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Interview no. 1685

Salvador Avila

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Salvador Avila

Interviewer: Yolanda Chávez Leyva

Project: Voices from the Border Project

Location: Cafe Mayapan in El Paso, TX

Date of Interview: July 21, 2016

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Transcript No.: 1685

Transcriber/Summary /Ana Urías

Summary of Interview: Salvador was born in Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. All of his siblings were born in the United States. They came to El Paso, Texas in 1967 when he was in seventh grade and arrived to Canutillo, Texas where he went to school. His father was a farm worker and his mother was a home keeper that would work in Mountain Pass Cannery during the summers. His siblings and he would work in the fields picking mostly onion but also weeds and chilies. He had seven siblings but one has passed away. He had a terrible time in school. He did not know any English. He recalls that every Monday a social studies teacher would flip a penny. If they were Chicano, he would swat them once. If they were black, he would swat them twice. If they were Anglo, he would let them pass. He feels that there were always little incidents like this that at the moment were not significant but in retrospect were appalling. Their parents would not notice because they would not bring it up at home. They would get bullied often and be called *mojados*, wetbacks, and burrito eaters, be told that they should not be there, and get beat up. If students spoke Spanish they would get lunch detention and be swatted. In their case, the punishments were not as severe because they were ESL (English as a Second Language) students. He entered Canutillo High School in 1969. There were many Mexican students, some Anglo, and not very many black students. There were two main paths that you could follow. One focused on going to college and the other had programs geared to vocational skills. Most of the migrant students were placed in the vocational programs because it was assumed that they would not go to college and that they were good with their hands. The programs were Building and Trades, Welding, and FFA (Future Farmers of America). He was placed in the Building and Trades program. He recalls an incident when a black student broke a shovel and the teacher told him that he would be charged for the broken equipment. His classmates stood up for him because an Anglo student had previously broken a drill bit and nothing had been said to him. Around 1971, Salvador and a group of friends ran a newspaper called *Underground Newspaper*. After football practice, he would work as a janitor in the school and would place a newspaper inside each locker. No one knew who was responsible. In it they would write about issues occurring in the school including treatment of students and how school money was been handled. In eleventh

grade, he entered the Upward Bound program under Pedro Duarte. He feels that his experience there was an eye opener. He recalls walking out of a Spanish class and spending the semester in the library reading and studying instead. He remembers when they created a Socialist party to run for Student Council. The principal blocked their candidates for president and vice-president but Salvador ended up winning Sergeant of Arms. He only went to the first meetings when he decided to leave the council. When he was 15, 16 he entered the movement and began looking at Corky's *La Cruzada (por la Justicia)*. His now deceased brother had gone to Colorado and was part of *La Cruzada* there. Pedro brought *El Teatro Campesino* to Upward Bound. They began reading everything they could about the Chicano Movement to become more aware of what was going on. After high school he left to the University of Oregon and was a member and president of MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*). He recalls that the people asking for money on the streets were white. This was very impactful and he experienced a lot of culture shock while living there. He remembers a locale called Mama's Place [??] that would allow you to eat for free if you washed dishes and cleaned. He liked it because the atmosphere was different, more advanced, more liberal, more open. He left Oregon after a year because he fell in love and came back to El Paso with her. He continued studying at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and acquired a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and Portuguese. He has graduate hours in Bilingual Education. He left to Texas Woman's University to attempt a Master's of Library Science but did not finish. He returned to El Paso and got married. He worked for the Marriott, Hilton, and Westin for a few years. He became a librarian in San Elizario under Darlene Brown and was in charge of district libraries for Dell City, Fort Hancock, Tornillo, and San Elizario. She encouraged him to become a teacher in Ysleta through an alternative certification program around 1987. He was a bilingual teacher for eleven years and is grateful to Ysleta for providing them with the resources, education, and support to be successful. Eventually, many teachers left the school because of issues with the principal. He returned to UTEP for a Master's degree in Special Education. He worked in Canutillo for a year and then went to Gadsden District in Santa Teresa High School in New Mexico. He has been there for 15 years as a Special Education teacher. He is currently teaching a Life Skills class. He talks about the community of the school and the relationship between the students. He also taught an Education class in El Paso Community College for three years. He discusses his experience there and how different it was working with adult students. He feels that there has been some improvement in the struggles in education related to the community and that we need to help those that are part of the silent minority. He recalls being part of *Chicanos Unidos* with Aceves and Arroyos and having the *Escuelita Tlatelolco* in Ascarte Park in the late seventies. They would set up a board and teach the students a little bit of communism, how to save money, economics, about food shortages, having better diets, exercises, and such. They wanted the students to see education as something used for personal benefit. The students were engaged and they had a lot of support from their parents. He believes that education is not just a piece of paper that tells you that you have graduated but it is personal liberation. He talks about his father and how he has an incredible amount of knowledge even though he never went to school. He acquired it through his life experiences. He feels that having a title is necessary to fight within the system but that at the same time recognize that we are all learning and have knowledge and experiences. He feels that if we look at education in a more open way and as a journey we will all be successful. He hopes that those that went through the system come back and make a difference.

Length of interview 50 minutes

Length of Transcript N/A