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**MS 314. College of Liberal and Fine Arts Oral History Program Collection**

**Rebecca Flores Transcript, March 31, 2006**

**Aaron Culp:** My name is Aaron Culp. I am interviewing Rebecca Flores for the College of Liberal and Fine Arts Oral History Program, and if you could just say your name and where you were born we'll start over.

**Rebecca Flores:** Okay, my name is Rebecca Flores, I was born in Atascosa County which is just south of San Antonio, in a rural community. Two parents who were both living on farms and stuff. My father was a farmer. He farmed his own land, and, as a young child I, worked in the fields inside Atascosa County, migrated inside the state of Texas, and then one year migrated into the Midwest as migrant farm workers.

**AC:** Where in the Midwest?

**RF:** We went up to, I believe only Wisconsin, and we did some work with beets and onions and cherries, and worked the whole summer, came back. And, it was during a really bad period of farming in Texas; there was a real drought period. So my father, who was a farmer, couldn't survive on that piece of land where he worked. And none of the small farmers could, so we had to migrate. It was my father and mother, and all of my brothers-- my brother and my sisters migrated into Wisconsin where we worked-- where all of us worked, and came back at the end of the season to return to school with a small amount of money.

**AC:** Were there a lot of breaks in school? Like did you-- I mean how many, uh, -- did you miss a lot of school? Did you ever fall behind?

**RF:** No, my mom and dad really believed in education and so all the work that we did was done outside of school hours. And we were all girls. We were five girls and one boy. And so my father-- my mother actually graduated from high school, which was kind of unusual. She graduated in the '30s-- kind of unusual for that. My dad did not. And so we kid-- I guess from coming out of mom and dad I guess both believed that we should have an education and so, so all of our work was done outside school days and outside, you know, in the summertime, and so we were, we had actually, pretty good attendance in school, and so we stayed there. All of us were pretty good students. We liked school, and so we excelled in that.

**AC:** Did you--you mentioned that you had four sisters and a brother?

**RF:** Four sisters and a brother.

**AC:** And did you all-- you all worked in the field?

**RF:** We all worked. By the time my brother came along, though, we were pretty much out of working on the farms, and my younger sister I think, also. But my older sisters, down to me, and my younger sister, we all worked. Along with my mother and my father.

**AC:** And that was-- was that primarily what your parents did?

**RF:** Yes.

**AC:** Throughout their whole life?

**RF:** Once we left the farm, which was in 19-- about '57, because my father--there was just, like, no way he

could make a living off of it. We moved into San Antonio, and I graduated. I went to high school here in San Antonio, graduated from high school here, and the rest of my family did too. So once that happened, we pretty much left the farm, and started doing, you know, odd jobs here in the city. You know, summer jobs and that kind of stuff.

**AC:** Were you guys all pretty close? Was it, everybody--

**RF:** Yeah, yeah. Our-- the rules that we lived by was that when someone graduated from high school, we went to work and supported the rest of the family. And we pretty much did all that.

**AC:** Did you go to college?

**RF:** Well what happened was, when I graduated from high school-- I went to Fox Tech High School here in San Antonio, and it was a very segregated school, it was the Mexican school--and all of the girls were trying to be secretaries, and all the boys were mechanics or woodworkers or cabinet makers. We were all kind of taught a vocation. So when I graduated from high school, I was seventeen years old. I had just turned seventeen. I immediately went to work with, at Fort Sam Houston, in the civil service jobs, which were highly coveted, 'cause they were, you know, the better-paying jobs, they were stable jobs, they had benefits and all that. And so, immediately after graduating, I started working there as a secretary over at the Fourth Army Headquarters at Fort Sam Houston, and I worked in civil service, oh, for about five years. Then I quit and used my retirement money to go to college. So I used-- I pulled all my retirement money out of civil service and with that, I started going to college. What happened, though, to us and to every other kid who went to high school at Fox Tech in the vocational program, was that we had to take--I had to take--a GED test to get into college, and so it was another barrier we had to go through to get to go to higher education. And so, which I did, and I went to St. Mary's University for undergraduate school, and graduated from there in 1970. And then went to graduate

school at the University of Michigan at the School of Social Work, and graduated from there in 1972. And my husband graduated in '73 out of the Jesuit school there in Detroit as an attorney, and so in '73 when he got out of school, when he graduated law school, we came-- we moved out to South Texas, to the lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. He started working with the ACLU down there, in '73, and I did some other kinds of work, but in '75, I started working with the United Farm Workers. The ACLU down there worked--was the legal office for the United Farm Workers, and so they did a lot of work. So my husband, Jim Harrington, at that time worked there, and then I joined the Union, full-time. I had been a volunteer with the different boycotts in Detroit when I was in Michigan, at the University. We did a lot of the grape boycotts, and lettuce boycott, as volunteers at the grocery stores. In 19-- what, '71? I met Cesar [Chavez] in Detroit, in Michigan. He went up there for a speaking tour. We got to see him at one of the union halls, I believe, and it was--we were a group of five students from Texas who were recruited to go to the University of Michigan School of Social Work, the first five Mexicans going to graduate school up there. And so--so Cesar came around, and he pretty much asked us all to not forget our roots and to return to our communities and work in our communities to, you know, to bring them out and develop leadership and all of that. And so I committed, along with some other folks, and we had about four or five young people who committed to working with the Union when we visited with Cesar that time. So then in '72, I got married, and my husband stayed one year longer at Michigan, and then we both committed to working with the Union in one fashion or other--he as an attorney, and me as a volunteer for a while, and then in 1975 I started working full-time with the Union in San Juan, Texas.

**AC:** You had mentioned that you were one of five, one of the first five Mexicans who--

**RF:** See what happened, in 1969, I believe, the-- there was a movement called the Black Action Movement at Michigan, at the University of Michigan, and it was really, a coordinated campaign between the African American students and the service employees at the University of Michigan, who got together and had a strike for wages and conditions of the employees at the University. And as part of negotiations, as a result of that

strike, one of the things that we got was recruitment of minorities into the universities, and specifically at the School of Social Work. And so when that happened, one of the persons who was there who was Mexican-American from San Antonio at the school was able to get some recruiting money and some scholarships to recruit students of Mexican origin to the University of Michigan. And so we were in the first group of students recruited as a result of the Black Action Movement Strike.

**AC:** And what was that, I mean, did you feel any tension or anything like that about being--'cause I know that it's not, being the first of anything is--

**RF:** Yeah. No, as a matter of fact, you know, I think the result of the Black Action Movement was that it really sensitized everybody to the need to have a diverse campus and so it was fine. School of Social Work was fine. It was the seventies, so of course there was a lot of action going on around the country at that time--the anti-war movement, and so there was just a lot of movements, and so I felt very, very much in my place, and was able to do--because Michigan is also a migrant state, that receives a lot of migrant farm workers--was able to do a lot of work with migrant farm workers when I was in Michigan. They also continued recruiting more and more minority students from the south and southwest to go to school there. So we really opened up the doors to a lot of minority students to go to school there. We very-- we were activists, we were not-- we were just going to do some stuff, and we did it.

**AC:** I'd like to kind of go back, and ask you-- clearly, you're very politically involved now, but when did you, and under what circumstances did you discover, I guess maybe you'd call it your political consciousness? When did you start getting that itch, I guess?

**RF:** I know-- I mean, I was asked that question yesterday, as a matter of fact. I don't know-- I really think-- I think that that whole period of course was a very active period, that anti-war movement. There was just no

escaping the fact, and so the difference between what was going on in Texas and what was going on in Michigan was to me like night and day, because as soon as I arrived in Michigan on the campus--cause the campus was one of the most active in terms of the anti-war movement--you had, you almost could not ignore the activities going on by the anti-war activists. We had the SDS there, we had the-- everybody was there, the White Panthers, the Black Panthers, we had Brown Berets, we had everybody there. And so it was a period of time where you really had to pay attention to that. Not only against the war, but also the discrimination that we knew was going on in this country. And so I think it was probably that whole--and then, and then of course it was the farm workers, which were a very identifiable group of people of Mexican descent. So Cesar was also touring the United States, trying to get people to understand that what farm workers suffered in the fields was part of everybody's lives, it wasn't just part of farm workers' lives. And so he connected consumers with what had happened in California. And so as he did this, and we began to see that our involvement was also very necessary, as students, although we were in this university, and that university because of all the activity going on there was very receptive to concerns of people who were minorities. So we just got into it. But it was-- I guess you never know what moves you, right? You never really know what moves you. When I worked in the fields, and we migrated into, you know, South Texas area into Wisconsin, I was a kid, okay? And I know that those who were more concerned and could understand what was going on with us was my mom and my dad. And they took care of us. We were a unit. As long as you're with your mother and father, you're okay. I don't care how bad it is, you're okay. In retrospect, though, when Cesar started talking, and telling us, and saying, "You know what, you don't have to put up"-- we knew what was happening. We knew that when we got back home we had very little money, after we had worked all summer long. And then Cesar came on the scene, and he said, "You know what? You guys don't have to put up with that stuff. You can do something about it. It doesn't have to be somebody that changes it for you. You can change it for you." And we all thought, "What? We could do that?" It kind of like-- cause he said it to us, he looked like us, he spoke our language, he said it to us, although at that time not directly, which you had to think, "Well, maybe we can do something." And so I think it was a long-term, you know, awakening, that I went through. I mean I'm sure others woke up much

earlier than I did. And then we had that big march here in Texas in 1966. And that was inescapable, you know, we knew something was up in Texas. And we knew it to be true. I mean I remember listening, watching these folks march by, and my dad was watching them-- and I mean my father was a farm worker, he knew what was up-- and I don't know if you know that history. But in 1966, there was a strike in Rio Grande City, by the people who pick cantaloupes. And they were getting paid forty cents an hour, and cantaloupes are harvested in the middle of the summer, of the hot summer, in Rio Grande. It's one hundred and five degrees. So these workers had a strike. They struck. And then the Texas Rangers at that time were these bullies and they went and they busted the strike. And they were totally on the side of the growers. And that's illegal, that's unconstitutional. You can't side-- I mean those are tax money being used against the people who pay the taxes, right? So, but nevertheless they went ahead and busted the strike. So what happened was those workers changed the strike into a march. They started in Rio Grande City and winded its way through all of South Texas and then finally they came through San Antonio, and as they were going through New Braunfels, John Connolly, who was governor at that time, came-- this was after he'd been shot, you know, with President Kennedy, came down to New Braunfels and told the workers, "You don't need to go to Austin, because I'm not going to be there." And so the workers said, "You don't have to be there. We're going to be there." It was kind of like he was, he was, you know, really racist, you know, there was one white guy with a big hat, coming down to meet hundreds of Mexican workers, farm workers, and telling them, "Go back home, cause I'm not going to be there, you know, and nothing's going to happen." And the workers of course said, "Well, we're going to go anyway." And so, as they were coming through, I remember sitting and watching TV with my dad, and he was saying, "God, you know, what kind of reaction is that from a governor?" My father was totally political, although very quiet about it. He understood, he really understood, what was happening. And so when the workers arrived in Austin on Labor Day of 1966, that's when it was a huge, huge, organized group who met them. It was one of the biggest rallies in the history of South Texas. And so, we remember Connolly was really popular because he had been shot with Kennedy and had all that sympathy stuff going with him. That was the end. I just couldn't stand John Connolly after the (unintelligible). So anyway, that was that. That was the 1960s. And at that time, I was

working. Maybe I was going to school. I guess I was going to school there. But I was-- St. Mary's University was very Catholic, very conservative school. So there was nothing going on there. Which—(unintelligible) really going on there now.

**AC:** And were you involved in that march?

**RF:** No, no. I just watched it through the media. I didn't get involved.

**AC:** You said that you started with the United Farm Workers Union-- I'm sorry, did you say in '75?

**RF:** Well, that's when I started full-time. 1975. But I was doing volunteer stuff with the boycotts since 1970.

**AC:** And what did you-- what did you start, when you got full on into the UFW, first of all, what attracted you to it, I guess?

**RF:** Well this is what happened. Okay. In 1975, there was an attempt by many folks to divide the Union, the United Farm Workers. And so there was, there were events that occurred in many states-- Arizona, Florida, Texas, and others-- where individuals tried to break off from United Farm Workers and form their own organization. So that's what happened in Texas. In 1975 there was another strike, and I was involved in that strike too. It was among the melon workers in Rio Grande and all of South Texas, it was a wildcat strike, and it was everywhere, people were, it was just hot. And Tony Orendain at that time was Secretary Treasurer of United Farm Workers, and he was Director of the State of Texas for the Union. So he was the lead there. So he decided to form his own union, called the Texas Farm Workers Union. So in that split, we-- my husband and I, and others-- told Tony that we were not going to support his movement, his effort to divide the Union. So we stayed with United Farm Workers, and he formed the Texas Farm Workers Union. And so when we stayed with

the United Farm Workers, Cesar said-- appointed me to become director of the United Farm Workers. And so in 1975, I became Director of the UFW.

**AC:** And did you notice any, I mean, can you kind of describe how it was being a woman in a position, of you know, assuming you were in a position of authority and had some degree of power over people? Was that difficult at all? Did you face any kind of problems with that?

**RF:** I never felt that I did. I'm sure there was, there was some reluctance, you know, to follow me. But for a number of years it was just a plain fight. It was just an internal fight we were having with Tony. So that was-- I'm sure there's a lot of stories about me during that period, cause I heard a lot of them call me all kinds of things for that. Because it was a fight. It was-- there were nasty things. Cause Tony and I had been good friends, and his wife, we were-- she was a wonderful woman. So for a few years it was just the fighting that we were doing amongst each other. But in the process of that we were organizing, okay? We were organizing workers. In 19-- nothing beats being successful. If you can show you're successful, it really cuts across a lot of the gender discrimination. So what happened in 1978, I believe, was that we started organizing a committee structure in 1978. It took us a long time to get there, and I had a couple of babies in the meantime and stuff. In 1978, we had Fred Ross, who was the grandfather of all of the training in the Union, came to Texas and trained us on how to do house meetings. Really basic way of organizing people, just in their houses. And so we went through that training, and then we began doing that work. And so I was the director at that time, and what I did was I recruited farm workers who wanted to do that kind of work. And so we were all, like, we were new to this whole thing, and they were new to it. They were new, they had been working in the fields all year. So we did some very intense house meeting training, and we developed colonia committees. Rather than like in California they have farm committees, based on farms, because you can work so many months on a farm for a long time in California, because they have long seasons, and they have a lot of work. In Texas it's real different, because the seasons are very short, and there's a bunch of migration from farm to farm to farm to farm. And the farms are

small. So rather than do it that way, because there was no structure there, we did it the other way. And we did colonias. And we began to know folks, and we knew who were farm workers, and we go to their colonia, and as you know in (unintelligible) County, there's something like 800 colonias. And I mean it's just huge. So we would go to their colonia, begin a series of house meetings in their colonia, and so in that year, I would ask this question: I remember going to my first meeting in the colonia house meeting, small number one in San Juan. We were in Lalo Abitua's house, and I asked Lalo—I said “Lalo, what problems do you have in the fields?” And he sat there and told me “We don't have any problems.” It was like they, like we in my family, our feeling when we were working in the fields is that “Well, this is our life. We have to suck it in and accept it.” So that's pretty much what Lalo was saying, by telling me that he had no problem with the field. I said, “So you don't have any problems?” And then I said, “Well, what about this?” And he says, “Oh yeah.” I was talking about wages. “Well what about wages?” And he says, “Oh yeah. They haven't gone up in years. I said, “Well what about when you get hurt in the fields?” “Oh yeah, it happens all the time.” So I was telling, like reminding him about stuff that was going on and all of a sudden it was like a torrent of things that they felt were absolutely wrong. But from that, so we did that at every meeting, and we had hundreds of house meetings. So at every meeting we would say, “What are your problems in the fields?” From those problems we began to determine a strategy and a campaign we were going to have. And, I remember clearly, cause we do leaflets with cartoons, cause that's how we would inform people, through little cartoons and stuff. And so we did a leaflet saying, “This is what we're hearing-- there's no worker's comp., if you got injured there was like, no help. And we had examples for every one of them. There's no unemployment comp. for farm workers. There was no field sanitation. There were no toilets in the field. There was no drinking water in the fields. There was no hand washing facilities in the fields. The wages were at the bottom. Oh, they were using the short-handled hoe. Anyway, there was about ten. So that was kind of like, what our agenda became. It was like how do you fix these things? Not necessarily through a union contract because of the way agriculture is in South Texas it was almost impossible to go after a union contract with the grower, because the seasons were, like, two weeks and you just couldn't get there and do it in that two week period, sign everybody up. Cause then the workers would

leave and they would jump over to the other grower. It was very, very difficult. So what we decided to do is we decided to look at it legislatively. So we began then, to do things, to establish a strategy to pass legislation. So, to pass legislation then, we had to change the political face of South Texas. Because, prior to that, the legislators were more beholden to the ag industry than they were to the workers. And so then we have to begin a political foundation.

**AC:** Then what did you guys do? What came out of that? What were you able to accomplish?

**RF:** Well, we first had to elect good folks, and we did. We had our first union convention in 1979. I want to show you that picture. (Noise, walking around, unintelligible talking.) This was the first union convention. That was in 1979. So at that convention, all of the delegates from each of the organizing committees that we had organized came to the convention. And it was at that convention then that we established our priorities and that then we began our political foundation. So what we started doing then was at that convention we endorsed candidates for office, we endorsed for state senate and state representative. And so, once that happened we then we started making sure that the candidates we endorsed and elected and that the reason we endorsed them was because they supported our legislative agenda. And the first item on that legislative agenda we passed was that workers compensation for farm workers. Legislation in Texas up to that point, up to the 80's would be passed specifically excluding farm workers, because they would say 'everyone has workers compensation except farm workers and domestics probably.' And so what happened was—agriculture is almost the most dangerous industry in the country because you're always working with knives, you're always working with ladders, you're climbing things, I mean, you just have the potential of falling down, breaking your arm or whatever. So, we said that was our number one agenda. Right in that period of time Genoveva Puga's son was killed in on of the orange fields or orchards in South Texas. And he was dead lying next to a bin of oranges that had toppled over him, and he was dead there for hours; nobody found him. When he was found and when we began to investigate, the owners said that he was not his worker and that he was a volunteer and that he was volunteering

his time as a farm worker and therefore, 'cause he wanted to disassociate himself completely from that accident, right? And so, when we filed for workers comp, when we filed the lawsuit against the farmer; cause we couldn't file it under workers comp, then we went, we had to go to district court and then to on to Texas Supreme Court. At the Texas Supreme Court level they remanded the whole lawsuit and found that he was an employee of that company, and that, but since there was no workers comp, we couldn't win that, but forced the legislature to take care of this problem legislatively, and that they should pass a workers comp bill for farm workers. And so that then in 1983, I believe, we finally had some clout over the legislature to pass the workers comp bill. And so, in the course of that period, there was a task force put together by Mark White, he was the Governor at that time, that included growers, and included all kinds of folks that went around the state of Texas to determine whether the workers comp bill was discriminatory against people of Mexican decent based on the Equal Rights Amendment of the Texas Constitution. You know we have an ERA in Texas, in the Texas Constitution?

**AC:** Right.

**RF:** And so the ERA isn't only for women, it's for everybody. You have equal access to the laws. And so, because of that, because of the ERA the farm workers were able to win that lawsuit and force the Texas Legislature to consider doing a workers comp bill that would suit farm workers. And so in 19-- I believe in special session of 1984, we finally passed the workers comp. legislation for congress. It took us all of that time, and it was huge, it was a huge process that we had to go through to get that thing covered. So it not only included a lawsuit that had to go all the way to the Texas Supreme Court, it not only included a huge political change in the valley, we had to elect these folks then we had to win the Texas Supreme Court decision, then we had to convince 76 people in the legislature in Texas that they had to vote with us. And let me tell you this: it was not a slam dunk either. Even after the Supreme Court of Texas told them 'you need to pass something for farm workers' I think we passed by 80 votes, you know there's only 150. So we didn't get a lot of converts; all

these guys just unwilling, unwilling to give us a break.

**AC:** What do you think, uh, it was that got the, those that were willing to vote for you?

**RF:** Well, they were going to have to do it, so they did. Those folks that voted against us, I guess, were just trying to cover their constituents, but it was not, see we had all the...all the urban votes were with us, right, they were good.

**AC:** You had the urban votes?

**RF:** The urban votes were good because they didn't have any constituents that were gonna go after them right? It was all the rural votes that were killing us except for South Texas. All the West Texas guys were against us and that kind of stuff.

**AC:** Sure.

**RF:** But, anyway, we got that and that was kind of like the beginning of one of the changes. But prior to that, we had passed the prohibition of the short handled hoe, I think, a couple years before that, and that was also pretty major. The problem with that bill was that we were never able to enforce it; it was just unenforceable. We had no...see, whenever you pass a bill you've got to have something, some agency or some way to enforce it. If you don't have...if they don't stick that in there, there's just like no way, you can scream and holler...We were in... (showing a picture) that's that work, which is a killer a killer job, but when we would see crews we would say 'who do we complain to,' it was very hard to find somebody to complain to...you know it was very, very hard. Finally what happened was that through education, and through, you know we told workers 'You really don't have to be doing that, get yourself a long hoe and refuse to bend over like that, its going to kill you.'

So finally, people themselves said 'We're not working that way anymore.'

**AC:** Can you explain for the benefit of the tape here kind of what the-- I can see it here, but what-- why the legislation was against it.

**RF:** Well the short handle hoe forever, before the law was passed in Texas, was the way people were forced to thin and weed crops. What the growers would tell is that if you're working standing up, you can't see the small shoots, you know, the small vegetable or what ever coming up, and you'll ruin more than you'll save. And so, that's how they sold it right? Of course in the process though, you ruin people, you ruin peoples back. If you bend over especially the long rows of you know, what ever crops we have here, if you're bent over for a very long period of time, you're muscles that keep you erect become weakened, and that's really what keeps your spine together, and once you're muscles become weakened and you have a real propensity to slipping your disk your back disks and stuff. So, farm workers always back problems, always have back problems. And if you don't have a good strong back, you're not going to be a farm worker for very long. And so, it's very important to protect yourself as much as you can especially in work that is unskilled and work that's hard labor. And so, we were able to pass the banning of the use of the short handled hoe I think in the '70's, and then what we began to see was that it wasn't enforced or enforceable. And then we began to see that the growers began to use knives that were this long (holding fingers about 8 inches apart) to do the same kind of work; which was worse now still. And so in the early '80's we introduced a bill, this was when Clemmons was now governor, we introduced a bill in the house to ban the use of the knife for thinning and weeding crews, and we connected some kind of enforcement, ability to enforce the bill. And so we got it out of both the house and the senate, but Clemmons vetoed the bill, Bill Clemmons vetoed the bill, so that never got out. So that was one of the bills that people just got infuriated over.

**AC:** Can you elaborate on some of the other...we're looking for high points and low points in your involvement with the United Farm Workers Union. Is there anything else that stands out in your mind about some major successes and maybe some things you wish had gone a little better?

**RF:** Well after that after we passed the Workers Comp. bill, we were on a roll and we passed the Unemployment Comp. Bill which had been always, workers had always been exempt from that. Of course, everyone knows that in farm work you're unemployed 6 months out of the year because you have high seasons and you have low seasons and so that was a very important piece of legislation; we were able to pass that. Right after that we passed the Pesticide Right to Know Bill which was a whole issue of workers who are in the fields need to know what is being risked in terms of exposure, so we were able to pass that. And so, for a period of years in the '80s we passed a lot of protective legislation for farm workers. And then, in that period also we did a lot of education about pesticides. We went around the state of Texas telling people—consumers, so that we could develop a consumer base that would support the farm workers on a lot of issues about the use of pesticides. We became very knowledgeable about phosphates and all those kinds of chemicals that were so dangerous to working people. But also, I think we educated the consumers as well. So I think that was very important. I really do. The union was kind of in the lead, at that time, in terms of using videos to educate folks. We'd put together a fifteen minute video that showed the problems of pesticides and the risks, not only to farm workers but to consumers and all that. And we used that as a way of educating hundreds of thousands of folks. We gave it away. We gave the video away. We were kind of like, the first—now of course, everybody gives away videos, they're so cheap. When we did that we educated so many people on that issue. And people still want to know stuff about that. So, I think that-- that it—in terms of what was good about the work that I did for all that period was that we—farm workers showed—farm workers that had always been treated without dignity and without respect—'cause I knew that, growing up, we wouldn't even tell people we were farm workers; we were embarrassed by it, cause we knew how people would react to it—is that we showed a lot of people in the state and around the country that we could do some stuff, if we got together. And we did so much more than

was ever expected of us. So, in terms of respect for farm workers, I have the utmost respect for farm workers. They work hard and they, you know what, even after they work hard they still put in time for meetings and they would learn stuff, and do political stuff, and they would get people afterward. It was just like, massive. So that's really, the high I've always gotten from the work that I do.

**AC:** How would people react, when they—if you were to tell them you were a farm worker? What--

**RF:** Oh, they would think that you're ignorant and you're stupid, and you're, you know, low class. I mean, that's really what it was. And then you're Mexican, right? So it's like really, uh—but I think with Cesar coming around and doing that whole thing of respect and dignity of farm workers. I think people went, look, I remember this so well. When we became politically involved and our members started working in politics and stuff. Every politician that came and talked to us, and then talked everywhere else, would say, 'I was a farm worker. I picked cotton.' You know, kind of trying to relate and I thought that was real telling. I always believed that was really telling. But I think prior to that they were nervous with them. That's what I think.

**AC:** Wow.

**RF:** Or, 'I knew Cesar. I marched with Cesar.'

**AC:** And was there anything you can think of that maybe didn't go your way—I guess a low point in things? There was a particular frame of mind among everybody...

**RF:** Well, I think in general, and who can blame them right—is that there's a huge population of farm workers, right? And a huge number of folks who are so afraid and I understand that fear of joining because they always say, you know what, if I join, I'm going to lose my job here, and this is the only thing that I have. And I see

that among people who don't have documents because they're worried, they never want to say anything because they're going to lose that little bit of money. So that's kind of like the struggle, I think, is the struggle among all of us who try to help things along. Is that you'll almost find this fear that's palpable almost like, oh, don't talk to me, don't, you know, wave a flag over in my direction. But on the other hand, I see some people who have so much courage, right, who say, you know what, who wants to live this life forever, do this stuff. And in the process of all those years of work I met with such good people who had so much courage. More courage than I would've had. Who walked out of the fields, who got into strikes, who stood up to the owners, to the growers. That's amazing. To the crew leaders. That's amazing in terms of courage. I had, I did the same, but shoot man, I wasn't working for them. And who got thrown in jail with me? I remember once we went to Laredo, a whole group of people went to Laredo. At that time we were picketing HEB because they had grapes, and oh, whatever, I think it must have been grapes. So we went to Laredo, there was a whole group of us, and in the process of that we did a lot of education, we talked to a lot of people, but it was a big crew of people who went in the van. So we were at the HEB in Laredo and I remember this woman who was elderly, you know, she was 60s or 70s at that time. She's Juanita Valdes-Cox's mother (unintelligible). So we were going for HEB and the police officers came. They said 'Look, unless you get off of this parking lot we're going to have to arrest you.' And these were all Mexican police officers. You know Laredo, all Mexicans. You know what? I have never stepped away from anything, so I told the police officers, 'Let me talk to the folks who are here with me.' So I told them, 'How many of you want to get arrested?' I told them in Spanish so everybody knew what I was saying—how many of you want to be arrested? I remember Juanita Valdez' mother being as little as she is, she shot up her hand, she was like this short old woman, like this, she says, 'I'll get arrested.' And a lot of others did the same. And I thought, those guys just folded. Cause it was like your mother, you know? So these police officers threw up their hands, went back to HEB, and said 'You know what, we're getting out of here. Just let them do their business and talk to people and we're not doing anything to these folks.' But that, see, that's courage. That's courage. These little old ladies going to be arrested, you know? That's tough. So anyway, met a lot of really good folks, a lot of courage along the way.

**AC:** So, you would actually have to take your children along on strike?

**RF:** Oh yeah, (unintelligible), in 1975 one of the growers in the valley Othal Brand, who also was mayor of the city of McAllen, there was a huge strike in '75 with the melon pickers. My husband at that time, it was like an emergency...we had to go to the hospital and we have a picture of him holding my oldest son, who was a baby at that time in diapers, who was in front of the strike. This is a photo of the airplanes, and these are photos of our demonstrations, our picket lines in South Texas during that...Oh, and this is a photo...oh, this is a condition that we passed in field sanitation. In 1982, I believe, we went to the department of health whose commissioner was a retired general, and we told him of the conditions of the farm workers in terms of sanitation. What happened on that actually that was a very interesting change. That was one of the first things that women told me about. When we started our house meetings they said, 'Rebecca, there is nowhere for us to go to the bathroom when we're working in the fields. And, you know, these fields were huge and there was thousands of people working on the farms and they would say 'we just get sick.' Well, they would get sick cause if they didn't go they would get all these urinary tract infections and so that was like, a big deal for us. And so, I remember going to our county judge and I asked him 'What do you think people do when there aren't any bathrooms?' And he says to me 'You know what Rebecca, I have never thought of that.' He was a farmer. And so, from there we took it further but, there was a local health worker, his name was Tony Tijerina, who came to me one day and he said 'I know you can change the rule on field sanitation.' He says 'Just look at how highway workers do it,' they have those porta-pots, he says all we had to do was we had to change the rule there that says add farm workers. And so that's how we did it we just changed it by adding to the rules. So, this one fellow from the health department just gave us the idea of how to change it, and almost in a matter of months we were able to change the rule on that. And along with the commissioner being supportive and understanding that things were bad in the fields when you had people urinating, defecating in the fields that were field packed, right, and put on trucks and sent to the grocery store. I mean, there is something really problematic with that.

And so, when he saw the problems with all of that he was able to change it. Then it took, of course, years for us to make sure that it was being enforced. 'Cause, you can see a toilet in the fields and think that its okay, but unless its clean, unless it has toilet paper in there, people aren't going to use it. Same thing with the drinking water; you can see the water thermoses, but unless you have the disposable cups, its still dangerous to workers. The other thing is hand washing facilities, which are so important. Unless there was water in there, it was I mean they're useless. I mean you can see the apparatus in there, but if you didn't go out and check everything... One day I got the commissioner, commissioner Bernstein, I invited him to the valley, I said 'I want you to come and see what's going on down here.' So, he arrived and he had set up a meeting later on that day with the growers, but I got him first. So I said 'Okay, let's go.' So I made him, I forced him, to go in and look at toilets...' Let's see... there's one go look in it' and he said 'You're gonna make me open that?' I said 'Yeah, you need to open it.' And so, he saw what was going on so then we met with the growers that afternoon and they were all saying 'Oh yes, we've enforced it, and there's toilets out there.' And Bernstein then got up and said 'You know what? I checked three fields today and let me tell you this: they're not.' And so, he was able to, you know, at least set them up. And then, of course, I remember that period so well because the growers said 'Look, we just need to educate, we just need to educate these farm workers.' I just got so angry at that, I said 'what is so difficult to understand how to go to the bathroom? The fact that your toilets are nasty and you don't clean them on a daily basis is the problem, not the fact that people don't know how to go to the bathroom.' But that was their deal, was they needed to educate the workers on how to use the toilet. But anyway...

**AC:** So, did that condition...it seems crazy, but I think that says a lot about the situation out there that you had to put into law...sanitary restrooms. Was there any...did the situation improve or is it still like that now?

**RF:** Well, yeah its...it is much better now. I was down in South Texas about a month or so ago, and we in fact, I took a bunch of students from UT Austin down there, and that was one of the things you had to do was go in and open up the toilets and check for everything else. And actually, they said that everything was ok. So,

they were clean and there were, you know, they had everything with them so we did a good check on them. But now I think, you know things have in fact changed. When we first started this thing, there were no cell phones, there was no nothing. So, we would go to a field, and we would see this field there was, like, no toilets. So we would call the health guy and we would say 'On this corner of so and so and so and so.' So he said 'Well he's not here, so he'll be in here tomorrow,' but by tomorrow that field is gone right. So, there was, like, no instant stuff. Now, of course, with cell phones you can do a lot more right, cause you have access to these agents. Because farm work is so migratory, from hour to hour it move from here to here, or everybody leaves and you don't have anybody to talk to...

**AC:** So, what else, I mean, obviously technology has improved so that's probably made it a little easier. What are some things that may have changed since you became involved with the United Farm Workers?

**RF:** Well, what happened in 1993 is that NAFTA was passed, the free trade agreement...

**AC:** Right, yeah.

**RF:** So almost over night, most of the agriculture left this country in 1993 and went to Mexico and other countries...like, all the tomatoes went to Mexico. So we lost a lot of, from that year on till now, we've lost a lot of agriculture. And as you go into South Texas, you see most of it developed to homes, house tracts. And so, that wonderful agricultural land is really now just under cement, under asphalt. There is some farm work, but not very much. There is some farm work in West Texas in up in Presidio, up in Lubbock and those areas, but it's very scattered and it's not concentrated and therefore it is very difficult to deal with in terms of organizing because its just so far. So that's really what's happened since 1993 on we've lost a lot of agriculture in Texas. It's concentrated from that point in California and Florida but Texas has dropped.

**AC:** What in terms of, like, personal sacrifices do you think that you've had to...was there anything that you can think of that you've had to personally give up in order to pursue this type of work?

**RF:** Well, I did live away from my family, which was my brothers and sisters and so I was all over the place. I don't know...it doesn't seem like I sacrificed too much personally. I worked very hard, but I mean this is like an every day thing. Now, what I did to make up with my children was to take them with me. And they were involved with some of that stuff, and I think it was good for them. You know, you really do what you have to do and you can't look back and say 'I should have done something else.' But the pro on that and I tell that to all young people, is that you can do so much with your life, you really can. I'm just one person, I'm not extraordinary, I'm just one person, and yet I can see all of the things that I was able to...being part of an organization was able to change, cutting edge change right? That I could not have done in any other kind of work, I couldn't have. I did it in the union because that is how the union was. The union under Cesar was cutting edge because it was like nobody had ever done it before. He used all kinds of strategy where you included families in the union. Other labor unions just go after the worker, but in farm work, because that's how we work right, we work, the family works together. When we would have any kind of meetings, the husband and the wife were involved because it was a family issue. And then we have the kids involved. We always had kids at our meetings; there was no way you could escape that. And so, so we had to look at and try different things to be successful, things that had never been done before. So we tried different stuff. And the way Cesar did it and the way we learned from him was that you integrated your culture into this movement. It was a movement, it wasn't just one little thing, it was a whole movement, so you integrated your culture. Our union meetings which were...it was like going to Sunday church...every Friday night at six o'clock at night we would have a union meeting and the place was full of folks who came there because that's where they got information. They weren't getting it from anywhere else. At that time we didn't have Univision and televisions and all the radio stuff right? No Spanish language newspapers, they wanted information so they would come. We included religious stuff in there like, we would have our prayer, we would have our De Colores songs,

which comes right out of the Sunday song books, we would have recognitions, we would have children's recognitions. Ok, which kid made an 'A' or whatever, we would have community organizations recognitions...those kinds of things. We would try to include the culture of our community in these meetings. We would have raffles, nobody had raffles, I mean are a totally Mexican deal, right, we have rifas (laughing). So every meeting we had to have a raffle, people understood that right. So anyway, and that's how we developed a movement, we didn't just develop a union, we developed a movement. And so, from that we have what we have today which includes not only organizing in the community for community issues, which are roads, streets, lights, sewage and all kinds of stuff, but also building houses, also developing business those kinds of things. We look at the community as a whole rather than just one portion of it.

**AC:** So then, could you say that your community... the way that you developed your movements, would you say that served to strengthen individual family structures as well as kind of create the sense everybody was kind of part of a big family?

**RF:** Yeah, yup, yup.

**AC:** And, how did the...do you think that the dynamic of farm work and family has changed at all in recent years? How would you say that it's changed or stayed the same?

**RF:** Well, I think that you still have families working.

**AC:** Right meaning that, like when you were growing up and you would work alongside your siblings and your parents is it still the same way?

**RF:** That's for the people who live in the United States. I think for young folks who come through Mexico as immigrants, I think it's a young men thing, and of course, that's different. Cause when I migrated, we migrated as a family. All of us got into a car and we traveled. When we stayed, we would stay in one room it was all family right. For young men who come from Mexico as immigrants, they come together and they pack, they stay together and they put them in one room, and they come, but they come as individuals. Although they all know each other and that kind of stuff. But like I was saying earlier, when we were little, it didn't hurt-- I don't know if it hurt us or not hurt us psychologically—who knows, maybe I'm all screwed up, but I think the people who took the heat of this whole thing was my mother and father, right? But we were all young. As long as my father and mother were okay, and we were all together, and we were all healthy, we did not get traumatized by it. So, in terms of farmer workers in this country now, when I was working in Watsonville, in the strawberries, you still had families working together. And living together in their homes. You don't have children too much. Although there is some child labor still going on, probably more in farm working than any other industry. But there is a strong pull to try to get people's kids in school. By the schools. So there's always an effort by the schools, now, to keep kids in school. I don't think that was very strong when I was going to school. Although we did go to school, but I don't think it was very strong.

**AC:** How else have the opportunities for younger people, who come from migrant family workers, or farm worker families, how has that changed for them since you were growing up?

**RF:** In terms of school?

**AC:** In terms of school, economic advantages, anything that you can think of that might have improved, or not improved—

**RF:** Well, I think young people who are migrants, and who are pulled out of school before the year ends, and who come in late after school starts, I think are at a real disadvantage. Because they're never able to catch up. And, there are still a lot of those. A lot of kids. Because I know in South Texas, by March, a lot of people had left. See, what's happening in South Texas, is that, there's very little—this is what people would do. They would work in the winter in South Texas, and that would hold them over for the winter months, right, because it was the Wintergarden area. And in the summers, since there was nothing there, they would pack up their children and go and work in the Midwest, up there, Michigan and stuff. And so that would hold them, for that period of time, and spill over into some of the beginning part of the season in South Texas. Now, since there is very little work in the winter in South Texas, I believe that people are pulling these kids out since there is nothing to do. I just worry about these folks, since there is nothing to do. So that, so that I think kids are, in fact, pulled out. There's a big number of migrants still. (Unintelligible).

**AC:** Do you think that the schools—has there been any type of, any degree where some of the schools have been able to pull some of the kids back in? Or is it still pretty much—

**RF:** All I know is that the dropout rate for kids in the Valley is 50%. Of course, I think the dropout rate across the country is pretty high. But that's 50% across the board in South Texas. I think it's probably higher in some. And there's really no good statistic. The way I figure dropout rate is I look at 9<sup>th</sup> grade figures and I look at 12<sup>th</sup> grade figures. It's like, if you have 1200 9<sup>th</sup> grade and 600 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I say, well, 50% dropout rate. But the districts don't keep—what they say, when we give them that figure, is how could it be that 1200 were here and now 600. They say well, they all transferred. So they don't have—that's not true, right? So what's happening to those kids? Who is tracking those children? No one's tracking those children. So where are they? They're somewhere. So anyway, I think that migrancy being one of them, but also the other stuff going on in schools, it's really hard to count kids.

**AC:** How have other—I know that there's been sort of an influx of different ethnic groups, immigrant groups coming in and doing farm work in the United States—how do you think that that affects the Mexican-American population, or the Mexican immigrant population?

**RF:** I've seen, well, in California where I've done a lot of organizing recently in the fields, it's all Mexican. There's very few other ethnic groups. In South Texas it's all Mexican. Now I worked in—actually I went to a meeting of workers in Madisonville, Texas. They have a big mushroom plant there, and that's mixed. Because there were Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Mexicans. And then, I worked in another mushroom plant in Florida, and that was mixed—Salvadorans and Mexicans. So, they worked very well together. The ones in Madisonville probably worked better than the ones in Quincy, but they were very united in terms of what they were doing. I didn't see any division by origin. And I really don't see anything other than Mexicans in the fields.

**AC:** Other than those—

**RF:** In the fields. The mushroom plants are inside buildings. Now, in nurseries, I believe, those are Guatemalans. So I think they do, in fact, gravitate towards a certain industry.

**AC:** Any outside, I guess, Mexican, Central, South American origin—do you notice any conflict between the—I guess there's some Pacific Islanders in Georgia, but I guess, you're not really too familiar with that up there.

**RF:** I don't know. I don't know. All I know is that, if you're (unintelligible), and you have a certain dialect, a certain language, you kind of like, stay together, and do some kind of work where you're together. I think that they stick together because they can talk to each other. That's what I think. But I don't know. I've never

organized Guatemalans who are indigenous or Oaxacans. I have never done that. I've really only organized Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans, and those were in the mushroom industry.

**AC:** So I guess this is the last thing I have, actually—as an individual, as a person, how has your work, your lifetime of work, how has that fulfilled you? Can you kind of elaborate on that a little bit? As far as the satisfaction that you get out of doing it? What it means to you?

**RF:** Yeah. I have been thinking about that recently. And, when I look back on it, I wouldn't have changed a thing. And frankly, I think I was put in a position, quite by accident, I believe, that I took on, not because I knew where I was going, but it was serendipity, I think, more than anything else. I was in the right place at the right time. Cesar said, 'You're going to have to do it.' I said, 'Are you sure? I'm having all these babies at this time. Are you sure?' He says 'Yeah, you're the only one here. You better do it.' And so, I did it. Even though I told him, after every time I had one of the children, I said, 'Cesar, I can't do this anymore. I've got to take care of my family.' He said, 'Rebecca, I understand. I have eight kids myself.' It was like no way he would allow me to get out because I had kids. (Unintelligible). She would say, 'Yeah, you know what? Having kids is great. I never saw it as a problem.' I said, 'Okay, I can't talk to you all about this.' And so, what happened, I guess that's part of the teaching, right? That's how you learn that there is no problem, right? You work with that, and you learn with that. And what happens is of course that—that's the other thing. That's the other thing that's important that I should say. The fact that I was a mother, both female and a mother with little children, opened up a door to all of these women leaders in the union, here in Texas. More so than anywhere else in the country. Because, as I was doing house meetings—I remember this so well—I would be hauling around one of my children. Especially if I was breast feeding, which I breast fed every one of them, I'd have to haul around the last one, or the baby. And I would be there at these houses, with these families, and the women would look—I would say, 'Don't you want to join our effort?' And the women look at their husbands, and the husbands would look at them, and the women would say, 'Well, I have this baby.' And I would say, 'Well, I

have mine here, look, right here.' And there was like no question, because I could do it, then they knew that they could do it also. There was no holding them back. And so, that gave them a legitimate argument. And frankly, I always held myself up so that I didn't screw around at all. I always had kept my life clean, I was respected, I was a churchgoer. I did all of these things, and I was real above board with everybody. Because I think that that was part of it. If the men found any defect in you, as a female, as running around, as (unintelligible), or whatever, they would use that against you and it would hurt the females. And so I tried to keep my life on an upper keel there, so that women wouldn't have to argue that point with their husbands. And so, what happened was that we had an equal amount of women leaders as we had of men leaders, in all of the stuff. Not only in the soft stuff, you know sometimes, they put women in soft areas—

**AC:** Right.

**RF:** But they were leading in strikes, they were tough, they were thrown in jail with me. They were as tough as the men were, in all events, in all activities. They weren't only cooking in the kitchen.

**AC:** Equally respected as well?

**RF:** Yeah. And so, when I got thrown in jail, and they did too, there was no argument. Oh, you were screwing around or something. There was no argument because when we were thrown in jail, we figured it out so well that we would come out winning. We never did something that was, um, what's the word. I mean it was illegal, obviously, but it wasn't something that we couldn't win in court. For example, one year, we were distributing flyers in the field. And so how do you do that when the fields are way inside. We said, well, you know, we were going to go in and look for work. Because you can always go in and look for work. You know, that's not illegal. So we went into this farm that was owned by Othal Brand, the mayor of McAllen. So we went in and we went and asked for a job with the crew leader. The crew leader said, 'You know what? There's

nothing here for you.' He knew who we were. And we said, 'But we have a right to look for work.' Even though I was a union leader, I have a right to look for work. And so what happened was, that day, as we were coming out they locked us up in this pen. Actually it was pretty scary, because we were like, in the middle of nowhere, next to the river, in this big old pen. And so Othal Brand then comes. Othal Brand always packed a gun. And so, I was very afraid. Because there was like nobody around. And so all of the supervisors came and were looking at us through the pen. We were like 'Oh my God, what's going to happen to us here?' And so, Othal Brand beat up some of the guys that were with us. I thought, 'This guy's going to kill us.' At any rate, finally he called the sheriff, and the sheriff arrested us, we got thrown in jail. And it was a number of us that were involved in that one. But in the end we were exonerated. And Othal Brand had to pay us money for doing that to us. And so, I guess what I'm saying is that I never put anybody's reputation at risk, with anything that we did. Everything that we did, what we risked folks, I was always very careful with it. And I did it with a lot of discussion. I didn't just do it on my own. I talked to our attorneys, my husband was the attorney. But I talked to the leaders to say, 'What do you think?' If people had some problems because of their immigration status, then we'd say 'Well, you need to remove yourself.' We did everything pretty carefully, so that we didn't jeopardize anybody's situations. And so because of that I believe that people respected our work. Because we held ourselves up to a standard that the women joined and became leaders and became very outspoken. The women were the ones that helped change the field sanitation rules. They were the ones. We did a demonstration once at the health department in Hidalgo County that was...fun! Cause, they weren't enforcing the rules, we had passed the regulations but they weren't enforcing. So the doctor's name was...I forgot his name. So we said you need to have some enforcement guys out there to enforce these rules because, you know the rules are there, you're just not doing your work. And he was hemming and hawing and hemming and hawing, and finally we said 'Okay, we're going to have a demonstration at your place.' So what we did there was we had a lot of people and women. And so what the women did was that we put a line of people at their inside toilet that they had for the health department and we would just sit there and we'd get to the back of the line so the next one would go, so that no one could use the toilet except for our folks who were in line. And so

it was like, it was a message, but the folks loved it because it was like you know, we were getting back at the man here whose role it was to take care of us in the fields but who couldn't get to his own toilet. They loved it.

**AC:** So that one was successful I take it?

**RF:** Oh it was great, it was great. Later on at the, I think at the convention, at our conventions we have such a great time. But there was a drama group out of the university down there was a good friend Ofelia de Santos and some other students who put together a play about that, it was the funniest play. And they each had one of us as their, uh, they were acting out our roles. Oh my god, we had a good time with that.

**AC:** What would you say you were the most proud of? Is it that story right there?

**RF:** Well, no, there was a lot of good stuff. The most proud is you know what? Farm workers can do stuff. That's the most...when I can see farm workers who have courage and they just stand up and say 'I'm not putting up with this anymore,' that's really the most proud you can be.

**AC:** That's great. Well thank you very much for talking with me.

**RF:** Oh absolutely.

**AC:** That was...I really appreciate it.