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Interview no. 731

Josefina C. Rodríguez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Josefina C. Rodriguez (1948-)
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 6, 1981
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 731
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 731

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua, reared in Clint, Texas; attended U.T. El Paso; first mayor of San Luis, Arizona.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical information; growing up in Clint, Texas and ethnic relations there; work experiences in San Luis; how she became involved in politics; problems having a career and being a wife and mother; experiences as mayor; her ideas on education and problems she will deal with as a member of the school board.

Length of interview: 1 hour Length of transcript: 34 pages

Josefina C. Rodriguez
by Sarah E. John
October 6, 1981

J: Usually we start out with your personal background, so could you tell us where and when you were born?

R: I was born September 13, 1943, in Juarez, Mexico. My family had a business in Mexico. My Dad had a very great idea about education, what it should be. At that time they were having a lot of problems placing my older brothers and sisters in schools because of lack of space, so he sold his business. And it was very easy for him to immigrate the family at that time. They had previously lived in Clint. He was immigrated, so he just had to immigrate the family. He just went back to his old place of employment, which was on a farm. He still lives there. We went through the Clint elementary school system, the Clint high school system, and [I] attended UTEP for two years.

J: Were you already born when the family came over?

R: I was two years old, I was two years old. I was the last of the family [born in Mexico]. There's two younger ones that were born here in El Paso. I was the last one, I was two years old. So I always consider myself really...well, I am an American citizen, I'm a naturalized citizen. But I consider myself native born, almost. And [my father] instilled in us, I don't know, he had the idea about education. And he decided, "We are going to be in the U.S., you are going to learn English." He didn't go for all those hand-outs or any kind of thing. He was going to make it on his own for his family, and

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he instilled those values in us that we still hold, you know.

J: What kind of business did he have in Juarez before he came back here?

R: He sold coal, and at that time it was a big thing, you know, 'cause in a lot of places they still..and they still don't have electricity. So, during the winter all it is is a...it was a good business.

J: Did he ever say anything about it being hard for him to adjust to working for somebody else after being a businessman?

R: No. He never seemed to regret it. I think my mom was the one that every once in a while would comment about how easier it was to be self-employed. And there were hard times because farm work did not pay that well and there was eight of us, and he was putting all of us through school. But I think now he can look back on it and be proud.

J: And your father's name was Cuellar?

R: Primitivo Cuellar.

J: Was he originally from Juarez, and your mother?

R: No. My mom is from Chihuahua and my dad is from Bolanes, Jalisco.

J: Did you know how their families eventually got up to northern Mexico?

R: My dad's family immigrated young and then he lived in Colorado, stayed for a while, and then went back to Juarez and that's where he met my mom. But I don't know the past history.

J: What are some of the first recollections of growing up in Clint? Clint is a very small place, even now. What was life

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like when you were a child growing up in Clint?

R: Oh, nice, free. One of my favorite pasttimes was rolling a tire and stuff, you know, and we had tire swings. And it was just great. Probably it was very hard for them; for me it was nice. (Chuckles) It was a free life, no responsibilities. Oh, and later my dad, we had the commissary there on the farm, so all of us worked. We had our responsibilities as far as knowing that we had to put in our own work. We did have set hours, of course, or schedules, but all of us knew that we had to clean shelves, and stock shelves, and sell and stuff. So we developed that early contact with people, you know, since we had a knowledge of numbers and that.

J: That's fantastic.

R: It really is. I think that's what got me started on wanting to work with people. Especially it was during the Bracero Program, first of all, and then later it was just regular farm workers. And so we kind of served as interpreters and everything else, you know. When we started going to school and could read and write, we would make out their money orders and just all kinds of things.

J: Did you hear any stories from the braceros themselves, why they decided to come to the United States?

R: Well, it was the same thing. What they were doing was just sending their money back. And a lot of them, that's where they bought their own land over there, and animals, and that's their livelihood now, I'm sure. But that was the idea. They all had this Bohemian air about them, you know. They used to think

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back about what it was like in their land and all, but they knew they were going back. But I don't know, it made growing up kind of interesting; never bored. (Laughs)

J: When you were growing up there, you grew up apparently with a lot of Anglo kids in Clint. Did you ever feel any different being around them or did they make you feel any different, or did you perceive yourself as different?

R: No, not at all. There was about 20 of us that went from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and it was just one big happy family. I never felt that thing, I guess it was because I was the youngest one, the last one on the line. And my brothers and sisters picked that up, I guess they went through some kind of transition. But by the time I came along I was into the mores, you know. They taught me the language, so I didn't go into first grade not knowing anything at all. And I don't know, we were a lot into watching TV, English TV. And to me it wasn't hard at all. I never felt like they excluded me or anything else.

J: What was the ratio there?

R: Well, at that time I guess you could say it was 50/50. Later it got to be more Mexicans than Anglos, but at that time it was about 50/50.

J: Were the teachers you had in school mostly Anglo or Mexican American?

R: No, they were Anglos.

J: That you recall, did you ever feel anything on the part of the teachers?

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R: No. Like I say, my dad's got that idea about education, you know. I think if we had disobeyed or something in school we weren't going to go home and tell, 'cause we would get it there too. I mean, so it was just the thing of you obey. You were there to learn and you were going to learn. And I was lucky I guess to have nice teachers. I never felt that they were mean or being unfair. So I didn't have any problems. I could look back on all the teachers and I can't pick out one that I would say, "Oh, what a meany." And then there were a lot of teachers that my other brothers and sisters had gone through, so they kind of looked after us, you know, 'cause they knew. And then we do come from....I don't mean to brag, but we're a pretty bright family, so they would always talk about my older brother, my older sister, how good they had done. So they kind of motivated you to do the same. It worked against one of my brothers because though he's very bright, he was not as easy to lead as the rest of us. And so he kind of said, "Well, why are you comparing me to the others? I am me," you know. But it can work both ways. It can either serve as an incentive or it can work against, and you're going to rebel against someone telling you, "Your brother did so well, how come you're doing this?" But it worked in my case. I mean, I'm basically I guess a docile person.

J: By the time you were dating, let's say, were the customs any different in Clint from other peoples', or from what you've read or heard from other people do you think they were pretty much the same? Was there anything more unique to the country

area?

R: Well, my Dad also had his particular ideas about what dating was. Like Tony Parra. Tony Parra used to visit the house as a friend. We knew him in school, he would visit at the house and stuff, but we never... Like we rode with him to town to school when we were coming to UTEP, we'd stop by and had a hamburger and Coke and stuff, but as a date we never went on one. It was just that kind of thing, we had that kind of a relationship. My present husband, I met him in California. I was just visiting some relatives, some cousins--something I'd never done, gone out of the home to visit through the summer. And my husband was working there and I met him. He is a farmworker and he's citrus foreman right now, and that's how I met him and so I started dating him. That was really my first experience in dating as such, that I could go out with him. And even then my sister went along with us. (Chuckles) So my Dad also instilled that idea in us, that you don't just make a date and can be sure that you're going to be able to go without taking one of your sisters to go along with you and stuff like that.

J: Was there any mixed dating at all there, with the Mexican and Anglo kids?

R: No. Though there was not that racist feeling, I think they kept pretty much to themselves, each one.

J: That's interesting. When you were up here in college, what was your major?

R: Education. But even then I wanted to specialize in special education. I went through the disadvantaged child education

syndrome and wanted to find out all about 'em. But I don't know, it's been frustrating also. Frustrating because sometimes you wonder, like we're talking yesterday, sometimes you wonder whether it's a hindrance or an aid after a while. How many of 'em are using it as a crutch and how many are taking advantage of it and trying to develop their own potential?

So after a while when Inter-American Studies came along I really got into it. I wanted to find out more about the culture--not just my family's ideas, but what the whole culture was like, the mores. And that's what really got me interested in Inter-American Studies. And I really liked it.

J: When you first started out in education, was that something that perhaps was only acceptable because you were a woman--not to you personally, perhaps, but let's say to your family?

R: Maybe. No, at that time I can honestly say that, yes, it had a lot to do. I think you grow up with that idea that girls grow up to be teachers, yeah. And I think it had a lot to do because after a while I decided that while I did want to get involved with people and maybe in education, that wasn't THE thing, you know.

J: When you were in Inter-American Studies did you think of doing anything different, then, after studying? I know you said you wanted to study the culture, but did you think in terms of going beyond just being a teacher?

R: No, no, no, I thought about government very seriously. My husband now teases me 'cause I used to think about the Latin

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American countries, you know, not just Mexico. I had friends from Chile while I was here at the school. I had friends from Chile, from Peru, and so that really got to me, you know, I wanted to go to those places. And so I said, "Well, what better way?" And so I thought about government, I thought about education in Inter-American Studies--you know, specializing in one of those areas. As it happened of course right now I got involved in politics, without meaning to. (laughs)

J: You said you attended college two or three years. Did you meet your husband in between the time you were in college already?

R: No, no, no. I met him between my junior year in high school and my senior year.

J: I see. So you had known him a couple years before you started college.

R: Yes.

J: When you did decide to get married and go to join him in Yuma...am I right, in Yuma?

R: Yes. He came down and got married here. He did go out of his way. (Laughter)

J: Did you feel when you got married that that was going to end your aspirations as far as a career?

R: I think I wanted to believe that. I think I wanted to...at that time of course I was going through my mom's death. She was the first death in the family and it was a very hard road. And I think I was ready to settle down. I thought that I wanted some peace and all this thing. Of course after a while

I did. For four years I stayed home and I had my first two kids. After a while it wasn't enough, though, 'cause I was always involved and I knew that there had to be something else. So first I worked at a bank for a couple of months and then along came a part-time job at the post office, which I thought was ideal because having the small kids and the hours were real good, the pay was real good. So I think I was going to be earning as much working three hours at the post office than I was working all day at the bank, so you couldn't beat that. So that's how it all started. I took the test and I passed, and I started working for the post office.

And one thing leads to another. Right now there are not very many people that want to get involved in San Luis. A lot of them are too, you know, on their own, they want to be left alone in all aspects. So first, what happened was, we formed a sanitary district, 'cause we don't have [a] sewer yet. We formed the sanitary district and the supervisors got in touch with a number of people that they felt would get involved. And of course it would go to the federal agencies, which is how I first got involved. [The] sanitary district was formed by the county supervisors, and after that the same group started talking about incorporation. All monies were federal revenue sharing, everything was going to the county office, and we were getting very little back in [the] way of services. Our streets would get graded maybe once a month if at all, or watered about two or three times a year. We started having a lot of delinquency, a lot of robberies from across the border. And it

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was just getting to be a real, real problem. The county sheriff's office were doing what they said was all they could do, which wasn't enough. They would patrol, and of course it's 25 miles between Yuma and San Luis. So there was one car patrolling. Every time that car left town the kids knew that the town was without any law, so they really ransacked the place. I mean, it was just getting real, real bad.

J: What years are we talking about? Did you move from Yuma to San Luis after living in Yuma a few years?

R: No, no, no. I'm sorry, I think everytime I say Yuma I'm talking about the Yuma area. When I got married I went to San Luis. And I went to San Luis, Sonora, Mexico. That's where I lived for three years. My husband already had his home. And that also has a little history of it's own. It's right close to my mother-in-law's. And so of course, you know, my dad had deep feelings about what family and all was, but theirs are even deeper. (Chuckles) I mean, you talk about extended families. And so I went through that period, and I think I survived it pretty well. My mother-in-law [and I have] a very good relationship. But I think it took my moving to San Luis, Arizona and a little bit further for it to get really good; 'cause we used to stand each other, but there were little problems that I think everybody goes through.

J: So even though you were of Mexican descent there were still some problems.

R: Oh, yeah.

J: So then when you moved from there to San Luis in Arizona,

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that's when you started working for the bank and the post office?

R: Right.

J: And did you find it unusual for a woman, and a Mexican American woman, to be working in those kinds of positions, or was that pretty common?

R: No. In the bank that was the thing. All the girls working at the bank are all girls that started working in the bank in San Luis, Sonora. And then when they built the Valley Bank, they already had their immigration papers, so they started working over there with the experience that they had. And so no, that wasn't the... Even now I find myself in a lot of meetings where I'm the only woman, but I've gotten used to it. You know, the first few times it was kind of strange and I used to think about what other ladies would probably say. But now I don't care because I know that I'm doing my thing and somebody's got to do it.

J: What years are we talking about when you started working with the sanitation and the incorporation and all that?

R: Okay, we're talking about 1977, the sanitary district, and then right after that we started talking about incorporation, looking at the pros and cons.

J: Who were on these committees? What kinds of people were on these committees?

R: Businessmen basically, and mostly merchants. Course they were looking after our special interests.

J: What interesting experiences do you recall about getting

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incorporated? I mean, did you have a lot of flack from people in Yuma itself or from the state?

R: We have a very interesting problem in San Luis that we have about a 2,000 population, and there's only about 100 registered voters. And that's because a lot of people don't want to be citizens. Like we were saying yesterday, there's a lot that [think] the benefits of having a dual citizenship are better than...

J: Going and getting your papers.

R: Right. And so we got that from a couple of people that were... I don't know, they were afraid that those hundred people were controlling the destinies of two thousand. And our argument was that they could be citizens. And the great majority, a lot of them could be citizens if they wanted to. And so it's very ironic, because one of the persons that most opposed the movement is now building...he's a contractor, and he's building our town hall. And he's done a complete turnaround, you know. Well, he can see now the benefits. What happened was, they were afraid that the merchants were going to manipulate, because most of the merchants are from out of town. They have their business there in San Luis, but a lot of them live in Summerton, that's the town between Yuma and San Luis, Arizona. And so they were afraid that we were just going to be serving as puppets, you know carrying out the wishes of the merchants. I guess now they've decided that that's not the way it's happening. And so now we've got a pretty good relationship with everyone.

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J: So the town was incorporated in what year, then?

R: 1979.

J: When the city was incorporated, is that about the time that the political system of the town started coming up? And you are the first mayor?

R: I am the first mayor.

J: When did all these things happen, when they decided to set up the city council and what have you, and how did you get involved in deciding to run for mayor?

R: Okay, well, it's no ball. I got involved in the sanitary district, and like I said, a lot of people just don't want to get involved. And so when the same county supervisors...that's the procedure, the county supervisors appoint the first council. Okay, the incorporation movement was basically the same that was already serving on the sanitary district. And so we had to get petitions, we [had] to get a petition signed from three-fourths of the population that wanted incorporation, regardless...they had to be home owners, they didn't have to be registered voters. So we did get those. And that's what our argument was also, you know, that there was a couple of people opposing the movement, but the great majority was for it. You know, when we got around to telling them the benefits of incorporation, they were for it. And so that had a lot to do with how the case was decided, because there was a litigation involved.

And so when I got involved in the incorporation movement I didn't know whether I wanted to be on the council or not, but I

felt that the first time it was going to be an appointed position for eight months from September until May when we had our first election. And so I said, "Well, I'll go ahead and serve on that first council just to kind of get the thing started." And so when time came for election, I was the last one getting my papers I think till the last half hour, 'cause I still...well, I've got my family. And though I like to get involved and I like to help, I also want to think about my family. And I was being away quite a while, especially those first few months, that eight months that I was appointed. [I] was running all over the place, going to Yuma meeting with the attorney, 'cause we didn't have a manager at that time. So I was doing both jobs--town clerk and mayor--and I had my job and my kids. So that was kind of creating a problem there. They wanted to help but they also knew that they wanted me at home, so that was creating a problem.

So I was getting this line about, "It's for the good of the town, you've got to run again." So I said, Okay, two more years." So I ran. And what happens is that we run, the council picks the mayor. So my council really was the one that elected me, it's not the people. It's very interesting because it's six men, so I felt it was a double _____.

J: Why do you think they did elect you?

R: After those first eight months, and that was also an appointed position, and then the council elected me. So I don't know, I guess it was because I worked so much on the incorporation movement. There's a number of factors involved. I think the

others were merchants, they felt they didn't have the time. One of them is a local merchant and the other one is a retired postmaster. And I really can't say. I mean, I think they just felt that I had the energy, the stamina, to endure. And after those eight months, the second term, they said, "Well, you did such a good job and you have a pretty good relationship with our state, these people that you have to deal with." And so they said, "You've already built that rapport, it would be terrible if we changed it." And so they convinced me. (Chuckles) No, it's rewarding, it's frustrating, it's a little bit of everything. There's times when you say, "What the heck did I get myself into?"--other times when you wouldn't trade positions. But that's the way it is.

J: What kind of problems have you had in being the mayor of San Luis? Besides on a daily basis, is there anything that stands out perhaps that you have come across that has caused you considerable consternation?

R: Well, just the fact that the people have to be educated in the ways that government works, our government works. A lot of them still have the idea either that you're doing underhanded things, because that's the way they're used to the Mexican government doing, and that you're doing it also; and that you're probably making away with their money. A lot of them don't pay that much in taxes, but they feel [that way about] the little they've contributed. And of course we don't do it.

So it's an educational process more than anything. Every time a problem comes up you have to go into all the history

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about how things get done--you know, that I am not going to be the one person... Many times I will go to the post office where I work and they'll expect me to solve a problem or get on the phone and solve a problem on my own. And I'll say, "Well, I'll take it before the council, but that's the way it works." And stuff like that I think is what I find more frustrating, that a lot of people still, having the town manager there and I refer them to him, they think that I have the authority, the power, to get on the phone and get things done the way you do in Mexico. When you know the right people, you get the things done.

J: So it's the people themselves in the city who are expecting you to be like a one-person government.

R: [Yes.] They feel that it's a lot like in Mexico where you know the presidente and you've got your foot in the door.

J: You said there was about 2,000 people in San Luis. They are mostly Mexican American, I take it. And a major part of these people are not citizens; they are farmworkers.

R: Yes, they're resident aliens. That's their status.

J: Are there any particular problems that you have had perhaps with the fact that they are resident aliens, even though they haven't voted you or the council in themselves? What kind of relations do you have with these people?

R: No, real good. I come in contact with a lot of them through my work at the post office. One of them, when we were working towards incorporation, someone mentioned to another council member that he just couldn't see how I was going to be the

mayor, and this was just an older man. He said, "Now with you I could probably invite you to a beer and tell you my problems. But how am I going to go with her?" And stuff like that, that they feel like we're not going to know how to handle a problem.

But the relationship between me and the people I think is real real good, I think most of them. There was another person vying for the position that really campaigned, whereas I didn't. He owns a lumber yard, and he had to file bankruptcy, he's had a couple of bad dealings with people. So stuff like that that speak for themselves. So they say, "Well, if he did that to his personal business, what is he going to do to our town?" And I have not been in the position to have to prove to them because of my job. I'm assistant to the postmaster right now, so they say, "Well, she must do all right. So that helps.

J: Living there on the border, there's no river as we have here.

R: No, it's a wire fence.

J: Just wire fence. What problems if any, or what kinds of experiences have you had with undocumented workers or undocumented people in general that have come across from Sonora?

R: Not very many, not very many we can speak of. A lot of our burglaries supposedly are committed by illegals, mostly young kids. But then that's about the only thing. But undocumented workers as such, we don't have any static from them or from the people.

J: Because most of the people that work there are the resident

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aliens.

R: [Yes.]

J: Is the city right on the border like we are in El Paso?

R: Right on the border, right.

J: What kind of business relations do you have? Are there lots of stores in your town where people come across to buy, or is it the other way around?

R: No. We have a 2,000 population, and I think during the day if you took a count it'd be about six thousand. Because it's in the first place all the farm workers going in and out, they commute; and then the people doing their shopping. We're getting ready to raise our sales tax. We don't have a property tax and we're getting ready to raise our sales tax by one per cent. And we know that the burden is going to be carried by the people in Mexico, 'cause even at the high prices that we're going through, it's still cheaper. Canned goods and stuff is cheaper than in Mexico. And the people in the U.S. do their shopping like for tortillas. And we are very spoiled in that respect, we go and get our own tortillas almost every other day, and they'll be hot, and our meat and stuff like that, vegetables that we can bring across. And I'm sure a lot of people bring some that can't come across! (Laughs)

J: What kind of a setup as far as the international boundary do you have there? Do you have a port of entry?

R: Port of entry.

J: You were saying yesterday that sometimes there was a very long wait for people crossing over to come to work in San Luis,

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Arizona.

R: That's another problema that we've had with the inspectors. Some inspectors either....I don't know, you get the feeling that they have it in for the people, you know. You can get to the line and declare your citizenship, which you're supposed to do. In most cases if you can prove, they'll just ask you the questions, "Where were you born?" and this and that. Or like in the case of a naturalized citizen, when you're naturalized that should be more than sufficient, because if you can answer back. In most cases of course you'll get fooled 'cause there's a lot of people that have been here for so long that they know the language. But most of the time I think they can pretty well spot, and they don't do that. If you don't have your papers... Now this is a few inspectors, not all of them. But they get a special pleasure out of doing that. I know my sister just went thorough an experience and she was so mad, because she was coming across and she didn't have her little boy's certificate, and they made her go all the way to Yuma--she lives in Yuma--which was a 65-mile trip. And she was so mad because there she was, she works for the city, and she had her check stub and stuff. And I don't know; it happens, I know.

J: They're both citizens of the United States.

R: Yes. And it happens when there's child smuggling or whatever. But I think you can tell more or less when that's happening. And they'll...it's like I say, it's just special inspectors that have that attitude.

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J: Is it from both Mexican American inspectors and Anglo inspectors, or do you find any prejudice in that? What have you found?

R: Well, I hate to tell you this but most of them are women. Women inspectors are real, real hard. And I don't know, I think the problem should be handled once they get across. 'Cause I think if they did a study on just how many people out of all those that they give that thorough inspection to, I think it'd be a very, very small percentage, maybe even less than one percent, that are undocumented or whatever, illegals as such. And I think if they concentrated their efforts in the border patrol maybe, or once they're in the country really that you can catch them. But right there at the [border], like I say, if you did a study I'm sure that it'd be less than one percent--the ones after all that thorough searching, they'll find that you can go right ahead, and all this line has been just accumulating. And that's a very frustrating...

They haven't taken it to the town council yet--knock on wood. (Chuckles) It's still a federal problem, they still view it as a federal problem, though the council has done something. We've contacted our senators and they're looking into that 'cause there's been some complaints filed against the inspectors. And we are trying to do something about it because it doesn't make for a good relationship, even for us, you know. You go across the border and it's very frustrating to have to wait for two hours to get across.

J: Is it a one-lane or two-lane?

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R: Well, they have two lanes coming in, but many times they'll close it, so... That's another thing, sometimes we wonder, there's one lane and there's a line piling up on the Mexican side. You know, they could very easily get another inspector and get the line across, and they don't do it. So sometimes like I say, you almost get the feeling that they get a special pleasure out of doing it.

[PAUSE]

J: How long have you been married?

R: Eleven years.

J: And mayor since '79?

R: '79.

J: How did your husband react, number one, to your getting a job after you were married a few years, and then getting involved in politics, and then becoming mayor of the town? He's from Mexico, and I'm not sure how men in Mexico react to this. I'm thinking they think a little differently, maybe they're not quite as used to that. That's one thing, and then the fact that he works in agriculture and you're working in office, there might be something there, too, that I'm not sure of. I'm thinking of all these things at the same time. But how did he react first when you decided just to go to work after you'd been married a few years?

R: It took some doing, it took some doing. I sold him on the idea that it was light work and all this stuff. I did have somebody helping at the house with the kids. And it's very contradictory, because while he accepts that I work...like in

that case, I finally sold him on the idea that I wanted to get out, and that it wasn't fair, that I had the knowledge to have some kind of a job, hold some kind of a job, and that I wasn't doing it; when a lot of women there, it's a great majority that work out in the fields. I finally buttered him up real good and he let me work.

It didn't work out because my youngest baby was less than a year old and so he wasn't progressing, and I could tell that it was hindering. I was also not very happy at the job. It's a very stressful job at the bank, handling a lot of money and a lot of responsibility. The pay isn't that good, the hours are long. So after a while I decided whether...is this where I wanted to be, or I'd rather be at home. So when that job came out, the post office job, it was just the answer for me.

But anyway, it's been very contradictory because he accepts that I work, and at the same time sometimes I get the feeling like I think all women that work [get], not just me, 'cause I know that I come from a lot of others and they have to get home and do this and do that and do their chores. Maybe [the husbands] will help out, but they don't help out in the ...like you go half and half as far as splitting the expenses and everything else, but they don't go half and half as far as doing the household work. And so I don't think I'm the only person in that, I think all the ones that work have that frustration. And sometimes I'd say, "Well, what the heck. I'm just going to quit doing anything and just stay at home do my responsibilities." Of course I won't do it. (Chuckles)

But anyway, as far as being mayor, he thought that it was my responsibility. Because I really got involved, I really got involved in the incorporation. I think I knew more about it, more about the process, than a lot of people did. And I had things going for me. The county supervisors knew me, it was just the ideal thing, you know. And he said, "It wouldn't be fair for me to keep you from it." Now this second term I wasn't going to run and he was another one that was after me. He said, "You started all these projects. You started on our street lighting project." We didn't have any street lighting at all, we started on that. We started on our sewage project, we started on some paving. And he said, "It's just not fair for you to have started everything and not see the completion." So he was also pushing me for it. And I said, "Well, if I go through with it, you're going to have to help every once in a while." That's why he doesn't say anything, not now. (Chuckles) He pushed me, he pushed me into it. I mean, I wanted to do it, you know, that wasn't the idea. It was just that I had my list of priorities and I know that I want my kids to know what it's like to have a mother at home at certain times. But as it is, it hasn't hindered them at all, they've enjoyed it. They also wanted me to run, so I think they got a special kind of a kick saying that their mother was the mayor. (chuckles)

J: You were telling me a little bit yesterday about the fact that you had run for this position on the school board and some of the problems that the school board had been having. I wonder

if you would talk just a little bit about that, how you got involved in that and what kinds of things you've come up against being on the school board?

R: Sometimes I think I'm beating my head against the wall, because the main problem is the language, the lack of the use of the English language. And that's been my main complaint. My kids did real well. They went through a kind of a control situation where they had a control group, and they put them through no aids, no Spanish speaking aids, just their Anglo teacher. It was a maximum of 20 kids per teacher, so it was just the ideal setup. And they are bright, so they went along right through.

And then the last year that I had them there at the public school they were falling back because they went out and mixed all the classes again. Because the idea of the superintendent, of the administrator, was to have those kids in that control group, after they got up to that grade level, to kind of serve as [an] example for the other kids. And it wasn't working that way because they were in the minority, you know. They had about three kids of that group, and there was about 30 other kids. So it was easier for the three to go along with the 30 than for the 30 to follow the three.

And in my own case, my oldest boy, who was a fourth grader, was becoming...he was talking back to the teacher, something that he never did, and the problem was that he was bored. He was bored because they'd pace them, they went at their own pace, and they were far beyond their fourth grade level. So when they put them in fourth grade work, they

already knew what there was to know. And the answer was to take them out. They are now in parochial school. He's a fifth grader doing seventh grade work. He gets pulled out and he's doing seventh grade math and language. And that's because he's got that advantage right now going for him, that he can do that--get pulled out of that class and put in different levels of learning. And his problem is gone. I was called in on that because he was talking back, and that really surprised me because that is not his nature, even at home. And the problem was of course that he was bored, and he had to do something. And now they've channeled his energies in the right directions.

J: When you were aware of this position being opened on the school board, how did you get involved in that and why?

R: It was time for reelection, and the other person with a Hispanic surname was not going to run because he felt also that he was always getting out-voted. And I had run the previous term and I had not won, so I felt I was not going to do it either. And since I had just pulled out my kids, they felt that since I was so discontented with the system and since I had been a high vote getter at the last election, that it was my right. I was always aware of the fact that my surname would help their cause. And I say theirs, because it's always been like the great majority of voters for that district...we're talking about the Gadsden School District. Gadsden and San Luis is combined, we don't have a school in San Luis right now, it's Gadsden. And they are farmers. So they do go out to vote on the election day, something, that a lot of Mexican voters

don't do--that apathy.

Which is something that I would like to get into too, because my husband was on the Parents' Advisory Council. They formed their own group. It's a state requirement that if you get those funds for migrant education you have to [have] this parents' Advisory group that kind of counsels the migrant parents, [they] have their own meetings. And so talking about apathy, my husband worked real, real hard to push for a five-man board, it's a three-man board now. And he worked real hard and finally got it through the right petitions, the right signatures, and everything else. And when it went up on the ballot, not enough people showed up. And talk about apathy hurting, boy, that was it, 'cause we came so close. 'Cause the margin wasn't that great, it was about 10 votes. And I could almost name you the 10 people that I know didn't go vote. (Laughs) And so that really hurt. So when they came up with this, a lot of people felt that the answer was not to accept to be on that board. They felt like it was mocking, that they were mocking the Mexican people.

I didn't feel that way. In the first place, I always felt that there was a conflict between the other person that was on that school board--his last name is Gardea, and he can't identify with the Mexican people. He's too much of an Anglo, and the only thing that he's got going for him is his Mexican surname; but he doesn't identify with the people, you know. So I think they always had it against him because he wasn't on either side. And with me, they knew where I stood. They knew

that I was going to fight for...not for the causa, because I don't believe in that, but I was going to fight for what I felt was good for the Mexican child--which was a stronger use of the English language [and] better teaching methods as far as migrant education, bilingual education. And so with me they know where I stand. And I accepted the appointment on those grounds, that we do something to better the teaching methods. If not, I was going to resign.

And this year they thought my kids were going to come back to school. They can't come back now because they're too much into that kind of a setup where they're right now at that parochial school, where they get individualized instruction. So now it would even be worse than when I pulled them out. And I wouldn't think of it because they're doing real good.

J: I know that the stance you take on education and the use of English maybe isn't as popular as other right now. Have you gotten a lot of flack from people about that?

R: Well, if I poll the people, all of them are unhappy with the fact their kids are getting out of eighth grade without learning English. It's a very very big problem because while they want all these considerations for the Mexican child and the culture, they want the end result being truly bilingual people. And yet they don't want the responsibilities that go with it. They just want, like I said, the end results. And you're not going to have that. In my own case I want my kids to be bicultural and bilingual.

J: How would you solve that? Apparently the schools aren't

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meeting this need. Do you have any ideas about this?

R: (Chuckles) No, that's what we're just getting into. Like we did from that panel. It's made up of two school board members, myself being one of them; and two administrators, the administrator and the migrant administrator; and one parent from each community, Gadsden and San Luis; and two teachers. And I know that a lot of teachers are unhappy because they've got all these things imposed on them, you know--"You're going to teach them this way and this way," and they're not really happy with it either. And so I don't know what's going to come out of it, and it's going to take a lot of studying. 'Cause I realize the culture that they come from, and in many cases, like I say in my own case, we were lucky because my dad had his own idea about what education was. Some parents don't. They're farm workers. They leave at four o'clock in the morning and they come back at about five or six. They don't have the time to have the little kid there asking them for help with his homework, and many times they just push him away--things that don't make for a better education process. So all of that we have going against us, and it's a toughy.

J: I remember yesterday you said that you were lucky in that you were taught in school in English, but that you learned your Spanish at home and learned about your culture at home.

R: Right, right. And that's the same thing that I'm doing with my kids. The first set of books that I bought them was tales in Spanish. And right now my oldest is going on 11 and my youngest is eight; and they both read and write Spanish, and

they haven't had an hour's classroom instruction in Spanish. So that's something that I think each parent is going to take upon himself. And like I say, maybe I'm an extinct species as far as that goes, because I still think that culture belongs at home. You're going to teach them, because what they're learning in school is not really THE culture, because they're getting exposed to the other, to the Anglo culture, too, so it's just a mixture.

Like in my own case, my mother was a teacher in Chihuahua before she got married to my dad, so she had her own ideas about folklore, about everything else, you know, that she passed along to us. And my husband went to Hermosillo to school and he got beyond what a lot of other Mexican parents go through, you know. He went through the equivalent of high school and was in technical school when he got out, and also just the idea [that] he wasn't getting the support from his family that he needed, really. He had to work, hold a job and work, and the expenses of boarding, being away from home, was just too much. So he immigrated right before the age of 21 and so he got out of school at that time. So I've got that going for me, too, that he's got a little more idea, you know, as to what it is that the kids are going through that other parents don't have. A lot of other parents are just seeing the schools as a kind of a baby sitting agency, where they're going to get pulled out as soon as that age permits them. And so I'm going to have to get back to you as to the results.

J: It's very interesting because the same kinds of criticisms are

being spoken all over. I'm just curious in your situation what's going to come of it, if there's any new ways of teaching or how you're going to get to the federal government or the state or whoever imposes these kind of teaching methods for the teachers, and what's going to come of it later.

R: Well, we're hoping that there's some kind of a home rule that will permit each school district to decide for themselves what they're going to do. See, because what we have is a migrant program that's not really...I don't think the migrant program is meant to be administered the way we're doing it in our own school. I don't think we're going about it the right way. I went through a migrant conference last year in Oregon, and what I was hearing there was just totally different than what we've seen at our school. I mean, migrant monies are supposed to be for bilingual education, for teacher's aides, for those kids that need that help--newly immigrated kids that are about 10, 11 years old, not for kindergartners. That's where I think the problem is going to get solved. You get your first crop of kindergartners and expose them to that English. Now because I do realize about when I went through school [it] was a totally different time than the ones that we're going through right now, and maybe they are going to have to set aside an hour for cultural instruction or whatever. But I do think that if they concentrated on the kindergartens, on that generation, I think eventually we'll have to run out of the ones that are now exposed to all that Spanish, and then we'll get our new generation. To me that's the answer.

Because like I was telling Dr. Segal yesterday, I think the kids don't see it as a humiliation or a cultural shock. It's part of the learning process. I think, like my own little girl, she's four years old and she speaks a lot of English. She speaks mostly in Spanish but she does speak a lot of English because of myself, and the kids and my husband. And to her the idea of going to school is learning to speak English, and I think a lot of kids. Because most of the kindergartners that we're getting in Gadsden have been here for at least two, three years. So I think most of the kids have that in mind, that they're going to learn English when they go to school. And so it's, to me, they're not getting what they're wanting, even the kids.

But I'm [going to] get back to you, because after these discussions that we [went] through this year, we're going to decide either we do something or I'm going to get out of the school board!

J: Well, it's really interesting. You're young and you've gone through all kinds of different experiences. You've lived all along the border, though, all your life. How do you feel living on the border, how do you perceive it?

R: Well, I don't think I can...you can't say THE BORDER, because I think like in El Paso the kids more or less choose their entertainment, choose what they want and with the parents' guidance. And like in my own case in San Luis, it's not there. I mean, they get exposed to one kind of behavior, and I hate to tell you this, but their kind of behavior isn't the best. Like

my kid's behavior in school that last before I pulled him out, he got straightened out when I pulled him out of that medio ambiente that they _____, you know. It's part of the peer pressure, is what it is. And if you don't go along with what other kids are doing, you're a so and so. And that's what my boy was going through. He was being a goody goody and all this. And now his teacher in parochial school says [that] he's a leader and the kids respect him, but he's also naughty enough to where they know that he's not [such a goody goody].

And it's that kind of thing we're exposed to in the border. And right now if you ask me, if I had my way, I don't think I'd live in San Luis right now because I do not like the surroundings that the kids are growing up in. As much as I want to help and as much as I want to change things, you've got to also have the cooperation from the people, you know. And it's a losing battle. You win some, lose some. You see improvement...that's what I was telling my husband. You see improvement as far as commercial; economic improvement, you see it, it's there, and growth is going to be there. But what about cultural? And I'm very concerned about that, because, I mean, what the heck? You can make all the money in the world and not be worth a darn.

So as far as I'm concerned, if my kids were in Yuma, they'd be exposed to a lot. I work and I cannot take them back and forth to their sports. They want to participate in sports and I'm a firm believer in that, in getting involved in extracurricular activities. I think you would imagine that I

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am. And I just can't bring them. We have a car pool, and so the car pool cannot wait around for them to get through and then take them back or whatever. And they get frustrated too because they want to get involved. And so, I don't know, sometimes I don't know where I'm headed, because if I had my way, like I say, I'd probably move to Yuma so that they could be close to their activities. In San Luis it's...

J: You're sort of isolated.

R: Really. No, like we've got tennis courts and basketball courts, but the kinds of kids...and I don't mean to label them or anything, it's just what they've been exposed to, you know. And like I say, I wish I could change them. Many of them don't want to be changed, though. They're happy, they're happy being la raza. (Chuckles) And it's one of those things you have to learn to live with, I guess.

J: Well, I think it's been a very interesting interview. I'm so glad you agreed to do it.

R: No, I get a special pleasure out of being a Mexican, you know, and my culture and all, but at the same time you have to accept the things that are wrong with it and take those that are good, I believe. And there's some kids that just feel like... Okay, like there was a student aide that was telling me at Gadsden, she was telling me that she was going to all this bit telling the kids, you know, that they have to learn English because they're going to be competing with Anglos for jobs and all this. And a smart aleck kid gets up and says, "Viva Zapata, viva Mexico. What do we care about English?"--stuff like that,

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you know, that you get. Like I said, I don't want my kids exposed to that, because that peer pressure is very much there. And as much as they'll go home and listen to what we have to say, that thing is stronger than what either my husband and I can say.

J: Well, thank you so much for giving me the interview, and I hope that you will keep in touch with me. I want to hear what's happening with the school board.

END OF INTERVIEW