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Belen B. Robles

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Belen B. Robles

INTERVIEWER: Jose A. Estrada

PROJECT: Class Project

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TRANSCRIBER: Jose A. Estrada

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

(U. S. Customs Inspector and National Vice President of LULAC.) Mrs. Robles was born, raised, and educated in El Paso, Texas. Both of her parents immigrated to the U.S. from México. Her father was originally from Juárez, Chih., México, and her mother was originally from Zacatecas, México, which she left during the Mexican Revolution. Mrs. Robles attended St. Mary's Parochial School, St. Joseph's High School, and Bowie High School. She is married and is the mother of two boys and one girl. She worked with the Dept. of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, for several years, and she is presently an inspector with the U.S. Customs Service.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; experiences with discrimination; the Women's Liberation Movement; the Chicano Movement; her role as National Vice President of LULAC, extensive statement of the history of LULAC in El Paso and throughout the Southwest.

1 1/2 hours.
31 pages.

(Interview with Belén B. Robles, April 26, 1976, by José Estrada.)

E: Belén, would you like to tell me about your background?

R: Yes, I'll be very glad to. As you know, I am a native El Pasoan. I was born, raised, and educated in El Paso, and I've lived here all my life. I come from a rather large family. There were 10 children in my family, and I was the fifth child. There were seven boys and three girls, although only nine of us lived to adulthood. My oldest sister died while she was a baby, so that the family as I knew it was seven brothers and two sisters. Both of my parents immigrated to the United States from México. My father has been living in the United States since 1907; he is a native of Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua, México. My mother immigrated to the United States in 1917 during the Revolution. She came from the city of Zacatecas, in the state of Zacatecas, México. She had to leave because of the Revolution. Her father was a mining engineer in that town.

I attended St. Mary's Parochial School in El Paso, and attended St. Joseph's High School one year. I completed my high school education at Bowie High School. I married Ramiro Robles in 1953, and we will have been married for 23 years August 1st. We have three children: Mary Helen, who is a junior student at the University of Oklahoma in Norman; Carlos Francisco, who graduated from Austin High School last September and is presently a member of the Armed Forces with the Air Force in San Antonio; and my youngest boy, Ramiro, Jr., is a junior student at Austin High School.

E: You have been working for the U.S. Government for several years.

R: Yes. As a matter of fact, I feel like I am ready for retirement. (Chuckles)
I have been employed with the U.S. Government, first by the Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, for 15 years. Now I have been with the U.S. Customs [Service] as a customs inspector for five years.

E: Do you have any interesting experiences that happened to you while you were with the Immigration [Service]?

R: Well, I'll tell you, when I started working with Immigration I was very young; I was just 20 years of age. And actually my experiences were really very revealing. Shortly after I went to work there, although I was hired as a clerk, I was called in as an interpreter for exclusion and deportation hearings. Apparently I had lived a very sheltered life, because I had not been exposed to life as it existed. I know that on many, many occasions, I was left speechless with the situations that were brought forth at these hearings. I was detailed for two months to work with the investigating section that dealt with the persons that were excludable on the basis of moral, criminal, or subversive background. That was a very interesting period.

E: You mentioned that you hadn't been exposed to the way things were in the real world. [Do you believe that] that's the situation with most Mexican Americans?

R: That is true, generally, for us girls; at least, my parents were very strict, to the extent that my friends were limited to my immediate neighborhood, the girls and boys that lived in my immediate neighborhood. I couldn't go further than one block away from home. In high school, I was also restricted strictly to activities dealing [with] and supervised by the school officials, so that the range of people [I] met and dealt with was very limited.

E: You are involved in a number of activities. What are some of the activities that you are involved in?

R: Well, I would like to give you a background perhaps as to what made me become so involved. I married immediately after I graduated from high school, and my experience in the job market was very limited. I did work in the summers and after school for two years prior to my graduation from high school. Then when I got married, typically of the Hispanic tradition, my husband was against my working outside of the home. He felt that it was an insult to his masculinity for me to seek employment outside the home. So for two years after I got married, I didn't work. However, with the limited income that he had, and with

family on the way, I felt that I needed to supplement the income. And although when I started I thought I was going to work for two or three years, it ends up that I am still working.

But, you know, all my life I felt that I was an American citizen, and that "Mexican" was also a citizenship. However, when I decided to go to work, I found that I was being classified as a Mexican when I was seeking employment. I would like to relate a very traumatic experience that I had with a company here in El Paso, a major company. I had an appointment to see the personnel officer of that company. I walked in (and it so happened that this is a large company), and they had a receptionist in the lower lobby. When I walked in, she called me over to her desk and asked me what I wanted and if she could assist me. When I informed her that I had an appointment with the personnel manager, she informed me that they did not hire Mexicans, except as elevator girls or cooks. I was very disturbed; and although I was granted the interview with the personnel manager, it was obvious that I was not going to be hired. It was at this time that I became aware that even though I was born and raised here and felt all my allegiance to the United States, because of my ancestry I was considered a Mexican.

E: What year was this, Belén?

R: This was in 1955. I finally found a job in a real estate office as a receptionist and secretary. However, I became aware of the situation that existed in El Paso, and I certainly didn't want the same situation to affect my children. So shortly thereafter I joined the LULAC organization. I have been very involved with the organization at the local, state, and national level. I have tried to involve myself with organizations that will benefit the community and, of course, my family.

E: Are you presently holding any national office with the LULAC?

R: Yes. At the last national convention held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I was

elected to the position of National Vice President for the southwest region, which is the second highest position in our national organization. In other words, I am the first vice president.

E: It seems to me that in your case, being a female and of Mexican American ancestry, it makes it even harder to reach such a position, or does it?

R: Joe, I am going to be very frank with you. The women of Hispanic ancestry or Spanish descent have perhaps a harder time in obtaining equal opportunities because of the machismo that prevails among the Hispanic. Now, I am not for doing away with the ideal and concept of the man being the head of the household. I believe that once you are outside of your home, either employed or involved in civic organizations, then I believe a person--whether it be a woman or man--should be afforded the opportunity to be employed in a position that he or she fits the qualifications for, either in employment or in office holding organizations, according to her or his capabilities. Now, the LULAC is composed of people of Mexican and Latin ancestry, and you know that I ran for president in 1970. I felt I was the best qualified, and I would say the majority of the people felt that I was the best qualified. However, they all felt that they weren't quite ready to have a woman as a national president. I do believe that we have made great strides, because as I stated, this year I was able to get myself elected to first national vice president.

E: Do you feel that women are getting ahead at this point? What is your feeling on women's liberation?

R: Well, to be truthful, I believe we have made some progress, but I feel that the progress has been very, very slow. In the field of employment, I would like to point out that most of our progress has been strickly tokenism. I want to tell you that since I have been involved for all these many years, I find that the counseling at the school level is still not all-encompassing

for the female. In other words, women in high school are still being channeled into the fields of education and nursing. And the way I see it, why nursing and not into the medical field of doctors and dentists? You find /that/ very few women are being encouraged to go into the fields of science, engineering, even into the field of mathematics. You find that in schools, particularly in our low income areas, girls are not being encouraged to enter higher education. They are still being trained into the business area, which will lead them to be clerks and secretaries. So I think we have a long way to go yet.

It still comes down to the basic concept of our society, that women will be married and will have a husband to support them. /This/ is a very fallible theory, because you find so many women that decide not to marry. Further, you find so many women that marry, and their marriage doesn't work, so they end up being head of their household. Then you also find that so many women outlive men, and so consequently they are faced with having to be the head of their households. So I think society as a whole has to revise /its/ method of thinking and recognize the fact that women have to be trained to be self-supporting.

E: I've been hearing lately about the Mexican Americans trying to keep their culture within the American society. Do you think this is a good idea, or should they blend in with the Anglo portion of society?

R: You know, Joe, I am very much for keeping many of our cultural traditions. We have been very highly criticized for holding our family in such a sacred position. That is one thing I would not like to have us do away with. I do not believe in the concept of the melting pot. I heard a very appropriate statement the other day which I would like to repeat at this time: It isn't possible to take all the people that come into this great nation of ours and put them into a melting pot, because when the pot stops boiling, the scum will surface. It is so much better if they permit these people from all the countries that come into our country to contribute of themselves as individuals, and thereby

you will have a contribution into our society from all peoples, regardless of race--whether they are black or brown or white or yellow--and it will weave into a beautiful tapestry. It will be more enhancing to our society if the dominant majority is willing to accept us for what we are ~~worth~~ and what we can contribute as individuals. I am very much for keeping our traditions. I feel very strongly that a person that speaks two languages is far ahead of a person that is able to speak only one language. I would like to bring out at this point that the United States is the only country in the world that will recognize a person /who/ speaks only one language to be educated. In every other country, if you are an educated person, you are expected to speak at least four to seven languages. This is a mark of education, except in the United States.

I was going to bring out something else, Joe, for your consideration. That is the fact that back in 1962 and 1963 I was very much involved with the drop-out situation in the El Paso area. I found out that young girls, particularly of Hispanic background, were dropping out at a higher pace than were young boys. This will bring back the fact that our girls are less prepared. And to a certain extent, this goes back to family tradition, that if a girl is needed at home to baby-sit or to help around the house, she is taken out of school for this purpose--with the thought in mind that the girl does not need to be educated. So consequently, since our population in the El Paso area consists of roughly 60 percent of persons of Spanish surname, you can realize the impact that this attitude will have on our society in the area. That is why certain things of our culture have to be rearranged, really, because we are going to have to recognize that young girls need the education as much as young boys. I think another area is... Of course, this had changed considerably, but generally when young boys and girls applied for scholarships, boys were given preference over the girls, with the thought in mind that, of course, the

education needed by the young man was more necessary than the need of the girl. Like I say, in recent years we have changed that.

E: You mentioned that El Paso is composed of 60 percent Mexican Americans. What caused the Mexican American to be a minority when they're actually a majority in this city, as far as running the city?

R: To be truthful with you, it's that, first of all, the Mexican American has still to find his place in the area of business. You still find very few Mexican Americans that have positions of responsibility in the area of finance. You find that as a whole, the Mexican American has yet to make an impact in the area of money power. It is unfortunate, but money has a lot to do with the position of a particular segment of our society. It has not been until recent years that the Mexican American has been able to make a few strides in that direction. I don't know if you recall, but our organization was very instrumental back in 1967 and 1968.

E: That's the LULAC organization?

R: Yes. It focussed into the problem of the Mexican American minority lacking the technical assistance to go into these fields. The University of Texas at El Paso for many years discouraged persons of Mexican descent from pursuing degrees in the area of business administration. There was no market, there was no place for them in the labor market. The banks would not hire them, the savings and loans would not hire them. It was not until 1967 when we proposed to the financial institutions that if they didn't need to hire us, we didn't want to force them to hire us. All we wanted was the opportunity to compete with them. And to avoid this competition, they started opening their doors to us. But prior to that, you hardly ever found any Mexican American in any position of responsibility with a bank. I think there was one bank in El Paso that had a vice president that was Mexican American, but that was it. I haven't made any surveys recently, but the savings and loans are still dragging their

feet in that area.

So you can see, the Mexican Americans were not offered this opportunity, and they lack the technical know-how of how to go about establishing their own banks, doing the feasibility surveys for any business enterprise that they wanted to go into. Then, consequently, very few of the Mexican Americans were able to become really affluent in the community. Up until very recently, we didn't have very many doctors. We have been doing pretty good with the lawyers. But we have very few engineers and CPA's. It has only been in recent years that the Mexican American has really had the opportunity to go into the business and professional fields. So, consequently, that is what has kept our people back; and also the fact that in the El Paso area, we have a constant immigration from México.

E: Do you feel that this immigration has an impact on the society already in El Paso?

R: I think so, very definitely. Because you will find that within the last 40 years, the only immigrants that we get from Méixco are the persons with a limited education, and /with/ the need to go into another country to find employment. In other words, the only people that we are getting from México are the people that are unskilled, /with a/ very limited education, and thereby a very low earning capacity. This puts a drain into our labor market. These people come in and they're not trained to do very much, so they have to go into the unskilled jobs. Consequently, through their lack of education, their views on the family and community are quite different from those of us that have lived here for a longer period /of time/.

E: You mentioned UTEP not offering /opportunities in certain/ fields for Mexican Americans. It's still that way to this day, as far as the political involvement of Mexican Americans with the University itself. It is still under the dictatorship of Dr. Templeton. It's got a Chicano Movement going on at the

University, trying to remedy this situation. Do you feel that this movement is helping any? What are your views on the Chicano Movement?

R: Let me put it to you this way: I feel that the young people have a lot to contribute. I don't always agree with the way they do things, but I do feel that it is something necessary, for them to focus to us the problems as they see them. Some of us that have been involved in the area of civil rights and equal employment opportunity for the Mexican American have lived with the problems for so long that we can't see the trees for the forest; and a young person just beginning to live can zero in on the problems more readily than we can. Of course, you know that with old age, we kind of mellow. And of course, my way of doing things, and the general principles of the LULAC organization that I belong to, has always been a peaceful way and through the conference table. However, the young people are more aggressive and they want change now. I want to state again that while I don't always agree with the way they go about accomplishing changes, I do agree with their bringing out into the public the problems that exist. I know that the University of Texas at El Paso has a lot of problems, mainly because they have refused to recognize that the El Paso area is a bilingual, bicultural area, and /they/ have refused to staff the University with bilingual, bicultural instructors and professors. The few good professors that we have had of Mexican ancestry have left. They have stayed for a short while because the establishment at the University had failed to recognize their potential and their contribution.

E: I don't want to insult the LULAC, but I heard a statement the other day at the University. One of the Chicanos /who is/ very active with the Chicano organizations up there was saying that the LULAC is more or less — a social gathering for women to go drink coffee and get together, in contrast to what the Chicano Movement is trying to accomplish. What are your feelings about this?

R: Well, I have no one to blame but the LULAC organization for this, because I have

always felt that our public relations with the general public have been very poor. We have failed to disseminate the proper information to the people. However, this statement that was made couldn't be further from the truth. The situation is that in order for us to carry out many of our programs--both civic and charitable programs--we need to finance them. Consequently, we rely on the public to acquire these funds. Most of our funds are raised by sponsoring the Fiesta de las Flores, which draws at least fifteen to twenty-five thousand dollars from the community for our various programs, or through dances and raffles, and what have you. This is what the newspaper will publicize. However, as long as I have been in the organization, the LULAC has been very forceful in many areas. If we went through our records, you would be able to see that. You will find that we have been very active in the area of housing for the Mexican American, that we have been very active in the area of civil rights.

Now, Joe, it bothers me that some of the Chicanos feel we are a social club, because LULAC was here and fighting since 1929, when it was not popular to go for civil rights. You will find that the LULAC organization has taken many of its cases as far up as the Supreme Court. It was through the LULAC organization and the effort of our attorneys that we were able to have a mandate issued to the state of Texas whereby Mexican Americans were allowed to sit in juries. Now, you're relatively young and you probably don't recall, but there was a time when a Mexican American was not allowed to sit in juries. Also, we have gone to court on many cases of discrimination in education. In the state of Texas there are many areas where, up to 10 years ago, they still had segregated schools for the Mexican American. In the state of California, we fought cases where the Mexican American children were being labeled as retarded because they were not able to speak English; we had to take that to court. In the area of equal opportunity employment, LULAC has been very involved for many years.

So again I say, to a great degree it is our inability to inform the public exactly as to what LULAC has been doing. Unfortunately, it has always been the policy that the public will know by results rather than /by us/ going out and tooting our own horns.

E: This individual did make one positive /comment/. The Chicanos are very pleased with LULAC /for the scholarships that it offers/.

R: Yes, /but it's/ not just a few scholarships. We have seven adult councils in the city proper of El Paso, and one council alone gave 33 scholarships. I also want to point out, and I am very proud of this because I happen to be National Vice Chairperson for the National LULAC Educational Service Center (this is a national board, national corporation, that acquired monies for scholarships for Chicanos), this money is disseminated to deserving students throughout the country. Prior to my being appointed to the board last October 1st, these scholarships were issued through the various service centers that we have throughout the country. Unfortunately for the residents of El Paso, the two centers for Texas /are/ in Houston and Corpus Christi. As far as we are concerned, they could be in the moon. Well, when I went into the board, my suggestion was that this money be disseminated through the local councils, and this is the way it is going to be. In other words, if the council issues ten thousand dollars in scholarships, then the National Education Service Center will match it. So the community will benefit by getting twenty thousand dollars rather than ten thousand dollars in scholarships. But I would say that through the many years that LULAC had been in existence (since 1929, mind you, and in the city of El Paso since 1930), we have given thousands and thousands of scholarships to deserving students.

E: That's wonderful. You talked about bilingual education. What are your feelings on bilingual education?

R: I believe that the concept is excellent. Unfortunately, our school system has

failed to implement it properly. Here is the situation; I stated it to you /before/ and I'll state again why bilingual education is so important in El Paso. We have this constant immigration, and children come into the country not knowing any English at all. Then you have the situation of the Mexican American people coming into areas where they have things in common, /where the Mexican culture is kept/; in other words, where most of the Mexican Americans live. So the children and adults all around there speak only Spanish. So you have a young student whose life has been opened through the Spanish language. When a child is five or six years old and he goes to school, there are so many things to learn. He has to learn to pay attention, he has to learn to sit still, he has to learn to abide by the rules and regulations of the classroom. All this is good and well, but if the child is also having to learn a language that is different from that which he is used to at home, it can be very traumatic. If the school was to implement a real bilingual program, where a young child starting school could be gradually taken into the English language, then it would be very beneficial. But unfortunately the school system is not doing this. I was very disturbed when legislation was passed requiring school systems /to/ hire bilingual teachers; and instead of hiring bilingual teachers, the school system offered the non-Spanish speaking teachers a crash course of six weeks to teach them Spanish, and that would qualify them as bilingual teachers. It is really a farce. I feel that very few communities have really been able to develop a truly bilingual program. I think that if it was to be developed properly, it could be a great advantage to our community.

E: That's true, but even to this date Mexican Americans tend to be taken into fields of technical vocation rather than white collar /fields, such as doctors or lawyers/. What is your feeling on schools doing this?

R: Well, I am the first one to agree that not all of us are college material. I feel that there is a great need for proper technical and training. However, I

think that the biggest fallacy has been to categorize all Mexican Americans as being capable only of training in these fields. This, I think, is where we have the problem. In other words, our schools have been unable to identify and properly counsel school children in the proper direction. /However/, I think there has been tremendous strides in that direction, because when I was in high school, I never saw a counselor. You never saw a counselor unless you were in trouble. I don't forget the fact that after I had gotten out of school and became involved with the LULAC organization, I was named chairman of the Scholarship Committee, and I went to visit my alma mater, Bowie High School. The counselor, who happens to be a principal at one of the schools, told me in no certain terms that I was wasting my time and money, because the students at Bowie were not college material. It is this type of ironic thinking on the part of the school officials that is so detrimental to the Mexican American.

E: Do you believe in the self-fulfilling prophecy that if a person is stereotyped into believing he is not capable, he /will, in effect, not be capable?

R: I would like to interject that this is precisely what is happening to the women. We have certain stereotyped positions, and the women are not being counseled into other areas where they could do very well. Then again it is part of our society that has stereotyped different peoples for different positions and nothing else.

E: That's very true. Do you have any /further/ comments to make on anything that we have talked about?

R: Well, you know, Joe, that I talk and talk and talk. All that I can say is that my great concern is the lack of interest in the El Paso community in important areas, such as education. I have been involved in education in various ways: through the LULAC organization with the scholarship program, with providing shoes for needy school children, to providing hot lunches before the hot lunch program was funded by the federal fund, by the pre-school education for...we used

to call it The Little School of 400, which was instituted by LULAC before it became Project Head Start; and by many other areas. One of the things that concerns me is that the majority of the people, particularly Mexican Americans, do not take interest in the selection and election of our school board officials, who are the ones that make the policies--sometimes the right policy and many times the wrong policy--for our school system. I feel that until the community really becomes involved as a whole, we are going to continue to have this problem.

E: We just had the election for the Community College Board Saturday. Do have any comment on that election?

R: Yes. This goes back to why the Mexican American is unable to have an impact on elections. There were many, many people from the Mexican community that were very involved in this particular election. I was happy to see a cross-section of people. You found people from your professional to your common laborer very concerned, and this was very good. But to show you what consequences can be had when we don't control the money, when we don't control positions of importance in business, I found out that two of the clothing manufacturers made it a point to keep quite a few Mexican Americans from voting by giving them a day off Tuesday, and then on Friday they advised them that they had to work on Saturday. Now, if these clothing manufacturing companies had been controlled by the Mexican American, and if the majority of the employees had been Anglos and they had pulled that, you can understand the difference the election would have had.

E: That's very interesting. Do you have any other comments on the election?

R: Needless to say, I was very disappointed. I was very disappointed because our organization conducted a very extensive investigation into the personnel problem at the Community College, and it addressed itself to the deficiencies of the board. It pointed out to the public some of these deficiencies. The news media--well, I shouldn't say the news media, because we got excellent

coverage on television--but the newspapers as a whole were very biased. All I can say is that I do not foresee that the election solved the problem. I do not foresee that the LULAC organization will cease to insist that the board is responsible to the community. It has not been answering to the community so far.

E: Belén, I know you are a busy person and I don't want to take too much of your time. Do you have any general comments before we conclude /for today/?

R: Yes. In closing, I would like to say that I met with the director of the civil rights division of HEW just last March 13th. We had a very in-depth discussion on the present problem being faced by the Hispanic communities, particularly in the five southwestern states, with regard to the poor education that is afforded our school children, and the fact that the established system is working against our children. Even those that are brilliant have to overcome such systematic discrimination in the system that has been built in. I was very happy to see that he placed a great responsibility on the schools of higher learning. In other words, the colleges and universities are as much at fault for allowing this discrimination system to exist. Until such time as the administrations at these universities exert every effort to correct these discriminatory practices within the school system, our children are going to suffer from poor education. Even though they come out with degrees, they are ill-prepared to compete for employment with other members of the dominant majority. I /feel/ very strongly that groups in the community that are interested in affording equal opportunity in the field of education to all persons should make an effort to correct these deficiencies. And I think a tremendous responsibility is placed on the administrative bodies of these universities, one of which is of the University of Texas at El Paso, /which/ has done nothing to correct this situation. I want to thank you for allowing me to express myself.

E: It has been a wonderful experience. Thank you very much.

- E: Belén, in our last interview you mentioned that you were involved with the LULAC. What effect do you feel that the activities undertaken by LULAC have had on the border area?
- R: Well, Joe, I believe that at this time, before I answer your question, we should put things in the right perspective; and perhaps I should give you a concise idea of what LULAC is. LULAC stands for the League of United Latin American Citizens. It is a non-sectarian, non-political, civic organization. It was organized in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929. It developed as a result of a merger of organizations in San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville. At that time, the organization was formed to fight a very prevalent discrimination situation that existed in the entire state of Texas. As a result, the first LULAC council in El Paso was formed in 1930; that was a men's council. Then in 1934 the first women's council was formed, and that is Council #9, of which I am a member. I want to point out that I have not been a member since 1934 (I was not born yet), but I have been a member at this council since 1957.

From the very inception, the LULAC organization felt that the key basis or the key principle of the organization--to bring better living conditions to the community, as far as Mexican Americans were concerned--was through education. This organization is composed of autonomous councils throughout the country, autonomous in the fact that every council can develop the programs and projects that they feel are beneficial to the area. In the city of El Paso and surrounding areas, LULAC has been extremely active since 1930. Now, if you will recall, 1930 was about the middle of the Depression, so consequently the activities during the '30s were geared mainly [/towards/] the matter of survival. The LULAC organization was very involved with trying to keep the children in school in spite of the many hardships that were being faced, and [/they also attempted/] to help our fellow El Pasoans of Mexican ancestry to find employment.

It was not until after World War II that the organization as a national

unit started developing specific programs. At that time, in 1945 and 1946, a very appalling situation was discovered: The educational level of the Mexican American in the state of Texas did not even reach the fourth grade. You could easily count the number of Mexican American persons that had graduated from high school, not to mention the fact that graduates from college were practically non-existent. So the organization commenced to make a concerted effort in the field of education. It commenced with the viewing of the existing educational facilities that were available for the Mexican American. We found that in many areas, including some of the communities surrounding the El Paso area and in El Paso, the facilities that were available for the dominantly Mexican American areas were substandard. In the little town of Fabens, Texas, they had the "Mexican school," as it was referred to; and all the children of Mexican ancestry, whether they were able to speak English or not, were channeled through this school. The obstacle that we met in trying to improve the facility and in trying to do away with this double standard of education was the fact that the administrations of the schools contended that our children were not able to speak English when they first entered school. As a result, LULAC, through volunteers, commenced a pre-school training for five-year-old children that were to be enrolled that September. We attempted to teach them the basic 400 words in the English language. This was done for about nine or 10 years on a volunteer basis, and then we got the state of Texas to allocate the funds for this program. At that time it was known as The Little School of 400. Since then, the federal government has recognized the need for this, and they have established a federal program. I believe it's called the Pre-school Headstart Program.

However, as you dig into the educational problems, you find that there are other areas that need to be looked into. We found that the health problem of our children was really something serious. We found that in the state of Texas

and in the county of El Paso, the Mexican American had by far a higher rate of tuberculosis cases that were developed. It was also found that inadequate housing with inadequate facilities was, in part, responsible for this health hazard. So in the early 1950s we went into a very intensified program to provide adequate housing for the Mexican American. Then of course we also found out that some of the children could not study because of insufficient nourishment. It was not unusual to find youngsters in El Paso grade schools who went to school without having breakfast. So, early in the 1950s also, the LULAC Council #132 and Council #9 developed the lunch program for these children. We would provide free lunch for the children so that they could have the nourishment necessary for them to study. We also fitted them with eye glasses, shoes, and clothing, because it is understandable that a child is not willing to go to school if he has to go barefooted; and you also know that a child cannot adequately take full advantage of the educational program if he is not able to see the blackboard. All these programs that we developed have since then, to a large part, been developed into federal programs.

Of course, since the very beginning we have been much involved in granting scholarships, grants, and aid to worthy and deserving students going into higher education. Then along 1959 we found out that we were educating our children, they were getting their degrees, and then they were having difficulty in finding employment. So consequently, we had to enter into the equal opportunity for our children that were coming out of school. As you can see, the educational aspect of our activities link one into the other, and I do believe the LULAC organization has been able to make some very tangible contributions in the El Paso area along these lines.

I also wanted to point out to you that while we were very much involved with and specifically spearheading in the educational area of our children, in the very early 1950s we recognized the need for us to become involved in the

selection of our public officials. It was at this time that the local LULAC councils, as well as all the councils in the nation, decided to launch a voter registration /drive/, and we were very happily surprised at the response from the community. As a result--I believe that as a matter of record--it was through these efforts that shortly thereafter we were able to elect the first mayor of the city of El Paso of Mexican descent, the Honorable Raymond Telles. Although the voter registration is no longer in existence in the state of Texas, we are still very much involved with voter registration. In this field, I feel that we are still a little disorganized. The Mexican American community has been unable to really make its impact in the political arena because /it/ has failed to organize and unite. I initially stated that we are non-political, and this is so to the extent that we don't get involved in partisan politics. However, all of our members are very much encouraged to participate as individuals in the election, whether it be for the school board, for the county or city positions, or state and national level. We get very much involved in the support for or against many issues that, although we'd like to say they are non-political, they are very much political in nature. I would like also to point out that the reason that we stay away from partisan politics is because we feel that we would lose our effectiveness if we were to support and endorse candidates. We have seen some of our local councils that have attempted to become involved in such a manner, although it is contrary to our constitution, /and it/ has proven to be fatal to the council. As a matter of fact, that recently happened to our council in Fabens, Texas; it had just been reorganized. There was a very heated political race there, and /the council/ attempted to become involved in that political race. As a result, the council disintegrated. We feel that it is much more effective if the individual members, as such, become involved behind the person that they feel is better qualified but that /they/ do not involve the organization in the support of that person. There has been much discussion pro

and con in this particular aspect because we have people of many philosophies and many ideas in the LULAC organization. We have from the very conservative to the very liberal, and everything in between, and there have been many that would like to see the LULAC come out and support candidates. By far, the majority of the members feel that we have been able to survive because we have not endorsed candidates, and that this is one of the reasons LULAC is the oldest Mexican American organization. Of course, that is a point subject to challenge and discussion.

Also, I'd like to point out that after we started going into the field of equal employment opportunity, we observed tremendous resistance from major industry and, in particular, the area of finance. When the Civil Rights Act came into being (where all government contractors were being forced to apply the equal employment practice in their hiring of employees), we found that industry was using the excuse of not knowing where to find qualified Mexican Americans. The Department of the Navy and the Department of Defense found this to be a tremendous barrier, particularly in the five southwestern states. They found that the major oil companies were continually saying that it was impossible to find qualified Mexican Americans. So again LULAC took the leadership in that area, and in conjunction with the American G.I. Forum, we organized a federally funded program which is known as Operation SER. The object of this program was to develop a skills bank, where qualified Mexican Americans from throughout the country could register if they were either unemployed or underemployed. And major industry could come in, and if they needed for example chemical engineers or a bilingual secretary, they could come in and we would be able to assist them. For example, in the city of Laredo, Texas, which has a population of 75 percent Mexican American, the highest rate of unemployment, and no industry, the object of Operation SER was to match the need of industry with the available manpower in the Mexican American community. Although Operation SER has not been able to

meet all its objectives, [it] has been a tremendous force in the employment of the Mexican American.

Also in 1967, we saw the need [for] the Mexican American community to develop in the area of business and finance. In order to develop into business and to try to establish a firm foundation for an economic base, throughout the United States we started to provide technical assistance to members of the Mexican American communities. I am very proud to say that through the efforts of this movement we established numerous banks and savings and loans that are controlled and owned by Mexican Americans. The first one is in Laredo, Texas; there is one in Houston; one [is] in Denver; one [is] in El Paso; and one [is] in Los Angeles. I think that this will give the Mexican American the opportunity to develop in these areas.

It is unfortunate that the program that was devised by the LULAC organization, through the efforts of brother Ed Lucero of Denver, was not funded for political reasons. Although we developed the plan and we laid the foundation for The LULAC Economic Development Association, the Small Business Administration saw fit not to fund it because the members of the board were not of the right political party; and the LULAC organization was not about to allow SBA or the President of the United States to dictate to it who was to serve on the board. The response of our national president at that time was, "If the members of your particular party were qualified to sit on this board, they would be there now." So, as a result, we were not funded. But the federal government took our program and devised it into what is now called NEDA, the National Educational Development Association. So you see, even though LULAC itself may not at this time be administering a lot of this program, we did lay the groundwork. We were able to identify the problems concerning the Mexican American so that the federal government, through its bureaucratic system, could then take appropriate action, although (I will be very frank with you) our bureaucratic system is very, very slow in

analyzing the problem

I would like to point out that one of the situations that we have always addressed ourselves to is the discriminatory system of education of our children. I was very happy to hear that finally the office of civil rights of HEW has recognized that such a discriminatory system does exist and is systematic, so that it is very difficult to fight. Of course, now that they recognize it, hopefully they will do something about it. To give you an example, they have found that in most of the schools, [the] teaching system is discriminatory against the minorities. Their system is such that a child, as he comes into the first grade, is given an aptitude test; then depending on the score that he [makes], he goes into one of three categories. He either goes as above average, average, or slow learner. Then the same company that prepared the aptitude test also prepares the material that is to be taught to the child. For example, a child that has been noted above average because of his score on the aptitude test will be exposed to 600 new words in his vocabulary during the coming year. A person who has been grades as average will be exposed to 500 new words during the ensuing year, while the slow learner will only be exposed to 300 words. Now this is where it becomes very crucial, because if the child is not English-speaking, then most likely he will fall into the slow learner category. [At] that point, his entire career in the school is determined, because at the beginning of the second year he is given another aptitude test. At this time, he is tested on the entire 600 words. The slow learner was only exposed to half of that. So, assuming that the slow learner is able to absorb 100 percent of that which is taught to him, he will still only score 50 percent. So even though he tries very hard, it is very difficult for him to ever catch up with the person who has been initially placed in the above average group. Finally, after 20 years of surveys and studies, the Department of HEW has determined that this is a discriminatory system, and is making every effort to correct it. Now, here we come to whether it will or will

not be corrected in the city of El Paso, and this lies on the shoulders of our elected school board members. And it is very unfortunate that in this city we still have very little interest from the average community member towards school elections. They don't recognize that they are the ones that set the policy for our children.

E: Belén, you mentioned that LULAC sought qualified applicants through Operation SER some years ago. I have heard through recruiters at the University that they are having trouble recruiting Mexican Americans away from the border. Do you think that trend is changing? What causes the ties which do not allow the Mexican American to leave the border area?

R: You know, Joe, I have been hearing /about/ this particular situation for many, many years. While I do believe that in our generation the fact that the close family ties and the tradition of the Mexican Americans to stay close to the parents was, in effect, a problem, I don't believe this is necessarily true of this generation. It used to be a problem that we have overcome. I have traveled throughout the U.S., and I find that everywhere you go, you find Mexican Americans that came from Texas. Just about everybody had ties from Texas at one point or another. I would like to relate to you that three of my brothers are engineers, and when the oldest one first graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso (that was back in 1959), he was interviewed by IBM of Poughkeepsie, New York; and he was offered a job at what was considered to be an outstanding salary. When he got up there, though, he found out that the cost of living was so high compared to his home town that it would have been a financial disadvantage for him to have obtained that job. Now, my other two brothers are also in the field of engineering. One is presently in Spain, working for the government; he is a mechanical engineer. My younger brother is an electrical engineer, and he is in Denver. So I don't believe this /is holding/ true in this present generation. The thing that must be recognized by the recruiting officers that come from major

industries is that, if a person is to uproot and leave his home, he must be in a position to make a comparable earning, once you deduct the expense of maintaining a second home. So I really don't believe this to be true, although in the city of El Paso we still do have some people that are traditionally very mexi-
canos, where parents want to have the unmarried children close to home. [But] I don't believe this is too much of a problem.

E: I do believe the trend is changing; the Mexican American that wants to advance does leave the border area.

R: I think so, too. As I stated, every time I go to Washington, D.C., I meet with the many, many friends that I have out there. And I ~~sh~~ould say that 100 percent of all Mexican Americans that you find in Washington, D.C. are from one of the five southwestern states. You see, this is the thing: Many times the offers that are given to the Mexican American do not really offer them great potential for advancement. While at one time we would have taken anything just to get a job, our students are better prepared and educated, and they can look around until they find what they believe to be suitable for their needs and their fields.

E: In other words, they can be more selective as to what they want to go into. You said [that] one or two of your brothers work for the government. I work for the government and you work for the government. Do you feel that Mexican Americans are advancing in private enterprise?

R: When my two older brothers graduated from UTEP, they applied for interviews with many of the industries from Texas; they were never offered a job. As a matter of fact, my only brother that is in private industry (Felipe, who has a master's degree in Engineering), was hired by Texas Instruments. But he was in such a dead end position that he had to leave. I still believe that many of our larger industries in the city of El Paso, such as the El Paso Natural Gas Company, the Standard Oil Company, Phelps Dodge, and so on, still do not come forth with an affirmative action to hire Mexican Americans to managerial positions and top

positions. I think that anybody that goes into any of these companies that I have mentioned and views their personnel records will find that the Mexican Americans that have been hired have been strickly on a tokenism basis, /just/ to be able to protect their government contracts.

E: That's right. We have had several lecturers at UTEP from private industries in El Paso, and that has been the impression that I have gotten--that they hire only as many minority people as they need to cover their contracts.

R: Right. In other words, like they say in Spanish, para taparle el ojo al macho. That's about the extent of their commitment to the program of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. We have found out through the many years of experience in the fields of equal employment opportunity that the majority of industry will conform to the law only to the extent that they absolutely have to, or if it is profitable; and it is very sad. We would like to have industry apply the Equal Employment Opportunity Program because it is the right thing to do, but unfortunately the many years of prejudice that have existed in Texas /have not allowed it/. Many of the citizens are still fighting the battle of the Alamo; many of the leading citizens till feel that the Mexican American is not quite up to par /with his/ Anglo counterpart. They still have us streotyped as being slow and lazy and just fun-loving. Although there have been some tremendous strides to eradicate this erroneous conception of the people of Mexican ancestry, I think we have a long way to go.

Just to give you an example, Dr. Alfredo de los Santos is a noted man in the field of Education. He has a tremendous record as an administrator for El Paso Community College. When they first sought to fill that position, they required that the person /who/ filled it have a doctorate degree. Now that he has been dismissed, it is obvious that they intend to fill this position with /someone/ other than a Mexican American. And we have found out through the advertisement in the newspaper that they have downgraded the

requirement to a master's degree. This is more or less an example of how the Mexican American is required to have better qualifications in order to qualify for a position. In other words, the standard for the Mexican American is not quite the same standard as is applied to the Anglo majority. They were willing to take an Anglo with a master's degree for the presidency of the Community College when a doctorate was required of a Mexican American. This is the type of dual standard that is very harmful.

At this point I would also like to point out that the women are facing this discrimination in the field of employment. Women are often required to be twice as qualified as men in order to qualify for a certain position. So you see, there is a lot to be done in the field of equal employment opportunity.

- E: Belén, do you foresee any chance of all the Chicano groups, LULAC, and, in effect, all the Mexican Americans joining together as one group?
- R: Well, the LULAC organization has worked with many, many organizations, both at the local level and at the national level, on various issues of common interest. I don't know if you recall, in 1967 when Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. was the head of the EEOC in Washington, he invited many of us, representing various organizations, to a conference in Albuquerque to discuss EEO problems. We were so disenchanted with the conference that we walked out on the Commission. As a result of this, we formed an ad hoc committee that was representative of all the major national organizations. It included MAPA, G.I. Forum, and several other organizations based in California. This ad hoc committee was very effective for one year. As a matter of fact, it was through the efforts of this ad hoc committee that we were able to get the first Mexican American appointed as a commissioner to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Unfortunately, at the end of the administration of Judge Alfred Hernández of Houston, who was the national president of LULAC at that time, the ad hoc committee disintegrated.

I really don't foresee any problems with LULAC working with other organizations, because we have done so before. Generally, if you stop to consider [it], the objectives of most Mexican American organizations are basically the same. We all want the same things. The only problem is that sometimes we don't agree on how to go about achieving our goals. But I think that if we can identify a forceful leader that can bring together all these organizations, it can be done.

E: That's one thing I've always thought about. The colored people [had] their Martin Luther King, and the Mexican American has not had a leader. Do you believe this would bring out the qualities which have been lacking in the organizations?

R: Well, the thing about the Mexican American person is that we're all so individualistic, and it's a little bit harder [for us] to unite. Very few of us are willing to compromise our principles. We have many, many leaders that are capable; but so far, none of these leaders have ever really undertaken the task of organizing or bringing together the many organizations. Now, I know one of the reasons that LULAC has been hesitant is because so many of our organizations are politically inclined. Unless we amend our constitution, it's very difficult for us to join in with groups that endorse candidates, because this would be contrary to our constitution.

Maybe in the future we can bring Judge Alfred Hernández from retirement. Due to illness, he has had to take the sidelines in the Chicano Movement. But he was definitely a tremendous leader, and he was willing to jeopardize his own profession, "Por la causa," as he used to state. But until we can identify [a] person or a group of persons that could bring the organizations together, I believe that we're just going to have to continue joining only whenever we can, for matters of mutual interest.

E: You say that all these groups are basically fighting for the same thing. What is this one thing, simplified?

R: Well, basically, it's to guarantee our rights as U.S. citizens; to protect our rights to equal education /and/ to ensure our right in equal employment. So, basically, it's all the same thing. The difference is just the way you go about doing it. For example, you know LULAC recently had to withdraw from the Committee of New Media. That was a group of organizations that sponsored a program on television to convey to the public the problems of the Mexican American community in El Paso. The reason that we had to withdraw was because of the /way/ in which the information was to be disseminated. These are minor differences that could be ironed out. Basically I think all the organizations, whether in part or as a whole, are interested in protecting the rights of the individual, in one form or another.

E: So basically it's just fighting for equality with the rest of society?

R: That's right. Of course, I would like to point out at this time, while LULAC is very outspoken in demanding /the/ rights of the individual, it is also /just/ as vocal in expressing the need of the individual to exercise /his/ right and responsibility. In other words, you have to assume your responsibilities as an individual.

E: /There's/ one thing that came to mind when you /were/ talking about rights and responsibilities. I've had several people come to me and say that once a Mexican American gets to a position of any responsibility, he forgets about his group, his Mexican American society, and he wants to join, say, the Anglo society--get away from the Mexican American or Chicano society.

R: Well, I don't fully agree with that. I think that we, as a people, are very demanding of our own. In other words, we demand more of our own, when they get into public office or positions of responsibility, than we would demand of the Anglo counterpart. Assuming that we have a Mexican American elected mayor of the city of El Paso, we cannot assume that he is just the mayor of the Mexican American people; but rather, he is the mayor of the entire city of El Paso. I

feel that many of us are too demanding when it comes to our own; and instead of having an objective view, we seem to just look at the shortcomings of the individual. This has always frustrated me tremendously, because I feel that all of us are human and all of us make mistakes. And while we tolerate mistakes from the dominant majority, we are not very tolerant of the human errors that are made by our own people.

E: So you don't believe this could be true, that they ignore their own ethnic group?

R: Well, I won't say that it couldn't be true. You know, we're human and I'm sure that there could be some who do that. As a matter of fact, I myself have found some that are not as responsive to the needs of the Mexican American as I would like to have them be. But I cannot say that they totally forget. In other words, many of our people don't fully realize what politics is all about. Politics is a game of "you give a little and you take a little," and many of us would like to have everything come our way; and sometimes, that is not humanly possible. I have dealt with many individuals who have been classified by some of my counterparts as "Tío Tacos." Yet, when everything is said and done, they have made tremendous contributions to the Mexican American--except that they have done it in a very subtle way. Sometimes we are not able to assess the situation, because you may win a battle and lose the war; when what we're after is winning the war. So sometimes in order to remain effective, a person has to take a subtle approach to things. Like I stated to you before, not all of us go about doing things the same way. I think that sometimes many of our people just don't realize the tremendous hurdles that some of our people have had to overcome. Just to make the slightest progress, they have to make concessions. So I do believe that sometimes we are extremely critical of the people that we have in positions of responsibility.

E: That's the way I see it. The people in any position of responsibility are

actually caught in the middle of two extremes.

R: That's right; that's very true. As a matter of fact, to give you a prime example, we have a commissioner in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission at the present time who is from El Paso: Raymond Telles. I know that many people have criticized him because he's not aggressive enough. Yet, if the people were able to scrutinize his record, what he has been able to contribute for the Mexican American by his subtle way of doing things is tremendous. It's just that some of us like to have things done one way, and don't recognize that if you were to do it that way, you might not accomplish anything.

E: Sometimes things can be accomplished, like you say, without being militant.

R: Right. Well, you see there, you opened another little door--about militancy. While the LULAC organization and I myself do not advocate violence in any form or fashion, I imagine I would only concede to that as a very last resort, when everything else absolutely fails. Yet I find that the aggressiveness of these groups makes the establishment recognize that there are problems. Consequently, that affords organizations such as LULAC the ability to go in and negotiate and discuss these problems, and the establishment is forced to listen. So you see, one is necessary for the other. So instead of being faced with having their industries burned or /have/ violence develop, they are willing to come forth and discuss the problems that need to be discussed; and solutions /are/ more readily acceptable to them. So this militancy, to a certain degree, is very necessary.

E: To attract attention.

R: That's right.

E: Do you have anything else to add?

R: Well, Joe, the only thing I have to say is that it is certainly my desire to see more persons become involved in the movement of the Chicanos in the city of El Paso. It is true that many of us become affluent either because we are able to find our place in society through a good paying job or whatever other means,

/but/ we recognize that the barrios still exist, that many persons in El Paso are still faced with extremely inadequate housing, that we still have a health problem, /and/ that many of our children are still dropping out of school at a fast rate /so that/ the average educational level of the Mexican American is below even that of the black in the state of Texas. We still find that the average earning capacity of the average Mexican American is still below everybody else--including the black in Texas. So, my God, even though we have sat here and discussed all the things that we have done, we find that the methods of keeping our people from acquiring their place in society have become more sophisticated; and consequently, our method of combating these things has to become more sophisticated. So, by and large, we cannot sit back and rest on our laurels, but rather I feel that we have to go out and fight still harder for all these things for our people.

E: I want to thank you for your time and effort. Thank you very much.