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Albert Armendariz, Sr.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Albert Armendariz, Sr.
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martinez
PROJECT: Mexican Americans in El Paso
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 10, 1976
TERMS OF USE: UNRESTRICTED

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in El Paso in 1919; received his law degree from the University of Southern California; has led several cases involving discrimination and the schools in El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; discrimination against Mexican Americans in El Paso's schools and in employment; the Alvarado desegregation case; the legal profession and Mexican Americans in El Paso.

[Oral History interview with Mr. Albert Armendariz, Sr. of El Paso, Texas on the 10th of July, 1976. Conducting the interview is Oscar Martinez of the University of Texas at El Paso.]

- M: First Mr. Armendariz, would you tell me where and when you were born?
- A: I was born in El Paso, Texas on August the 11th, 1919.
- M: Were your parents from El Paso?
- A: My parents were from México. My father was from Río Florido, Chihuahua and my mother was from Chihuahua City, Chihuahua. They came into the United States in 1906 together with another group of couples that came out of the country at that time.
- M: Do you know why they came out of México?
- A: It had something to do with insurrection and war. It had very little to do with economics, which is different than with most people. That was before the Revolution, but I understand in 1906 there was some turmoil down there. My father was a federal employee from age 17 and he had to flee the country at that time.
- M: Was he active politically?
- A: No. My father was apolitical completely, but spent a lifetime helping people, but non-politically. He just didn't care about politics and politicians.
- M: When your parents got here to El Paso, where did they settle and what did your father do?
- A: My father at that time came to work for a family by the name of Calderón. They were very well known here and had the RCA Victor. At that time they were just beginning with music and they were down here on South El Paso, and he was a salesman for a while. My father was a telegraph man by trade and he went to work for Western Union for a while until the things quieted a little, and then he worked as a

telegraph man in Juárez from that time until the day he retired.

M: When did he go back to Juárez?

A: It must have been right around 1910. He was very proud of the fact that he worked for the Mexican government (the way he put it) a lifetime. He worked 62 years for the Mexican government in telegraph. He was one of the rare persons who had permission from the Mexican government to live in the United States and work for the government in México and had permission from the United States to live in the United States and work in México; and so he lived here. He refused to take us into the interior of México, where he could have probably gone up in the field of communications, because all of us were born here with the exception of the oldest; and he just didn't want to take us out of the United States. He loved this country very deeply and felt that it was very very good for us as children to be raised in this country. He suffered a lot because of that.

M: How did he suffer?

A: Well, the suffering was economic because he made his money in pesos and had this large family over here that he had to support with pesos; so he suffered in the sense that he enjoyed no special privilege for himself. Every penny that he made went to support the large family that he had; and so in that way he suffered. Also he suffered in that he retired as a sub-jefe, which means the second one in charge of the Juárez office. My father could have probably gone up into the upper echelons of communications in México if he had chosen to abandon El Paso and go on into the interior of México where the jobs are, where the communications centers are.

M: It sounds like your father had a double loyalty: one to the United States and one to México.

A: I think essentially you could say that. My father had a deep love for this country and he tried to teach us to appreciate the American way of life and to understand his sacrifice, and certainly he loved México very deeply. He was a deep thinker in the area where México fails its people, where México doesn't provide for its citizens. He was quite a thinker.

M: Mr. Armendariz, did your father ever talk about the position of Mexican Americans in the city back then?

A: Both my father and my mother did. My mother was a concert pianist who took her music at the conservatory of México City and gave it up for marriage and children. She taught piano here in El Paso, but we came. You asked a little while ago, where did we land. When we landed in here, my father refused to move to South El Paso, even then, and he put us up here on Montana St. I remember there were three houses. In one house were living the Muñoz's who came from México with them; the Kriebs, who were a German descent family of Mexicans; and my father and mother. We came to an Anglo neighborhood and they would call us "dirty Mexicans," and we would come crying to mama. I remember so plainly that mama used to impress upon us the fact that we were in a "foreign" country; that was her word. "You are a stranger here and you have to learn to take this and not be hurt by it." This was the philosophy of my father also. My father used to tell us many, many times that we should realize that we are in a society that has a dominant group and that we should learn to live with it and abide by

it and get along with it. This was of course the old thinking, and whether right or wrong, this is what we were taught.

M: Where did you go to school?

A: I went to old Bailey School. That was one of the original schools in El Paso. I learned a lot about it that I didn't know in the recent trials with the El Paso Independent School District. It was located where the YMCA is today, between Montana and Rio Grande. It was a one block school. I went there from kindergarten through the eighth grade, and from there I went to El Paso High and graduated from there; so I only went to two schools during my whole life.

M: Was that a predominantly Anglo elementary school that you went to?

A: Yes, it was predominantly Anglo. However, there was a good 25% of us, but most of us did not speak a word of English. For instance, I didn't speak a word of English when I entered the kindergarten, and we went into an integrated situation. I have always thanked my father and God that he did put us here and that I went into that, because it didn't take us long to pick up English. We were cast into a 75% Anglo society and it was a matter of necessity that we had to learn it, and we did.

M: What incidents stand out in your mind at school?

A: I remember several things. First, most of the Anglos were from the Southwestern Children's Home. They were orphans, or at least we believed that they were orphans because it was an orphans' home. The Southwestern Children's Home was on Arizona at the time and most of the Anglos at Bailey School were very kind, very fine people. We got along real well. But I remember some teachers who were awfully mean.

I remember one; I hate to mention her because she's probably dead. But I remember one Mrs. Biggs, who used to grab some of the boys by the hair and pull them up and then slap them down into their chair with her right hand. This type of thing was there. I also remember that we were taught right away that everything Mexican was bad and we were castigated if we spoke Spanish. Some of the teachers (Mrs. Biggs, for example) were more eager to do that than others. I also remember very pleasantly that we used to have a May 1st [May Day] fiesta every year and everybody looked forward to it. I remember a May Pole that we played around. I really have pleasant memories of my schooling at Bailey. I remember also the deep hurt that we had. In those days we had to take Texas history, and Mobil Oil put out a book in the form of a funny book. I remember the deep resentment at some of the statements such as: "Down with hot tamale eaters" and "those dirty Mexicans."

M: Right in the book?

A: Right in the book being used in the schools. I remember very clearly because I guess, even at that time I was developing the basis that has been my inspiration of fighting for equal opportunity for this group. Texas history itself is a very, very, difficult subject for the Mexican American to take, especially as a required subject. Then we had it in high school, too. I don't know whether they still do or not; at that time they did. They did not use the Mobil Oil booklet in high school; it was only in grammar school.

M: You mentioned that you were taught that things Mexican were bad. Do you remember specific examples of that, aside from the Mobil Oil book?

A: Well, on many occasions we were subjected by some teachers to a

discussion of religion, and invariably this lead to the evils of Catholicism. Most of us were Catholic, and I remember we used to go home and we were very shook up by some of the things we were told. I think that the attitude of the school towards speaking Spanish was an important factor, because it did make you feel that you were doing something dirty or bad. In all fairness it was very helpful in forcing (and the word that I use is "forcing") us to learn English, but it did leave deep scars on me and on my fellow students. There were other factors I couldn't pin point it at this time; they were there.

M: Do you remember at that time comparing yourself with Mexican American kids in South El Paso, or your parents talking about them?

A: In relation to this, I have to tell you that there is a tremendous amount of self-discrimination in our group, and we experienced it a lot. We were told very clearly (maybe not in word, but in deed) that my father was sacrificing very, very much to have us living in North El Paso, because he didn't want us to live in South El Paso, because the children in South El Paso would say bad words or they weren't clean; that type of thing. But we had some cousins there. After my father came, some of his brothers and sisters came over here and we had some cousins that lived in South El Paso. My grandfather, Don Manuel Armendariz (who had a white beard looked like Santa Claus), always lived in South El Paso. We would go down on Sunday and his second wife, Manuelita, would feed the whole family. All the cousins were there. We'd go and we'd kiss the old man's hand and all of us would remain in his house. He lived in a two room tenement house over there and yet the place was immaculate and the food was great. I remember

some of those meals, especially el caldo. She was a great cook and we used to go there every Sunday until the old man died; but Don Manuel was very well known here in El Paso. As I understand it, he followed my dad into the United States after my dad came, with some of my cousins. We knew South El Paso as the Segundo Barrio and we were warned not to go there, and we tried to avoid it.

M: Do you remember feeling better than those kids who lived over there?

A: Oh, there is no question about it. There is a feeling of superiority. It's very natural, I think, because you never felt superior to the Anglo and it's always good to find someone to feel superior to. The funny thing about it is that we never had too much contact with the black. In our neighborhood and at school, of course, we didn't have blacks; so we didn't have anyone to feel superior to except other Mexicans. That's very definite. I think that if you ask anyone of my era that [they'll give you a similar answer]. For instance, there were several of us that grew up together. I mentioned the Kriebs, the Alderetes; they grew up in the neighborhood with their fathers spending more money because there is no doubt that it costs more money to have a large family in North El Paso than it did in South El Paso. When you got to that, you were very lucky and you felt great and you certainly felt superior. I always felt superior to my own cousins. I hate to tell you this (I don't want to sound pompous), but certainly our knowledge of English was superior, our intelligence was superior. In other words, the school over here taught us heck of a lot better than they were being taught over there; it was obvious. We considered them dumb and stupid and laughed at them, and we would talk about subjects that they never heard of. Obviously the school system in the North was much better than in the South, no question about it.

M: Do you remember having any models as you were growing up, people you looked up to in town, or beyond El Paso?

A: Yes. I think old man Calderón was probably one of the people that most of us looked up to. He had a home here on Rio Grande Street, on the corner; it's still standing. I understand the family still owns it. You look at it now it doesn't look like much, but at that time it was a very fine home and certainly all of us aspired to some day having a home like that for our family. I think everybody looked up to him. I know my dad looked up to him; he called him Don whatever his first name was. I always looked up to an uncle of mine that was called Ramón Gómez León. He was not really an uncle; he was second uncle on my mother's side who worked for Calderón. This man was to me one of the most intelligent persons I have ever met. He had no education, particularly, but was very intelligent. There were few people in the Mexican American group that you could really look up to because there were very very few who had reached any level of success whatsoever. Those would be the two most prominent ones; I would say that a lot of us knew about them and knew them. By the way, Calderón ran the Colón Theatre and several other theatres down there, and the man that came in with my father (Muñoz) went to work for him. Later they split up and he had the old Iris Theatre there in South El Paso and another couple of theatres. We used to go and play the gramophone for the movies and get in free, because we always enjoyed movies. That was right at the beginning of the movies. We would go up into the balcony and play the gramophone and he'd allow us to go in free so he would have someone to play that music. These are things in the background that come up. It was a pleasant life; it was a pleasant life

in the North. It wasn't too far North of the line, really, because Montana Street is not too far North.

M: You mentioned a line. Where was the line?

A: Well, the line of el Segundo Barrio was the railroad track and it was very pronounced at that time. I don't know whether you remember this or not, but the railroad tracks were not sunk at that time. The railroad tracks through that area were much wider than they are now; they have been narrowed considerably. When we were kids there were maybe eight or ten tracks where there are two of them now, right through the downtown area, that divided North and South El Paso; and that was the dividing line. I hesitate to say that the railroad tracks were really the demarcation because downtown was South of the railroad tracks and certainly we didn't consider downtown the Second Ward.

M: I have heard San Antonio Street mentioned as a dividing line.

A: I think that it would be correct if somebody had the impression that San Antonio Street was the dividing line. [You would say], "South of the tracks," and then you try to correct yourself because you realize that downtown is south of the tracks, and certainly downtown was not Second Ward. I would put it this way: I think the railroad tracks was a correct delineation; but when you take into consideration downtown, then San Antonio would probably be a good demarcation because south of San Antonio was certainly South El Paso, no question about that.

M: What do you remember about your high school years? What incidents stand out there?

A: I went to an integrated high school. [I remember] the large Jewish

community there. In that school, most of the what we might call discriminatory acts today (we realize they were discriminatory acts now, at that time were just mean things that were done to us) were done by the Jewish group. The Jewish people were quite mean to the Mexican American. They wouldn't let you get into any of the clubs, sororities, etc. that were there. They took all of the [honors, like] football queen. We had a very large Jewish community in the El Paso High School area. This I think gave rise to many, many of the people who have gone to El Paso High School who have a deep prejudice or resentment toward the Jewish community. I pride myself in believing that I have never had any such feelings; but I do recognize that it was there.

M: A lot of people resent the Jewish presence in South El Paso and downtown El Paso, and all those businesses that they get so much money from. Do you have any comment about that?

A: You talk to the Mexican American who went to El Paso High with me, who worked for some Jewish enterprise for years and years and you realize that they have very legitimate "beefs." I don't particularly want to talk about any one enterprise, but if you cite examples and not naming any names, for example, Popular Dry Goods Company. When there was an opening for a managership of a department, they would usually ship in a Jewish person from New York or somewhere and usually marry him up to some local girl. Or vice versa; it could be that they brought in a woman who would marry a local Jewish boy and that person would be placed as the head of the department over a Mexican American who had been there for years and had been working his head

off with the company. This occurred at all of the Jewish enterprises and all of us knew that it was going on. All of these were aunts, uncles, friends, who would come home and sometimes cry and couldn't do anything about it because they had to work. But this injustice was very palpable at that time. Everybody knew it and everybody felt it.

M: Do you think it was limited to the Jewish establishments?

A: No, no, no. Oh, no. It was limited to the Jewish establishments in that they actually imported Jewish people. The denial of that type of a job to the Mexican American was paramount. [There was a] difference at The White House, for instance. I could name you three or four who worked there for 50 years and never became department heads because they would hire Anglos for that; but they didn't have to ship them in. They were here already. That's your difference. The difference is that the Jewish community sort of went one step further. I would put it this way: it seemed to me that the Mexican American was much more willing to take or to understand or to accept discrimination by the Anglo, while they were much more resentful of discrimination on the part of the Jewish community. This I think is very basic. Old time Mexican Americans who have worked for these people feel a special kind of discrimination because we know that Jews have suffered at the hands of others. So it's hard to take that type of discrimination, and I think that's what they're talking about.

M: What about this other question of the ownership of many business establishments on the part of the Jewish people? Were there any resentments that you can recall about that?

A: Well, when I was very, very young I remember that we as a group were told... and I don't remember who told us this, but I remember the story so well. This man was saying that if Juan Pistolas, a Mexican American, was to put up a store next door to Fischbein, in a Mexican American neighborhood, Fischbein would flourish and become a rich man and Juan Pistolas would go broke. This was essentially what we heard in those days. I know that it affected me in that I have always resisted business enterprises because I never thought that I could be successful, personally. It affected me and I am sure it affected a lot of my friends that got the feeling that we could never succeed. The story that I got from that was not so much a resentment towards the Jew or the Jewish element, but a resentment for the Mexican American who was not a person to help another Mexican American to get ahead. Certainly I have discovered in my years of working for this group, and as a lawyer, that this is one of the horrible truths of our group. It's the truth that they would rather go and buy from Fischbein than they would from Juan Pistolas. It goes for lawyers, for doctors, for everything else. In our own group we cannot, for the life of us, establish in our minds a sufficient basis for faith in each other as professional people, as businessmen, etc. That is something that I feel very deeply, and it started way back there when we were kids.

M: To what do you attribute that?

A: I attribute it to the truth of our own group that we seem to be a very selfish lot and are very unwilling to help each other. Now, at that time I didn't realize it, but now I think very deeply that we object very vehemently at what the Anglo does to us. I mentioned some of the

things that I know that the Jewish group did to us, especially the business group. But what they do to us is nothing to what we do to each other. I see it everywhere. The Anglo has recognized this trait in us, and they use it very effectively. When I've worked for EEOC cases, invariably the dominant authority uses Mexican Americans to defeat points and to defeat persons. For instance, when we filed the El Paso Independent School District suit in 1970, the newspapers in El Paso published statements from three people denying our allegations, and all three of them were Mexican American employees of the El Paso Independent School District. I have an EEOC case against a major utility company. Recently one of them was goaded by a Mexican American that was placed as the head of the department, who was not qualified, because he goes along with the dominant group. This person certainly was not as qualified as the complainants. They put an order over him to lord it over him to where he could stand no more, and he turned around and called him a son of a bitch, and this gave grounds for firing him. It's a pure case of using the group against the group for the purposes of doing away with dissenters or those people who would seek change in the set up. We see it; I've seen it in all of these cases. This is what we are: we are not a very close group. In my own profession, I'm just about retirement age. I have maybe eight or 10 years more and I am going to go out very deeply resentful of my group, as a group. They will bring a traffic ticket to you or they will bring an insignificant case to you; but when they formulate a corporation or they formulate a company, they usually go to an Anglo lawyer or to a Jewish lawyer. In other words, this is group action.

You talk to all the lawyers and you'll see that there are a few exceptions; but I doubt very much if any of them have any of the business of the Mexican American businessmen. The Mexican American businessman does not come to the Mexican American lawyer. In fact the Mexican businessman, the businessman from México... it permeates to that. They look to the Anglo or to the Jewish lawyer with more favor and more trust. Now to what do I attribute that? All of this I attribute to a quirk in our own group, that we need to raise our own standards as to each other. I think it goes for professors, too. I don't think that there is anything **that** I am telling you that doesn't apply to all of us as professional men. It's a serious matter; I think we ought to give it more thought, maybe some action.

M: Well, if you compare the behavior of the blacks in this respect, you find the same thing.

A: Well, of course, I'm involved in work for the Civil Rights Commission, and I've met with coalition groups, etc, etc. One of the biggest fears that most of us who are in civil rights action have is that they're going to separate the black and the Mexican American and put us to fighting each other. It's very natural. The Anglo throws a bone at us and then we're going to fight over that bone. I've heard black leaders say that they have the same problem. I attribute it, of course, to the competition, the scramble up the ladder of success. Just this morning when you came in, I was sitting here looking at the charts of this particular utility company I'm telling you about. I was looking at the hierarchy, and the hierarchy has not a single Mexican American, not a single black, not a single woman in the upper

echelons. In the lower echelons of the heirarchy, out of maybe a hundred people you have three "bones" that are thrown to the minorities. It happens that the three "bones" are right now being filled by Mexican Americans; there are no blacks and no women in the lower echelons of this utility. Well naturally, when there's an opening, there's going to be a fight. Suppose they made available a fourth slot for a minority; then there's going to be a fight between the black, the Mexican American and the woman for that particular slot. I think that this is where a lot of this is going to come in. It's the lack of opportunity that does this to us. You can't talk in terms of, "The utility company has a hundred jobs in the upper echelons, and we have a chance to get a hundred slots if we're qualified; and can do the job." We know we'll never get to that. The best we can do is hope that instead of three, next year it's five. Anyone who hopes for more than that is "whistling in Dixie." The other two slots are going to be fought for by the black and the women, and that's what you have. But these are very interesting statistics in a local utility. This is a utility that is in El Paso, that has 57% Chicano, and doesn't have a single Chicano on its board or a single person of Mexican descent in any given category that is of any [importance]. Now since we filed the suit, the EEOC, you see them making a place for one or two. The irony of it is that in every case they [do not] choose the people who have fought for it; [instead] some person who is going to confirm and keep his mouth shut is chosen for the job. That's happening in this case. They're going to open up one slot to a Mexican American; they're going to give it to a fellow who is an

enemy of the people. Everybody, all this group, hates him because he is anti-Mexican himself. You see, you have a feeling of uselessness, of inadequacy. You have a feeling that nothing has been accomplished, because really and truly you go back, because the Mexican American who is going to discriminate against his brothers and sisters is a heck of a lot worse than the Anglo who discriminates. He tends to be meaner, less fair, more arrogant; more this and more that. He is much worse than the Anglo. We see it in the law. For instance, they're going to choose a judge. We haven't elected any judges here. All of them have been chosen; it's the Governor's gift to the Mexican American. In no case would the Mexican American lawyers' group or any group have chosen these people to be judges. I'm not talking about any of them particularly, I'm talking about all of them. They don't come to the Mexican American community to ask us, "Who would be a judge to your liking? Which person would make a judge that's going to be fair and square with you guys?" They choose their own. It's a choice by those that choose, and you can't say there are no Mexican Americans because there are, but the Mexican Americans are very, very carefully chosen, so that no change is effected or there is no effective change. If anything, it's worse. The situation for the group becomes worsened.

M: Mr. Armendariz, I would like to come back to these points that you made about the school law suit, the EEOC, and the law profession, and discuss those in detail. But first, can we go back and pick it up chronologically? I want to ask you a question about El Paso High School. I went there myself, by the way, many years later. At that

time, what percentage of the student enrollment at El Paso High was Mexican American?

A: I don't know exactly, but it must have been 40-60, taking the Jewish population as white or Anglo.

M: 40% Mexican American?

A: About that much.

M: What years are we talking about?

A: I'm talking about 1934 to 1938.

M: Was the Depression still going on at that time, here?

A: It was right during the Depression, right in the middle. I was in high school right during the Depression.

M: How did that affect the situation with Mexican American students? Was there a problem in some students not being able to go to school because of that?

A: Oh, yeah, there were a lot of drop outs at that time. Of course, we always suffered because, for instance, we didn't have tennis shoes to go into gym. I remember the coach getting on me tremendously, I mean just bawling the hell out of me, because I hadn't worn a jockstrap because you were supposed to wear a jockstrap when you were out there playing. The simple fact is that we didn't have the money to buy a jockstrap. Many, many children quit school because they didn't have shoes to wear, they didn't have food to eat. It was rough, it was rough. We try to tell our children how rough it was and they just don't want to listen, they just don't believe it. It was rough, and it was right during my high school days. For instance, I liked athletics, but I couldn't participate because I had to go sell papers.

I sold papers, delivered papers, did something because my dad just didn't make enough money. If we were going to have a pair of shoes (and mostly tennis shoes) [I had to work]. I remember we used to go down to South El Paso Street and buy tennis shoes that were .69 cents at one of those stores there. But we had to earn the .69 cents to buy them, otherwise we didn't have them.

M: Was selling newspapers your first job?

A: Yeah, I sold newspapers with the Krieb boys on the corner of the Hotel Hussman, which was later the Hotel Cortez. Dr. Ayub is one of the ones that I sold papers with; Felipe Ayub, his brother, was one of the circulation people and we sold papers. I sold The Herald and the Ayubs sold The Post, which later became the El Paso Herald Post. That was many years ago, at old Hotel Hussman.

M: In those days, did they have kids from Juárez selling newspapers along with you?

A: No. In those days, there was no problem of kids from Juárez coming. Most of the people were going the other way; most of the Mexican residents were going from the United States to Mexico at that time. There were a lot of families that quit school because they were going back to México. They'd tell you, "Well, we're pulling up stakes. My family is moving back to México." Things were so bad in the United States, at that time, that they were better in México, obviously, or they wouldn't have left.

M: Do you remember specific cases of families who packed up and left?

A: Oh, yeah. I remember one of my best friends there at Bailey School left. This was in the last years of the high school and their family

left. But at El Paso High there were many of them. I don't know whether I can remember any specific ones, but we lost a lot of them that went back to México.

M: Do you remember interesting experiences when you were selling newspapers on the streets of El Paso? I did the same thing, years later. The reason I asked you about the kids from Juárez is because I was a kid from Juárez selling newspapers. There were many interesting things that happened to me during those years, and I'm wondering if you remember some interesting incidents that may have happened to you.

A: The only interesting incident that I remember was that Dr. Ayub and I (Pablo and I), who are like brothers now, used to go around the corner there at the Cortez almost every day and have a fist fight. They had come in from México more recently than we had. As a matter of fact, they had just come in from México at the time. Then I remember Willy Krieb, the Krieb boy who used to be my protector, because there were a lot of kids who wanted to beat ~~upon~~ me. I was a little skinny kid, the smallest kid in the class. Willy Krieb was one of my fighters, he would fight for me. He was a battle horse, he really liked to fight. So if they got on me, he'd get on them. But other than that I don't remember any particular incidents. Now, I remember a very interesting thing that happened at the Cortez. There were many, many occasions when it would "rain coins." People liked to open the windows then (it wasn't air conditioned then) and throw coins at us down below; and of course it was very pleasant when they did that because we scrambled after them. One item comes back to me that could be interesting. Right across the street from the Cortez, on Mills

Street there was a restaurant. I recall it as a very elegant restaurant; it may not have been, but certainly it was too elegant for me. I never went into it. Every afternoon they would put in the window the most delicious looking baked apples, a pan of baked apples, that was put in the window for display. I remember we used to go and drool over those apples every day. I mean we would go over there just to look at them. I also remember how cold the winters were when we were selling newspapers there on the corner, and how we would take turns in going around to the back of the Cortez. There was a grill that we would sit down on. I realize now that they were exhaust fans from the kitchen, because very warm air came out. We would sit there and warm ourselves and take turns; and the others would be on the corner selling the newspapers while some of us would be warming ourselves up on the grill. I remember that; a lot of things come back to you. If you hadn't asked the questions, I would have forgotten.

M: Those kinds of experiences just repeat themselves, because there are many similarities with what we were doing as kids. What did you do after you graduated from high school?

A: The very next day after I graduated from high school, I went down and started working for the Lion Shoe Store. It was on Overland Street. It was a Jewish-owned enterprise. I went to work for \$7.00 a week. That was in 1938; that was my first job. From there I went to A. B. Poe Motor. My sister had married this fellow by the name of Zuñiga, and he was on the grease rack there, and he got me a job as his helper on the grease rack. That's when I got married; it was in '40 or '41. When I got married I was working for A. B. Poe and making \$12.50 a week.

M: This was servicing automobiles?

A: Right. Greasing cars on the grease rack and lubricating cars. From there I went to work for the Fort Bliss laundry, because they were going to pay us \$18.00 a week. I worked three days and almost killed myself. I just killed myself because I had had an accident on my back at age 14, and my back was killing me. I went back to A. B. Poe and they were kind enough to take me back. It was one of those times when you venture out and find out you're wrong and come back. Then I was there at A. B. Poe until I went to work for the federal government. I went to work at Fort Bliss. I started at the grease pit. We would prepare all vehicles that were going to go overseas, to see that they were properly oiled and lubricated. We used to have a line a mile long. A fellow by the name of Reagan and I were grease racking. We just got thousands of vehicles ready for overseas shipment during the war. Then I was put into the ordinance department and learned vehicle parts. Then I was drafted and put into the Army, and went right into Fort Bliss, stayed there in uniform, and I was a motor pool sergeant at the post motor pool. So my experience up to the time that I got out of the Army was with automotive, but I always wanted to be a lawyer. Paul Ayub and I there selling newspapers on the corner of the Cortez used to talk to each other. He would say he was going to be a doctor when he grew up and I told him I was going to be a lawyer; both of us managed it. I'm very grateful to the Army because I wouldn't be a lawyer today if it weren't for the G. I. Bill, because when I got out of the army I only had a high school education; so I had to go to UTEP. Luckily at that time they had a program that was available to

veterans where if you had a B+ average in 60 hours of college work, they would accept you into an accredited law school. I came back to UTEP with high school only, took 60 hours after a ten year absence, and made a B+ average and got into the University of Southern California. I don't have a BA degree; my son does, but I don't. I just have the juris doctor because I'm a product of the G. I. Bill.

M: You went to Southern California for three years?

A: Well, I made it in two and a half. I made 60 hours in 17 months at UTEP and made Southern California in two and a half years (which was 28 months) because I only had so many months of G. I. Bill. I ended up with just a little under two months left, and just made it. I got through law school paid by the G. I. Bill.

M: Were there many others Mexican Americans doing the same thing?

A: No. I was the only one at USC, I was the only one.

M: What about here at UTEP?

A: I doubt very much if there's a counterpart, one more, who can say that they became a lawyer or a doctor through the G. I. Bill. Our group just didn't take advantage of it. I don't know why. I was counseled to go to a trade school.

M: In high school?

A: Yes, in high school, but I mean after I got out. I don't remember exactly who, but when I got out of the Army there were places that would counsel you on the G. I. Bill, put out by the Veterans Administration. I was counseled to go to trade school; I was counseled against going to an academic school.

M: Who encouraged you to go on to become a lawyer?

A: Oh, I think myself.

M: It was stricly on your own.

A: My father was dead-set against it. He said that I was a married man, had children and had obligations, and he felt that I was trying to get out of my obligations by going to school. I assured him that that was not so, that I was aware of my obligations, that I was going to school in order to be able to take better care of them. Everybody was against it. The only one that encouraged me was my brother John. My brother John is a jeweler. When we were at University of Southern California, the G. I. Bill at that time was a very tenuous thing. They would cut off the check for any reason whatsoever and then you had to go down there and beg them to give it back to you. It was a very fine thing to have the G. I. Bill, but I'm afraid that as a group, if there is a study made of the veteran Mexican American, that the veteran Mexican American did not profit by the G. I. Bill as they might have. I don't know to what to attribute that, but I do know that there are very few lawyers, doctors, or others professionals [who went to school that way].

M: Didn't they receive enough counsel to take advantage of it? Could that have been a problem?

A: Well, the counseling that I got was anti-going to [an academic school], to use my eligibility to go get a trade.

M: Do you think a lot of people went that route?

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah. The trade schools were full of Mexican Americans. They became welders, this and that. Especially in Los Angeles. In other words, I happened to go to school in Los Angeles, and over there

there were very few of us veterans that were Mexican Americans that were in the academic school; very few.

M: Mr. Armendariz, could you trace your career after you got out of law school?

A: Yes. My career has been one of a private attorney here in El Paso. I hung up my shingle at the old Banner Building; that's above Kress. I did that because I had no money. Deeply in debt, I borrowed \$40.00 from my dad and paid the first month's rent. I shared the phone with an elderly couple who had this hearing aid place there. They had sublet their space to me and also their phone. When I opened my office, it was just a single office; just one room. I had three people waiting for me, had no waiting room; they had to wait out in the hall. I had three people and they haven't stopped coming since. My law practice has been a quantity, not quality, affair.

M: Could you clarify that?

A: I don't want to be disrespectful to my clients, but it has been very poor people and very, very many of them. I perhaps do 10 cases to my counterpart in society's one, because I've dealt with very poor people who can afford very small fees. I had been sort of the legal aid society until the Legal Aid Society came in; and when the Legal Aid Society came in I just had no way to change. I mean, there were just too many years. So I continued to do that. So those people who make \$400.00 or under go down to the Legal Aid, and if they make \$401.00 they come here. We take care of a lot of people for reasonable fees, give them the right to pay in payments. This is the story of my life. I went from there to the Caples Building, from the Caples Building I

went to the Southwest Center, from the Southwest Center we were on Overland Street for three years. Then we went to Myrtle Street and from Myrtle Street, here. I have been here in El Paso for a long time.

M: When you started as a lawyer in El Paso, how many Mexican American lawyers were there?

A: There were only two others. There was George Rodriguez and A. C. Gonzalez. A. C. Gonzalez has never been interested; he has been a business lawyer, he owns real state. Well, there was Galvan too, Galvan was there. There was one by the name of Sanchez, who said his name was "Sanchay" and that he was from Louisiana. He didn't speak any Spanish but he had a very very large Mexican American trade. Bob Galvan had just begun. So actually there were a few more. Then I came in. Calamia, Calamia is half Italian and half Mexican; he was already here. Joe Rey, Sr. was already here. That's it.

M: Did the Mexican American lawyers get together?

A: No, no. I doubt very much if there has ever been a meeting of Mexican American lawyers in El Paso for any reason. If there has been I have not known about it.

M: Did you ever perceive a need for them to get together?

A: Oh, yes, I've tried. I made several invitations myself. When I was the Chairman of the Board of the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund in recent years, I actually gave them all an invitation to come and sup with us the expense of the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund; but nobody came. They are just not interested. I don't know why they're not interested. We've tried it criminal, we've tried it immigration, we've tried it Mexican American; you just can't get them to go.

M: What was the main function of those lawyers who were here when you started your law practice in El Paso?

A: Well, I think that it's a very, very similar practice to the one that I have. I think most of us were trying to take care of the myraids of problems that this group gets into, for small fees; trying to eek out a living. I think this is one of the biggest, biggest problems for the future lawyer of Mexican American extraction, and that is: How is he going to survive, especially as numbers increase? Right now we've got maybe 20 or 25, and they're all scrounging to make a living; and very few of them are.

M: Is there a problem right now?

A: Oh, yes. No question about it. No question that there is a problem. We don't have any of the business community source; we don't have that. Now there may be one or two of them. I know that Andy Gonzalez has no problem, he has a lot of property. I doubt very much if Andy Guevara has any problem, but Andy had his father who was in real estate and was able to help him get into situations of real estate. But given those two, everyone else who is dependent upon the Mexican public or the Mexican American public is struggling financially; no question about it.

M: Why doesn't the Mexican American lawyer get into the corporate trade?

A: Well, in the first place, the only avenue to corporate trade for the Mexican American lawyer is his own group; and his own group goes to the Anglo lawyer or to the Jewish lawyer.

M: The Anglo customer doesn't come to Mexicans?

A: No; the Anglo customer never never does. I have what I consider one

of the best corporate lawyers in my son. He is a tremendous corporate lawyer. We don't have any corporate accounts. We don't get them. The corporations that we get are those that want us to do the work free. For instance, I represent the San Juan Orphanage, several groups of Sisters. But all of it is free work. For instance, the Bishop has an Anglo lawyer.

M: How have Mexican American lawyers fit into the local political structure, since you started here?

A: Well, it's been like an old wild west attack by Indians on a wagon train. We've been able to knock off a wagon train or two, and that's about it. You have some that have been able to make it; but politically speaking, I think you can count Mexican American victories on your fingers. I think that the victory of Raymond Telles is probably one that most of us dwell back to as an example of how great we can be. I don't want to comment on the changes in the man and what have you, but at the time it was a tremendous victory. Nobody gave us a chance in the world to win the mayor's race. He was the only mayor of the City of El Paso that we've had at least in the last fifty years.

M: Since the establishment of the city.

A: Right. But that was a tremendous victory for the Mexican American, showing how the Mexican American can operate if he gets together. But other than that, I don't think any of the others can really be called victories.

M: You imply that Mexican American lawyers have not been a significant political force in this town.

A: Oh, I have no doubt that we have not been a significant political force.

I think we have some shining stars for possible future action. Ray Caballero I think is an example of what the future might bring. Mario Martinez was one, and look at him. He lost by three or four thousand votes. But I think it has been insignificant myself. I personally feel that we cannot possibly win anything in local races until we have the Districting. I was extremely happy with the news item the other day that the El Paso Independent School District is looking into this. I must tell you that they are not looking at it voluntarily, as the Times might say. We appreciate it and everything else, but they have been definitely been threatened with a law suit; and there will be a law suit filed if they don't straighten up.

M: What about the Anglo lawyers as a political force? Have they been a political force?

A: Oh, yeah. This whole city is run by Anglo lawyers, no question about it; the judgeships, everything is. There isn't a thing that is done politically here that isn't run by the Anglo lawyers. I don't care whether it's the Democrat or the Republican. The Republican Party and the Democratic Party are run by Anglo lawyers, and they have been run by Anglo lawyers since I have been in business, no question about that.

M: Why are they in there and the Mexican American not?

A: Well, the Mexican American simply has had no force. I know this; I was told this by Woodrow Bean himself, who is the best example of the Anglo who has led and who has been the leader. "How many votes can you deliver to me if you want this?" We have not been, as a group, a political force that is worth a damn in either party. We just have

not, and that's the sad truth. The sad truth of it is that we are not, as a group, politically motivated and politically alive. We are completely politically naïve and have very little interest in politics. I think all of it is part of the whole thing, I mean this feeling of futility, of "what the hell for? We are not going to make any difference in our group."

M: Mr. Armendariz, what are the prominent law firms in town?

A: I think that if a survey was made, you would find that 80% of the fees that are generated for lawyers (a large, large chunk) are received by two law firms. They are the Grambling firm, that represents the El Paso Natural Gas Co., and the Scott-Hulse firm, which represents the State National Bank. There is a third firm, Edwards, Belk, Hunter and Kerr, who have represented real estate interests. That is a very successful law firm. But none of these have a Mexican American.

M: That's the reason I asked you this question, because we have done research on the subject, according to the number of people that these firms have, as they put the information down in the city directory. We have gone through and have compiled information for the years 1950, 1955, '60, '65, '70, and 1976 and have identified these firms as the largest law firms. I want you to help me establish where they fit in, if in fact they are the six largest law firms. Peticolas, Stephens and Windle?

A: No.

M: No?

A: No. That may be one of the future big law firms, but right now it isn't. It's a big law firm; I mean, I am not going to tell you it

isn't a big law firm, but it isn't considered in "the" big law firms.

M: Okay. Well, here is the list. I wonder if we could go through it.

A: Scott, Hulse, Marshall & Feuille. Very definitely. That's one of the ones that I mentioned.

M: Grambling?

A: I would say Grambling would be number one, Scott would be number two, Edwards-Belk is number three. Those are the three that I mentioned. This is one that I forgot; I would have mentioned it but I forgot it. Kemp, Smith, White, Duncan & Hammond may well be number two. If I had thought of it, I would have probably put it in second place. I would have put Grambling as number one, Kemp-Smith as number two, Scott-Hulse as number three, and Edwards, Belk, Hunter, & Kerr as number four.

M: And the other two?

A: I would put this one as number five. This law firm, Potash and Bernat, is a rather small law firm that is dedicated to a large segment of the Jewish community; they represent Popular, American Furniture, Welch Furniture. This is a very, very fine law firm. When I first went into the practice, they had a man by the name of Cameron, who was one of the finest old gentlemen you ever saw. He used to give me an awful lot of advice. But as far as size is concerned, I would say that 80 or 90% of the fees that are generated by lawyers in El Paso, Texas are taken by the first four law firms.

M: Well, the next question that I pose to you is based on the findings of our research. Going through the data, these six law firms since 1950 (and probably before) up to the present have not had a Mexican

American among them.

A: Right; they don't.

M: What's the reason?

A: They don't want them, that's why. If they wanted them they would have them. Potash and Bernat is a Jewish firm, but you don't find any Jewish people, you don't find any blacks, you don't find any women in the others. Now this one here made a great big exception and made a big to-do about it. The exception is Galatzan, who is Jewish. He was a District Court Judge. They took him off the bench and [the Grambling firm] made him a member of the firm. Now he is mentioned in the name--as the last person on the totem pole, but at least they have that

M: Would it be fair to say that these law firms operate like private clubs? I mean, friends that come together to form a law firm. One would naturally expect that Anglos would have Anglo friends and they would come together, and so therefore they're not really discriminating against Mexican American lawyers or excluding them. They're merely coming together around their own friends.

A: Well, I think that you might say that that is it. There is no doubt that these are groups of lawyers that are very close. If you want to rationalize the thing, that's a very good rationale, that they do it because they like each other and not because they hate another group. This is fine. But in the case of Galatzan it wasn't... I mean, what the heck? You know that they dwell in different worlds, and they brought him in. No, I wouldn't be willing to allow that rationale to take away the fact that they should have in their midst Mexican American lawyers. I think the answer to it may be more financial because I

understand that most of these people have to come in with money. They have families that have this and that. They can contribute to the firm not only finances but clientele that would be important for the firm. After all, they all have to make money and survive. But these are the six firms that represent El Paso Natural Gas, El Paso National Bank, the Southwest National Bank; you know, the people with money. These are the firms that don't dwell, like we do, in society; and by "we" I mean the other lawyers. The rest of the lawyers have to depend upon a client entering our reception room. These people could even close a reception room; they don't need reception rooms. They have on-going business with the clients of theirs: the banks, the insurance companies. They don't depend upon the walk-in client or the client that reads about them or hears how good lawyers they are. They don't.

M: There's a similar situation with the major corporations in town. We did the same thing for the years 1950 through 1970 every five years. Taking a look at the management positions, we found that among the six largest firms in town (this includes El Paso Natural Gas, El Paso Electric, Peyton Co., Darbyshire Steel, Mort Investment of El Paso and Border Machinery) there was not one Mexican American in all those years. I don't have the figures for 1976, but I don't think that has changed very much.

A: No, it hasn't changed any.

M: How do you explain the absence there?

A: Well, again, you can rationalize that they like each other, that they're friends and they're buddies.

M: It would be less true for these corporations.

A: They just don't want Mexican Americans in there, they just don't want us; and if they don't want us, they're not going to have us. If you look at the banks, you are going to find the same thing.

M: We did. We found that out of 498 total officers between those years (1950 and 1970) the number of Spanish surnames amounted to 23, which is less than 5% of the total. Also, you find that those Spanish surnames fit in the lower echelons; one guy a director of Public Relations, for example. Those kinds of positions, where there is very little power and influence within the bank.

A: These are studies where you couldn't miss if you were going to establish a basis for a claim of discrimination. You couldn't miss, because the statistics are so strong in your favor and all you have to do is find them because they're there, and they're there in every facet of this; every facet. It all goes to the financial door, because when you come down to brass tacks, you can come to a conclusion. What is the largest and biggest conclusion that we reached from what we've talked about today? That is that the Mexican American (I don't care whether he is professional, or what he is) has such a small input into the financial aspects of the American society; and by American I mean the United States society. We have such a small input that we get nothing; we get nothing back because our input is nothing. This goes into every facet. I don't care; you pick any facet of importance and you find that this is true. They rationalize it; the very rationale that you gave us is the rationale that they give: "It isn't that we don't want you. It's that we've got a lot of buddies that we want."

M: Would you tell me a little bit about cases that you've handled, first on an individual basis, that illustrate ethnic relations in this town?

A: All my cases, with the exception of the Alvarado case, have been on an individual case. The Alvarado case is the only time I had class action or an effort that is backed by groups. One of the most significant things that I must tell you is that it has always been an uphill fight financially, because our people, as a group (and I don't care whether they call themselves LULACS, the G. I. Forum, the MECHA), do not have the necessary money to fight an effective battle in any arena in the law. This is a tremendously important observation that I'm giving you, that we do not have the financial resources to fight the battles that are necessary for us to reach any kind of equality of opportunity as a group. The only hope that we have (and it is lost hope, in my opinion) is that the federal government enter the arena. The federal government up to now has absolutely flat refused to enter the arena for the Mexican American. The efforts of the federal government [include] a couple of school cases involving Mexican Americans; they have filed thousands of cases involving the black. They've had couple of cases and they botched them up so much that they lost both; there was no heart in it. Then again, you go into the background and you find that in Justice, your figures that you have there are just as bad. I just got a compilation that I'll be happy to let you have, that you can use in conjunction with this, showing that in Justice the number of Mexican American attorneys is also almost nothing. It's just insignificant. But what you've got here is a group that has depended, since I can remember, upon the individual

lawyer. The contribution of the individual Mexican American lawyer to the Mexican American movement, of all your professional men, is outstanding. There is no professional group of Mexican Americans that has done so much for the group as the Mexican American lawyers. I am not saying this because I am one of them; I am saying this because it is the truth. You cannot get the doctors who make the money to contribute. I just made a speech for de los Santos at one of the parties that was given to him by a group of local Mexican American doctors. In my 25 years of practice as a lawyer and in my long knowledge of Mexican Americans in this city, it was the first time that a group of Mexican American professional men, other than lawyers, did anything for a Mexican American prominent person such as Dr. de los Santos. To me it was great, and I mentioned it when I said thanks to the doctors. I thought it was great. You start with Gus Garcia-- and someday I'm going to write a book about Gus Garcia. Here was a man that dedicated himself to the Mexican American and died a poor and ruined man, because fights for Mexican American rights take all your time and all your effort; and that's it. The irony of the whole thing is that the Alvarado case here in El Paso, for which the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund has spent and will spend in excess of \$50,000 on the case, is the only effort that has ever been financed by other than lawyers. The Pecos School case, the Bastrup [sp] Independent School District case, the police brutality cases--all of them have been financed by individual lawyers who have taken the cases to court.

M: Since you mentioned the Alvarado case, could you tell me a little bit

about the history of that case, before it came to court?

A: We have always been very concerned with the El Paso Independent School District's attitude towards the integration of the schools, or the lack of integration. Most of us who have been with the problem were very, very worried about Bowie when there were only three schools: Bowie, El Paso High and Austin. We became very alarmed when Jefferson was installed, because now we had Bowie and Jefferson. As 1970 approached, we realized that the policies of the El Paso Independent School District had created the Bowie and Jefferson of 1970, at the same time keeping Bowie and Jefferson, because El Paso High and Austin had become the Bowie and Jefferson of 1970. So now we had El Paso High, Austin High, Bowie and Jefferson. When you know anything about schools, you realize that each high school has "feeder" schools and that the thing permeates down to the feeder schools, and you have a sad situation. We were very, very much afraid that if we didn't put a stop to it that next year or maybe in 20 years Coronado would be the Bowie High of 1980 or 1990, because they're moving north. All the good schools are moving north. So we met with groups of parents; there were several of us that met. The one meeting that is mostly in my mind was a meeting of parents there at the school. What impressed me was that the mothers who were against the law suit were Mexican American mothers who were fearful of the Anglo coming into El Paso High. On this basis, one of the mothers said to me, "Mr. Armendariz, my daughter became high school queen this year. She is a high school queen, she got her picture in the annual. Do you think that if the Anglos came into this school my daughter would have made high school

queen? This is the reason that we don't want you to fight this case, because we don't want Anglos here."

M: How did you answer that?

A: Well, I thought about it. My answer to her was simply that she had to choose between the importance of her daughter being a football queen and her daughter's education. What is more important--for her to be a football queen, or for her to be prepared to face life itself? I said, "What is more important to you? If you say it's more important that she be prepared, I would like to test your daughter, right now; give her an exam. I'm sure that I could show you how defficient she is in the academic world. She may be the most beautiful thing in the world, maybe, because she got football queen. There is a second aspect of it. One of the weaknesses of our group, one of the real, real ironies of our group, is the fact that we are so absolutely devoid of political savvy. By golly! this is when we learn it, at the high school level. It may be good for her to have competition, for this group to have competition, at the high school level, and see if you can rally the forces to beat these white girls sometimes. Wouldn't it be a hell of a lot better if your daughter became football queen and she had had to battle an Anglo girl to beat her out of it? We live with the Anglo society and that's what we have to do." Essentially this was my answer to her, but it didn't convince her. It didn't move her at all. The other mothers were of the opinion that they'd rather have their daughters be football queens than educated.

M: When was this meeting?

A: This was in early '69, because it took us about a year to gather the

sufficient number of people who would become parties to the suit.

You have all of these people coming to complain to you, and you have to find at least a few of them that are willing to stand by their complaints by becoming plaintiffs.

M: Who was calling the meetings? Who was leading this effort?

A: Well, it came from several places. At that time the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund was not interested in it. I was interested in it, personally. Chuck Alcala, who later went to work, was interested in it personally. Frank Galvan had made several complaints and he was interested in it personally. But most of us were dealing with it on a personal basis; there was just no group action as such. The LULACS were highly interested, and I, as a member of the LULACS, was interested. But this was the thing that was picked up later by the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund. Now, I would like to tell you that when we in the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund Society, the group, discussed the participation of the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund in the school area, I was the only local person; and I took the position that if the El Paso Independent School District was to be sued, and MALDEF was to sue them, I took the position that I would rather the suit be for single member districts. At that time I was overruled on the basis that there was very little chance of success, because the Supreme Court had not ruled on single members districts yet. I have to agree; there was very little chance for success. In retrospect, the money would have been better spent because probably we would have had single member districts since last election and we would be on the way to maybe having some input into the School Board.

That's essentially the Alvarado case; the background of the Alvarado case is there. It was to be an effort by the Mexican American community, in which the Mexican American community of El Paso has had very, very little input; not because they have not been invited or anything else, but because they just simply haven't responded into the case itself. The Mexican American community has not contributed one penny to it, with the exception of one or two of the people who helped us the two weeks that we were there. We had had no input from them before; we had asked them, but no.

M: Could you comment on the reaction of the Anglo community in the court room itself, or the Anglo lawyers? What was their general attitude toward this particular case?

A: The most amazing thing is not the Anglo lawyers. To me the most amazing thing has been Judge Galatzan. I am touched by the man's sincerity; I have known him for years and respect him very much. But his position was, "Why are you doing this to us? We are so good to you, we do so much for the Mexican American. Why do you lie about us, why do you say these horrible things?" Several times he came up and said, "Boy, if that is true, we sure have a bad Independent School District." The whole attitude of theirs was that they were entirely innocent, babes in the woods, angels with halos over them, and that we were a bunch of bastards for bringing up the case. For instance, I told him [Judge Galatzan], "Judge, what do you think of the bussing to bring these people from the Gas Light District, pass them by Anglo schools and take them to Mexican schools? What do you think of that? Do you think that that's right?" Whenever you got specific with him

he would not comment. But in general, all of them, all of them, sincerely believe that the El Paso Independent School District has done more for the Mexican American than the Mexican American deserves. That's basic; there's no question about it. I think that the School Board man that I took on cross examination feels very, very strongly (and he is a Mexican American himself) that everything has been done for the Mexican Americans, and that we have no complaint.

M: The case elicited a lot of opinion and coverage in the media, front page coverage, for several days. Of course, people were thinking about that throughout those two weeks. What other feedback did you get from the Anglo community and the Mexican community during that time?

A: The Anglo community has been very silent about it. If they have had any reactions, they've kept them. The Mexican American community... I got stopped by many, many people who were baffled, wanting to know whether it was true, wanting to know why we were doing it. Then there were quite a few, and I would say the consensus was that, "Goody goody. They had it long coming. We are so glad that somebody had the guts to do it."

M: This is the consensus in the Chicano community?

A: Right. "Goody goody." In other words, "We couldn't touch it, we couldn't contribute to it; but we're sure glad that you guys did it."

M: Why was it not fought in 1970? What was the delay?

A: Oh, well, it was Judge Guinn. Judge Guinn summarily dismissed this case. I talk about this in the speech that was published that I made to the Mexican American Educators. I dwell on this point there, because it's an important point. This is a device that is used by the federal judges. You see, it costs anyone \$15.00 (that's all it costs; very

few people know this) to file a federal law suit. The only thing costly is to cite the defendants. For instance, in the Alvarado case I think we had maybe \$600 worth of costs for citations and subpoenas, etc., etc. But it costs \$15 to file a law suit and get your day in court. But if the court summarily dismisses the case, and by "summarily" meaning without a hearing on the merits (he finds a reason, a legal technical reason and just dismisses your case), then you have to spend all your time and all your effort and a lot of money to appeal his decision to the Fifth Circuit, or the Circuit Court of Appeals. By that time you've spent all your money, you've lost your clients, the thing is cold, five years have past. This is what happened to the Alvarado Case. Judge Guinn summarily dismissed it.

M: On what grounds?

A: On the grounds that it was the governmental agency, HEW, who had the only right to sue a school district for racial discrimination, that the parents had no standing in Court to sue. He was reversed and the case was reinstated. Judge Guinn was ordered to give us discovery (because he didn't give us discovery) which led to the discovery of all of the documents that you saw in the court room. But he was ordered to give us discovery by the Fifth Circuit. But it cost us close to \$10,000 to get the case reversed. So our day in Court, the Alvarado day in Court, cost the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund close to \$10,000 compared to the \$15 that anyone else has to have to go into Federal Court. All you have done is won your day in Court. Do you see the point?

M: Yes.

A: And that was the delay.

M: And he could base that decision on something that is legally there, on the books, and it's just a device on his part?

A: He not only could, he did. We had it in the Molina case. The first Molina case was dismissed by the present Judge.

M: What is the Molina case?

A: Well, it's another school case on discrimination against employment. This is on specific employment practices. The other one was discrimination in all aspects: building, pupil assignment; and the Molina case is on hiring practices. That was dismissed, and we are on appeal. It's costing all the money and it will be years before we are in Court, if we are.

M: Is that the only way that this can be done?

A: Well, you see, what I am trying to tell you is this: This device has been used by Courts against the Mexican American movement. For instance, we sued the city of San Antonio Hemisfair. That case was to establish equality of opportunity in employment by a city. The Mexican American Legal Defense Fund took it. Judge Price or whatever, the head judge in the Western District of Texas, dismissed it summarily. It cost another \$10,000 to appeal that one. It was reversed; we got a day in Court. But it cost us \$10,000 to get our day in Court. That case was won. Now, in the Midland School District, the same thing; they dismissed it. We had to appeal the dismissal; then when we got into Court, then they ruled against us and we had to go to the Fifth Circuit on the merits. Finally we won it at the Fifth Circuit, on the merits. But you see, we've spun our wheels and spent a lot

of money that could be used for other litigation in just establishing our right to stay in Court. When you reflect on it, well, is this deliberate? I can't say that it is deliberate; I don't know. But it does have the aspects of at least that the Judges have met and discussed this and at least have knowledge that each other one is doing it, because they do it in a lot of the EEOC cases, in a lot of employment cases.

M: Let me ask you a final question, Mr. Armendariz, regarding this case. What are your present thoughts about the outcome of this case?

A: Oh, I couldn't comment on that. I haven't the slightest idea. I don't have any idea of what is going to be. I shouldn't even comment on this. I'm commenting not really about the Alvarado case. My comments have been on litigation of the Mexican American position in any arena. You see, basically what I am saying is that we have such a shortage of funding for the fight and we face so many obstacles in the Courts that takes those funds into areas where they shouldn't be spent. The final effort, or the entire effort, is jeopardized and certainly affected very adversely by that and that we just don't have the money to fight them. Every one of the things that you have told me here--the banks, the law firms--all of these people should be sued; they should be sued. All of them should be sued to end it, so we can open up the horizons for our own children. This is what we are talking about, aren't we? We're talking about opening up these horizons for our own children so they can become bank directors, so they can become directors of the utilities and make the money, so that our children have the opportunity that you and I did not have.

Now, all of that is going to take litigation and litigation has a trickle of money into it that is being eaten up by legal maneuvers on the part of these people. When you fight these people, you fight money; and it's hard. It's a hard, hard racket. To me, I'm at the end of the line. I'm not going to do too much of it any more. But I can see the others that will come in that are going to be frustrated like I am because there is no money. Then you have your own clients. The last one we had was a group of groups. They come in here and hire us to file a law suit that is very, very important to the Mexican American community, then drop it and demand money back. Not only do they leave the Mexican American community holding the bag by dropping it, they come to the lawyers who have done all this work and say, "Give us our money back." This is the kind of problems that we face.

M: You don't sound very optimistic about the future.

A: No, I am not. I'm not optimistic at all. I have no right to be optimistic. But that doesn't mean that I am saying to anybody that they shouldn't fight, and they shouldn't do their best. But I'm not optimistic; I'm not.

M: It's going to be a hard fight.

A: It's going to be a hard fight, it's going to be very difficult, we're going to have very little results; your biggest enemies are your own group. Your own group won't help you; they won't give you a penny. They certainly won't give you any thanks. It all has to be you; you have to be dedicated, you have to understand what you are doing. Then I look back at my 25 years and I look at people like you. There are many, many others who have jobs. I say, "Golly! They're here."

Because 10, 15, 25 years ago we didn't have a Mexican American professor at UTEP. Well, there has been some progress made, so it's not all bleak and black, but it's just so slow. Somebody said that our movement should be "slow, firm, unequivocal and sound." Well, to us who are fading out of the picture that may be a good rule, but to the youngster who is grasping for equality of opportunity in a hurry, because he can't wait, I just don't know.

M: While we're at this, I want to ask you a question regarding the Chicano movement and the importance that the term "Chicano" has taken since the late 60's. When was the first time that you heard the word Chicano?

A: Oh, I remember the word Chicano years ago. I never liked it, I'd never adhere to it. I don't think that our group gave it to us; I think the Anglo gave us the name. I think that if a study is made you'll find that that's where it came from. I view the thing as an attempt on the part of our group to achieve a place in the American society that has been very difficult to achieve; to achieve dignity, to achieve equality, to achieve acceptance. I'm very, very sorry that the name Chicano... I feel that there could have been a much better designation than the name Chicano. We are labeled as "Mexicans," or "dirty Mexicans," or "Chicano," or "that group" by our own names and our place in the society. If we are going to apply for a bank director's job, the people who are going to decide whether we get it or not know that you and I are Chicano or Mexican American because of our name. It's the very essence of the whole situation that tells you this and it's an attempt by the group to present a united front

against oppression and inequality. I don't care what you call it; I really don't. It's a fight that must go on and nomenclatures are not that important to me. I don't use it myself. I invite your attention to an article by Professor Alvarez of the University of California that appeared in the Social Science Quarterly. That is one of the best explanations of the Chicano Movement that I have ever read. Not that I agree with him or not, but it certainly is very, very excellent article. I would certainly recommend it to anyone to read it, because it does bring you to the point where the Chicano movement became at least known. I've heard the word Chicano in this area for years and years, way before the professor suggests it came. I think what he is talking about is when it became famous or infamous. I know one thing; the last meeting of the LULAC National Assembly that I went to was in Denver. I went there and that shifted into a committee on violations of civil rights. The committee took three hours discussing the term and I walked out and told them, "To me it seems a shame that with so many things to talk about, so many things to decide, we've taken three hours to discuss that stupid thing. Whatever we say or do here, isn't going to change it, and I for one, resent it. I am leaving. I am not going to be with you this afternoon. It's just a waste of time. Goodbye." And that's the way I feel about it. I feel that a discussion of what the word Chicano or Mexican American or hyphenated Americans is is a waste of time. I think that the effort should be for equality of opportunity for the Spanish speaking or the Spanish surnamed, or whatever you want to call yourselves. I think that the thrust should be to achieve equality of opportunity in the United States as

soon as possible for our group, and I don't think we should waste time discussing the nomenclature.

M: Mr. Armendariz, I want to thank you very much for your time.