the educational rights and then bringing in the associate student body and the White students, at that time it was just so powerful you felt a lot of power, a lot of impact on the campuses and even in the communities.

EM: *How did you work with contacts? Did you have people that you were working with that you were giving direction or helping to understand and also trying to recruit?*

CG: What would happen is... as you are doing your work, you meet a lot of different people and when you see people who think the same as you, or who come to you because they see that you have some kind of knowledge and direction, they start coming to you and you start building that relationship as friends. You see from the other person, they want more and you start looking at them and seeing "Would this person have similar views and beliefs as you, and are they willing to make that commitment?" You have to judge and that's the thing like in terms of say the unit meetings... we would discuss that, like so-and-so, and if people felt that that might be a person to recruit then you have a way of doing that. So that is basically what we did. You look at people. It sounds weird, but you look at people because that is how you grow, right? So you look at people and you say well so-and-so might be the person, then you work with that person to understand them politically, what their commitment level is, what do they have to offer... and if you sense that person wants it, then you can step it up a little bit more.

EM: *Did you ever do that? Did you ever work with someone?*

CG: I don't think I ever recruited.

[both laugh]

EM: *Lets go back to Watsonville, the support that Chicano students gave for that issue. So there was a cannery strike that happened there but there was also an amazing law suit that took place, too, from [inaudible] that reassigned the District [inaudible] and the majority Latino population would never win representation on the city council so [inaudible] sewed them and won. So Latinos got on the council and all that. What was your connection with that work in Watsonville?*

CG: At that time, I think for myself I was a student at San Jose State and we did more like support work. I wasn't part of the legal part of it but that was very powerful because it helped me understand more the Latino students at San Jose State. I think there is a tendency, we have preconceived ideas of what are the type of students go into the Hispanic business association or who goes into the Scientists, there is a tendency to think of them being more right and not willing to be part of the struggle. So at that time of the Watsonville strike, at that time too at San Jose State, the Nationalists... we had retaken MEChA because we lost MEChA. So the Nationalists were in power at San Jose State MEChA. When the Watsonville strike, I think, the Nationalists had made MEChA so bad that nobody was coming to the meetings, nobody was coming to the meetings. So I was nominated to be president and it was so bad that we had kinda like ask different organization to be part of the MEChA elections, so we could have elections. That's how bad it got because the Nationalists made MEChA look really really bad. So what had happened was we start rebuilding MEChA and the Watsonville strike and what was so good about that in terms of MEChA at San Jose State was, you know, we had to go to the Hispanic business association and go to SOLES, Scientists of Latinos Engineering Association, and that's where we learned that a lot of the students who are going to these organization are going there because it helped them with their major, but politically they were more open...especially the engineering students, because most of them were from Central America, El Salvador, from Nicaragua, where the wars were happening... and these folks they

were the first in their families to go to college in this country but politically they were more supportive. So they would help us with the Watsonville strike support work. If they couldn't go to the rally or to the demonstration because they had to stay here in San Jose and, you know, study for their midterm... they would give us money to buy turkeys, or whatever they could do to support. That's when they learned that... I need to change my views about how I look at students who go to these different types of organizations, there is a difference about how they're gonna help me graduate and politically what can I do. So I learned that a lot from them.

*EM: In the 1988 Jackson Campaign, were you involved in that in any significant way or more building support?*

CG: I think it was building support.

*EM: Is there anything about any other statewide MEChA or national MEChA conference that you wanna talk about?*

CG: No. I think it was covered.

*EM: In terms of your membership in the League, by 1988 you had been in for what? Six years?*

CG: Yeah. Six, seven years.

*EM: Did you ever regret the decision to join the League, because the attacks by the Nationalists had been pretty bitter.*

CG: The only regret, if there was any, was not having the push to change. I think you kind of get stuck and I know towards the end, when you think about it... I came in to San Jose State like in '81, I finally graduate in '93... that's a long time. That was a regret that, part of it, was myself, but part of it... people, too, not helping me change my life. I need to grow up, I need to move on. I think to me that was the only regret, but in terms of the work the League was doing... no regret. To me, it's like, part of life. The thing I felt... because of the League, it made me strong enough to be able to deal with it. For me, it just gave me that strength to not take it personally, that something was wrong with me. It gave me that power not to go there.

*EM: Were you ever, because earlier you had mentioned criticism/self-criticism, did*

*you ever get criticized and had to grow from it?*

CG: Yes, because, we are not perfect and sometimes you could be in your head too much and forget about the world around you or how you relate to people, or how to look at things. And that is the thing about criticism/self-criticism that is very helpful because you might look at things too nationalistic or anti-gay or... and sometimes you don't catch yourself and you need folks to help you. Or in terms of how you work with people, you can't be heavy handed or taking a step back... and that criticism/self-criticism really did help. And again, I wish we had that.

EM: *Do you remember continuing the political study, so how we approach our work wasn't just task oriented. I know sometimes it was because we had to get a certain thing accomplished, but do you remember ongoing political education in terms of like how to look at the Jackson Campaign, cause here you had a guy who was not a Socialist running for president of a capitalist country and even how we approached the Nationalists, the fight with the Nationalists...*

CG: What I remember was having... you had your unit meetings and then you had, say there was too many work, and people come together, from the Asian students, Chicanos students... so you have that. I remember retreats. All of that was very helpful because it put it in context. That's the one thing I really learned was that whatever Nationalists struggles that we were going as in the Chicano student movement was either happening as well in the Chicano immigration work or in a different form in a different... so that is how you understand more broadly, what it is and then how does it come about in other... what are the lessons learned... all that. To me it was so beneficial.

In fact, I always say this. When I go to my work retreats, for me, it is very disempowering. Why? Because at least when I went to the League retreats it helped me understand how things are moving, politically, economically, what does it mean for the world, and then what does it mean for Latinos, what does it mean for Asians, what does it mean for... you know? It helps me understand the world and when you do your work... because you don't do your work just in the Chicano community. You are working with a lot of different people. So having that knowledge helps me do my work better. So when I go to my work retreats,

I'm wasting my time. It's not helping me understand what's going on because where I work, I'm in the labor movement, and we go into electoral politics. So, in San Jose you have the Latinos and the Vietnamese, and if I didn't have the League and all the knowledge that I got from the League, I don't know what the hell I'd do. Or how come the Latinos didn't come out to vote, how come Tim Orozco got smashed, or the Latinos are too lazy to vote...and I come from a different perspective and I go, "You guys are not doing it, you're not understanding what is going on." Or the political difference between the Vietnamese community, there is no context. And that is one thing that the League helped me... is to understand. So the political education in terms of the unit meets, when we came together, the work, the retreats... kept us up to date.

*EM: In 1990, early 1990, the central committee of the League put out a proposal to basically disband or change how the organization was and one of the proposals was to not be a secret organization, to not see Marxism-Leninism as a guiding thought, those kind of things, and there was a process to inform all the cadres and have discussion. What do you remember of that period?*

*CG: What I remember would change...opening my eyes to see that things are changing around us. And I didn't fully understand it but I felt comfortable, but then I felt sad. The sadness was losing that foundation, but at the same time I felt we needed change and I didn't feel it was bad. I just felt that we needed change and I felt that we needed an opening, but then I felt an insecurity, sadness, and the thought that all the work that we did... is it gonna fall apart?*

*EM: Do you remember that there was a minority position on the central committee that was fighting for the organization to basically remain?*

*CG: Yes I do. Yeah... but at that time I felt that, I hate to say this, they were stuck, they were stuck. And they were holding on to something, and I felt that. At the same time, I had to accept it. It's there. I just felt that we needed to move and hoping that somehow, some form, people would still be doing some work but in a different form. And I have to hope for the best.*

*EM: And now looking back, that didn't happen in a big way. How do you look at that period right after?*

CG: I think it was a transitional period. For me, I finally graduated [laughs]... but I think it was transitional. I still have some ties with folks, but like I said, thank God for Facebook. Looking back, looking backwards... I wish there was something, somehow that...because you look at what is happening right now. The attacks, Black Lives Matter... I see the good and I see the bad, but I do know, I do feel that something is coming. I'm very proud to say, and I kinda say this to folks that I am glad that... I don't say it publicly because of the League, but I do say that I'm so glad that my teachers came from the Civil Rights Movement, came from the community of colors because that knowledge that they gave me allows me to have hope for a better future because I see the labor movement people, out of the labor movement. They are demoralized. They are burnt out. They have no sense of hope or they keep doing the same thing over and over and over and I'm like, "Dude, open your eyes." It's frustrating, but when people ask me, "How do you stay hopeful? How do you stay with a smile? How have you been working for the South Bay Labor Council for like twenty years?" and I say, "Because of what people taught me in the past, I have hope." And then looking at Facebook, how I use Facebook... I see my old friends still active in some form or fashion and still have a drive to make the world a better place, on one level. Then I see the young folks that have that and it makes me cry. It does. When I see young folks that think like me, I'm like, "Okay, there's still good people in this world that want to do something to make this world a better place."

EM: *Do you think it's time for a Socialist organization that is totally open? I mean we have Bernie Sanders who says he's a Socialist.*

CG: What's surprising is that's not an issue, to me it's like the very right wing or folks that are burnt out make it an issue but for the majority of folks... it's not an issue.

EM: *Not an issue that Socialists...?*

CG: Socialists. I'm not sure about the term Communist, but it's not an issue. Its more the work that people do, you know? It's like people have grown up or the level of understanding. I don't know. I just feel we are moving into a time that is more powerful. People are more open and I look at AJ Plus and what they're doing... they had some videos about Socialism. People are liking it. I think that discussion

is changing.

*EM: What do you want young people to know about the League?*

*CG:* It was ahead of its time because the League was ... okay you look at today's society. It's majority people of color. The League in the '80s, and the '90s, '70s was majority people of color and women of color in leadership positions. It was ahead of its time. When you look at the accomplishments, the work that that organization did...was powerful. It made change. It showed to the world people of color can make a difference, and when we come together, and fight to make change... WOW. When you look at the history books, there is no sense of empowerment there. Or that's what I think. Self-empowerment. We can make change. We have a big history in this country. I wish there was a way, and that is why I am so proud of the work that is being done now, because we need to showcase this, because you think about it there is majority people of color. We still have racism in this country. We need to educate folks, what we did, what our ancestors have done, we are still here, we are still fighting, and we have power... we are getting more power. We need to, in order to prevent the right [wing]... because it is scary. Just in terms of the anti-Muslim attacks. People today not being able to come from England to the United States because they are Muslims. This is happening today. We can't let that continue to happen.

*EM: Throughout this interview, you've told me what you miss several times. Is there anything you do not miss?*

*CG:* Too many meetings. [both laugh] When you are in it... it's hard, but when you step out of it, you realize the importance. You realize the importance. It's only natural, its only human that someone will say, "Did you do this?" It's part of life, but when you take the whole picture you realize. I was glad that someone... at least I know in terms of all the folks that I work with... I didn't have, what we call a helicopter mob, someone hovering over you. I remember that being a big issue.

*EM: Within the League?*

*CG:* Within the League. So that was one. And then the other part of it... knowing that you have someone helping you to get better or helping you make sure that you

don't work 24 hours/7. That you have time so socialize, you have time to be with your family... because I used to remember one time my mom...she broke her knee cap. And we were in the mess of a campaign. And I used to remember somebody will call me and say, "Carmelita where are you? Are you with your moms?" or someone will call me, "Carmelita are you doing your homework?" At first you're like "ugh" but at the same time you realize, "I need to be with my mom." I need to make sure I don't flunk out of school. So you know, it's that give and take kind of thing.

*EM: The League also had a lot of people of color, but there was also people of different class backgrounds too, I mean mainly working class but you know there was middle class and even some people from the bourgeois. Did you ever feel any class differences with people?*

*CG: You do, you do... and some of it is upbringing. So that is one part of it. Another part of it too was that struggle of educating folks on how to change their views to be more working class, and I remember some of those things, and people with that self-criticism. That's when it comes in. In terms of not looking at people the right way or making statements, but at the same time it helps you understand how they make that change. So you can fall back on to that when you need to use that to change other people's views or when people criticize people from that class. Attack. But then starting with them to be more dialectical, to have more of an understanding. That's the thing about the League too. Look at all sides. It helped me to try to help others to be more objective. How they look at people. How they treat people. How they move people.*

*EM: So we're at the end, are there any last words? Anything I didn't ask you about? Anything you want to add?*

*CG: The only thing I would just add... I am very proud of the years. I am very proud of the friends that I made and very proud to see that, from what I can see, the majority of folks in some form or fashion are still part of the movement and still have a very optimistic view. And at this time, like I say, like in San Jose I feel like I'm by myself. Because of Silicon Valley, people are being forced to move out because they can't live there no more. If I didn't have Facebook [laughs] or social*

media, I would feel very disempowered. But when I look at Facebook or when I look at... when I was looking at AJ Plus, and AJ America, or some of these young journalist coming out... that I could have sworn they were a member of the League. It makes me have hope that we can have a better future for our families and for our people. It just makes me so proud and very hopeful for a better future.

*EM:* *Thank you very much.*

*CG:* Thank you.