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MS 317. Archives for Research on Women and Gender Oral History Project

Graciela Sanchez Transcript, June 10, 1997

Tori Beckman-Wilson: This is Tori Beckman-Wilson, I'm talking to Graciela Sanchez at the Esperanza Center on June tenth, nineteen ninety-seven. I guess we can start at the beginning, can you tell me a little bit about your association with the center, how you came to be here? I understand you're originally from San Antonio, grew up here…

Graciela Sanchez: Yeah, I was born and raised in San Antonio, on the west side, which is about ninety-nine percent Latino, uh, one of the poorer sections of San Antonio. Parents, um, stayed in that neighborhood on purpose because, you know, there is this whole kind of internalized racism that we all have to move away from one side of town to the better side of town once you get educated. And when they had a choice they decided not to and the children, all of us, screamed and rebelled, 'cause we wanted to go to the high school anyway and we, everybody's just, my parents had been to that high school, so we were gonna go to that high school, even though that high school has a reputation of being, um, poor, again. Because it was a vocational school and in Spanish, the kids that went to Lanier High School were called, well the school was called la guarra (sp?) which translates into rags. You know, so the kids that went there were so poor that they dressed in rags. So there's all this negative under, yeah and people resented, you know, again that fear of that neighborhood being a bad neighborhood, lots of crime and poverty. So, my parents didn't believe that and I think they instilled that, that it wasn't about—that those were all false accusations, that, because, all around us, we only knew good people. And we weren't, you know, living—not that the drugs weren't there, not that the crime wasn't there, but we also recognized that people were good people, that there was a culture there that was really about extended family and community, at least that I recognized. And so we stayed there and I think some,

all of that was kind of instilled by my parents so that, you know, it was important to come back home also, you know. I don't live in the neighborhood right now, I don't live in the neighborhood, because I don't think the neighborhood allows people from the outside to come in, because people just continue to live in that neighborhood, so there are not a lot of houses available that I can go and buy. But, um, it was important to me to go away to college and come back to San Antonio to do the work.

TBW: Now, you said there's that thing that once you get better educated, you move out of the neighborhood, middle class flight thing. We see that in all kinds of different groups in the U.S., it happens over and over again. Did your parents get a better education than their parents? Or what is their situation and how did that form your personality?

GS: Yeah. I think, you know, I think my dad got to go to seventh grade. Um, and probably his parents were, you know, had first, second or third grade education. They were, again, if you look at my father, my father's dad, my paternal grandfather, Adrian, was in the, was a sergeant in the first World War. He was stationed here and actually got sent to Mexico, and so actually knew the area of Tampico, which is where he eventually lived there for a while, so we know now that our great-grandfather, on my, the paternal great-grandfather was born in the U.S., in Texas in the border area. So, you know, so my father, on the other hand, was born in Mexico City, because my grandfather went to Mexico, found his wife, got married and fell in love and stayed in Mexico and then, then brought the whole family back here, but most of his children were American, even though they were born in Mexico. But my dad came as a thirteen year old, and had to go to grades that were, you know, lower than that and sort of had to learn stuff, and by age seventeen decided to join the Navy and go into and be part of World War Two and, you know, snuck in as a seventeen-year-old rather than an eighteen-year-old. So, he was a traveler, they're from the region of Mexico which is the coastal area around the—it's more Caribbean-based, it's Tampico and his mother was from Vera Cruz, so that's Caribbean-based. So there's also this thing about traveling and adventure, so that was instilled from my father's side. The

education he got was by reading the books and traveling and so we continued, we traveled all our lives as kids. He, they would take us to trips, you know, starting thirty miles away and then to Corpus, and then to Mexico, then to different part of Mexico, and then when one of my brothers went to school, prep school on the east coast, it was like to pick him up, so by age twelve, I had traveled twenty-five states. Now that noise [a drill]. Let me stall and see how [pause in tape]

TBW: So your family traveled a lot and you got to see quite a few places by the time you were…

GS: Yeah. On my mom's side, she was, she graduated from high school at Lanier, also. And I think she's probably the first, I wouldn't say the first, I think all her siblings probably also went to school, but they were men, also, so they went to World War Two and stuff like that. So we're better, you know, all their children were better off than they were in terms of getting college educated. And I guess they were, a generation ahead of their—I mean, more educated than their parents.

TBW: Now Jill tells me—I had a run down on you before I came over—she tells me that you attended Harvard.

GS: Yale.

TBW: Oops, wrong one.

GS: Wrong one. I do not like Harvard. No. [laughs]

TBW: How did that come about? You graduated from Lanier, right? O.K.

GS: It was a combination. Actually, that older brother that went to prep school also ended up going to Yale. But when he was graduating from high school and they announced where he was going to college, and they said Yale and I was a little upset, because that's where I was going to go. He's four years older than I am so I was a little upset that he was going to the same school I was planning to go to. And he's been my, you know, nemesis or whatever when we were growing up, so, it was like, "Oh, no, now he's gonna go there." And he went to a prep school, and I had a chance to go to a prep school and I didn't go to prep school on some level because he, you know, I didn't want to follow in his footsteps,

either. And I was also more, you know, again, this thing about going to that school and staying and working for the community was really important.

TBW: Even at that point?

GS: Even at age, yeah, whatever. Because he went when he was fourteen, so that meant then I was ten, about that age. So at age fourteen I could have gone also.

TBW: And by that time you already kind of knew what you wanted to do.

GS: Well, I, I mean, sort of. I was definitely kind of laid back, I was definitely, uh, liberal, and I would say, a little beyond liberal, and more left of that, then I was then. I really believed in—and again this educational system taught all the stuff that you do learn as a student in undergraduate and graduate programs, where there is more critical thinking allowed. So, but yeah, I think my parents kind of instilled that ethics and morals and principles to all the kids. Of course, I am the one that is the radical in the family.

TBW: What does everybody else do?

GS: Um, oldest brother…

TBW: How many siblings do you have?

GS: There's six of us. So I have five siblings. I have four older brothers, myself and my youngest sister. My oldest brother is a manager of the HEB down in the west side, in the neighborhood. But he's in charge and he also kind of moved up, he went to Saint Mary's and dropped out after his second year, and so it was harder for him to get a managerial position without a degree, but he worked hard enough and he's really good, so. Um, second oldest brother works for Alamo Title Company, and he's been doing that for about seven to ten years now and before that he was, he owned his own little antique shop which used to be on Main Street, and was called On Main. And, no, it was called String of Pearls, actually. And the third one is the one that went to the Ivy Leagues, the prep schools. His name's Fernando, and he's in Cleveland right now, he's actually raising his four or five year old

daughter while his wife has a job at the museum, through the museum of art. And he was working at Oberlin for a while, but he wanted more of a tenured position, so he's applying to some deanship at Yale, going back. I don't know if he's gotten that or not. Um, and then Gustavo is the fourth oldest, and he has had problems because he's got some chemical imbalances and whatever, whatever, whatever. And the poor people's system doesn't allow him to recognize, allow the family to recognize what problems he has until he's in his thirties, so by that time, you know, the behavioral changes have been a little difficult. But he was almost gang raped when he was a junior in high school, and that really set him back a lot. The doctors thought he was schizophrenic, and now they found out that he may be just more, more of a compulsive behavior, which chemically can be treated, but behaviorally, he's already learned all these other sorts of things. So he lives at home with my parents, and he's now thirty-nine years old. And then my sister, who is Leticia, she works at Palo Alto. As a, she was doing admissions and assistant director of admissions or whatever, and now she works somewhere there and probably wants to get her Ph.D. and teach it. Institute of higher learning, so that's it.

TBW: So, you have taken a, a bit of a different path than the rest of your siblings.

GS: Yeah, and I think my sister, Fernando, myself and my younger sister, Leti (sp?), went to Ivy League schools. Leti went to University of Pennsylvania. Um, and I think because she didn't want to follow in my footsteps and be my shadow 'cause she had been. And I think the three of us politically are the furthest left than the rest of them. I don't think she wants to just be here. The whole family still supports the work I do here, and they're here all the time, and they're here for me more than I am there for them. But I think that's because my job is just intense.

TBW: So, after you graduated, you knew you were coming back to San Antonio. Was there ever any question in your mind? Or was that settled?

GS: I was, knew I wanted—well, again, I think was also the time frame when a lot of emphasis was put on coming to San Antonio and select like, the best of the best, and taking them off to all these good

schools. My brothers, you know, who were four, six and eight years older than I was, they themselves or their friends were going to these Ivy League schools. And I think I heard the dialogue, that they're not coming back home, so that I knew that was wrong. I mean, some of them are back. But I would say of all the, you know, the Chicanos who went to school with me, you know, they're not back. And they're not back for a lot of reasons. They're not back because they may not find that San Antonio is as open a city as they want to, and they may, like my brother, he can't get a job here. He's either overqualified and then he's a dark-skinned man that…

TBW: That still presents a lot of problems.

GS: Yeah. He's gonna challenge those guys. I'm going to give you this tenth anniversary book so you can take it home. This is Rina. [introduces co-worker]

TBW: Oh wonderful. Thank you. My name is Tori, glad to meet you. [to Sanchez] Thanks so much, I appreciate this. So ten years. Now, you have been involved for quite some time.

GS: I helped think it though. And helped found the organization.

TBW: And how did that come about?

GS: That was based on history, also, coming back home and saying…

TBW: I want to do something. And how did you get connected into the network that formed…

GS: It took a while. And I think part of the problem—I mean, I came here and thought that I might teach as a secondary educator and go back to graduate school and figure it out that way, and then come back again. But then they wouldn't hire me as a secondary educator because I looked too young at that moment. Then Southwest Voter Registration Project and Willie Velasquez (sp?) had a job opening and the Ivy League connection, some people said, "Oh, there's this position, just go and apply." And I got the job. So then I, you know, was a concern that I might be an attorney at some point, and so I went and worked with them for a couple of years.

TBW: There was a concern that you might be an attorney?

GS: A good concern, a bad concern, depends on how you look at it. [laughs] I think my dad always wanted me to be an attorney because he and I always—he challenged me, I challenged him back and he's a good, he's a good man. He allowed me to challenge him as a woman. Um, so, he allowed all his kids to do that, but I think being the fifth child, also helped. He was very used to the older brothers and he was more relaxed with me, so I got to challenge him more.

TBW: First daughter, right? So they must have been thrilled.

GS: Yeah, that's what they keep saying. I deny that there's any special treatment towards me, I mean. Um, so after working at Southwest Voter and then also connected with MALDEF and working with MALDEF for a while, I decided I didn't want to be an attorney. I didn't like the compromising that was going on towards clients at the expense of saying they won a case, you know. Because I was working a lot with the clients as a paralegal, and even though I took the LSATs and was ready to do that, I just pushed that aside. And I also recognized what I saw within these predominantly Chicano civil rights organizations, what I noticed was that they were male-dominated, that Willie called me a lady, and called the other women ladies, that we had absolutely no names. Um, and that, you know, all the men were the men in power, you know, they were the directors and all. I was the highest ranking woman on some level, as a paralegal. Everybody else was just, you know, a secretary or an assistant to some, and only one or two positions ever came up that women held as directors and then they left after a while, so you know. And then when I went to work at another place, which is called Chicano Health Policy Development, I applied and said, "Look," you know, "I want to be able to work here, but I want to make sure that I am allowed to take initiative and move on something and not be held back because I'm a woman." Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Five months later, I was fired, along with everyone, like nine other staff people. [laughs]

TBW: What happened?

GS: Well, the organization decided to go from Chicano Health Policy Development to the Center for Health Policy Development, and I think people who had been there for a long time were very upset with the change, and the attempts to compromise the name for funding and so I helped to say, "Well, let's challenge." And it was mutual, so several of the staff people challenged back, and since I was the last one hired, I was the first one fired. Actually, the excuse was that it was the Gramm-Rudman bill, and there was cuts in all these things, so they had to lay me off, and they laid the last two people, but then they also laid off everybody else that had been there before me and then they did, they did change policy and nobody was there to argue the name change. So it was all those little, working with all those Chicano men that said, "Oh, it doesn't matter that it's just about Chicanos," I think I was definitely woman-identified but I don't know, it was, you know, those experiences that kind of made me more aware about working with, you know, working with women, was also a more important thing. And I kept on, you know, after I was fired from that Chicano Health Policy Development, I had this time. Then I said, "This is the time." And by that time, I had met other women. In 1985 during International Woman's Day march and rally, I met uh, one other person, Susan Guerra, who had been thinking the same way. It was like, we took three years to meet each other, and we wondered why it took us so long. So it was like, how do you create a space that allows progressive-thinking people to come together? And so that was the, kind of, thinking about Esperanza, and we talked about it for a while. I challenged other women to, you know, why aren't you running your own organization, why are you so frustrated working here, here, here, here, let's, why don't we just do it? Why do the guys just do it? Why can't we just do it? And it was like, well, well, well. So then I had, there was this time that I had no job, so I said, "This is the time, let's put the energy here." So I was the one without a job and we're getting consulting trips for five hundred dollars a month, so I'd work for one month and I'd be off for another month and do research and talk through things and then we basically found the space on Flores Street. And then I got a chance to go to Cuba, so then I, the organization was formed

and kind of developed and a lot of thinking went into it for that year that I was off, and, and so the organization opens up in nineteen eighty-seven. Um, but that's the year that I get a chance to go to Cuba, so for a year and a half, I live in Cuba…

TBW: What took you there? What was going on?

GS: I had, I had, well, in between—again, I've got these other jobs at Southwest and wherever, I'm also doing the volunteer work, the interesting work in my community, which is the doing the volunteer work around women's issues, like International Women's Day, uh, or Central America was a big thing at that point, and I was concerned that all the people working around Central America were white people that were, for the most part, church based, and in a city where, again, sixty percent Chicano, there were no Chicanos coming to meetings, there were no Chicanos involved in the action and it didn't make any sense. And so I helped form other groups, um, that were more Latino-centered. And the white organizers were like, "How did you get the brown people in?" We said, "Well, because we're doing more programming that includes, that brings in culture," and suddenly there are brown people in there, you know, because it was a different way of organizing and different thinking behind it. And, you know, suddenly we had no problems bringing in the Latino community of this town. So those were the sorts of jobs I was doing as a volunteer and I wanted, because of my interest in Central America, I also traveled down to Nicaragua in eighty-four and took a camera with me. And, 'cause again, I was seeing white people coming back and saying, "This is Maria," you know, "and she," you know. And it's a slide show, slide show. And I thought, 'slide shows don't work, and I'm bored of them.' And it's Maria, it's a white person talking about Maria, and what about us brown people talking about Maria who looks like us, who looks like our grandmother, who speaks our language and all that stuff. And so I thought, 'Oh, let me go and do a, you know, I'll do a documentary about it.' So I spent six weeks doing a documentary.

TBW: Oh, really? Film?

GS: A video, yeah, yeah. So came back and edited my first piece. Somebody saw it and knew about a film school starting up in Cuba, which is a school called Escuelenta Nacional de Cine Television, founded by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and all these filmmakers from Latin America, 'cause there was no film school except in Argentina and Mexico. There are film schools and then the one in Argentina closed down, economically they've been, they've struggled. Brazil, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. So those are the only film schools. You know, there are thirty-plus countries in Latin America where do you get them educated? And the filmmakers of the sixties and the seventies were also the people being kidnapped and brutalized and tortured and found dead because of the, you know, political message they're putting out there. So this is somehow a, a third-world vision to make this film school, and when that came up as an option, I had to do it, I weighed the differences and decided to go there 'cause I didn't think there would be another chance for me to go to Cuba.

TBW: And you were there for a year?

GS: A year and a half. From, with a little break coming in back home to touch base with San Antonio. Um, so yeah, I mean, I learned the essentials of, you know, working the video camera and worked on a film as well.

TBW: And while you were there, I imagine, you probably, what else other than the technical skills of using a camera did you get in Cuba? I'm sure that had to have some influence on you.

GS: Well, I guess, um, the school is made up of, again, it was the Ivy League of Latin American schools or whatever. It was kind of interesting because only six students from, you know, Argentina were accepted, six students from Brazil, six students from Ecuador, six students from all—I was the only person from the United States accepted, because there was only one slot for a Chicana, I was not even considered a U.S. citizen, you know, because this was Cuba, also. But there were, so there were eighty students selected for this entering class, and it was the first class, so it was the beginning of this program. So it was a big honor, again that was another thing, do you delay it? And I guess what I

recognized, it wasn't the Cuban school, although the Cuban community helped make it happen. You know, it was a school, it was a secondary school that they redid and created as a film school. It was, um, staffed, you know, the cafeteria workers, the people who cleaned the, you know, the gardeners, everybody that worked there, some, some of your professors were Cubans, but they were also limited to the number of slots as the other Latin American folks, so there were, you know, so my professor of editing was from France. Two of the professors were from France, you know, and the photography professor was from Brazil, but he was originally from Uruguay and the sound person was from Mexico. But there were like, two or three of these, each of these professors but they all came from all these different countries and there was a Cuban that came in also, to teach some classes. And everybody wanted to take classes anyway from those Cubans because they were famous, but we didn't get enough of them as we wanted because they were busy making their own films. Um, well, what I did also notice was that there was the economic differences between those third world countries, so that the kids that got selected from Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil were these upper-class, Latinos who didn't mix very well with the third-world types that were poorer from Ecuador, Bolivia and at least those two countries and more indigenous people. And I identified with the indigenous people, even through, I'm a light-skinned Latina.

TBW: Is that because of the situation here in the U.S. and the racial biases people have?

GS: Exactly. Yeah, sure, exactly. So we made those connections. And um, I guess up to that point I probably really, I understood class, I've always understood the class differences, but I hadn't put that in a, you know, relationship. So it was a struggle for, you know, we, everybody thought that we'd all love each other, that we were in for the same thing, but you know [drilling noise obscures conversation] this is the last part of trying to make the space legitimate here, it's taking a little bit at a time….well, when we looked for the space, we looked for something with high ceilings so we could put lights or whatever, because, again, it's a multi-use sort of space. And then we ran into this, and it was like, 'This

is beautiful, what is this?' you know? And, and people have said, if you don't want a fire alarm system, you'll have to bring it down [referring to the open-beamed ceilings] and create all this stuff, and they actually wanted us to have a sprinkler system, but the sprinkler system was going to cost thirty thousand dollars or something. So we talked to the people and they allowed us to do this other thing, so that we could do this, and learn a lot. And everybody wants to buy their own building nowadays, and it's like, "Please don't buy another building. Just share facilities, please.' So let's see, I don't know, the film school, I made a couple of other, I got to do the first film on gay men in Cuba. Um, and again, I wanted to take a chance, do you do that, do you not do that?

TBW: Was it very controversial?

GS: It wasn't controversial, and I mean, I think that was, again, up to that moment, you know, this is already a year, this is the piece I did the last, six months we're working on black and white, sixteen millimeter. And we all worked on a three-minute piece. And I did an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' 'House on Mango Street,' called 'Esperanza,' which is one of, it's like everybody's favorite little video, one of the top ten of the, you know, it's one of, it's very, it's one of my favorites, I'm surprised I can be as creative as I was because I'm more of a documentary sort of, type person. So there's more creative juices there. So then the last year, I spent some time doing research. But it was, you know, asking those questions and, again, we were outsiders coming in, so it was kind of like, you know, kind of putting some stuff out. I had, early on, I was walking around with my pink triangle trying to see if that would be a way to connect with other students, and then this student from Peru, who was in another class said, "Get rid of that, don't push it, you don't know what you're getting into, just drop it." And I paid attention to her for about a week or two, and then I said, "Forget this," you know. And just kept on pushing. And actually at one of the, they have an annual film festival, and it's like the biggest in Latin America and so, already reaching a year being in Cuba was when this film festival occurred. So there were all these films I really hated, because they were homophobic, racist and sexist and so there

were all these big forums that occurred like in a very United Nations-style format, so you'd have hundreds of, you know, people in these conversations talking about films from Latin America. So I had actually made a connection with U.S. white progressives coming in for the film festival and hung out with them and kind of asked them, my perceptions of films, and it was interesting, how I related progressive political thinking around women's, you know, how women and people of color and queers were portrayed, and kind of, got my O.K.s from them that yes, indeed, I could challenge them. So, because I wasn't getting the same sort of vibes from the Latinos there, and maybe it was also because I hadn't spoken English in a long time that I wanted to talk to people, you know, in English. So then I gave my speech that was challenging that, you know, 'If we're Latinos,' you know, 'working on making a new cinema for Latin America, Asia and Africa, then we should not be,' you know, 'continuously creating racist, sexist and homophobic stereotypical things.' And I talked about a specific film called the 'La Pelicula de la [unknown word]' which ended up winning the big awards that year. And I said, "I hear that it's going to be the big winner, and I hated that film and this is why," you know. And a lot of people came and supported me at the end of that, a lot of people thought I had no sense of humor and um, so, you know, that was like, a big highlight at the festival. And again, what role do I have because I'm then seen as a gringa, going on being this show-off, whatever and so I think I challenged some people, but I thought it was important to say it at that moment. And the other thing was that, early on in the year, just two weeks into it, in my bad Spanish, again as a Chicana in San Antonio, a lot of us have internalized a lot of this racism, that, um, that we, you know, I grew up speaking Spanish, my dad wanted us all to speak Spanish, because he knew that we would all learn English, and he knew that and educated person knew more than one language, but all, everywhere else we were hearing, "Don't speak the language." So I understood it really well, but I couldn't speak it as a twenty, how old was I? Twenty-six, so I had to basically be there and practice it. And two weeks into that I ran into Fidel who was at the film school and he was asking everybody what we thought of this film school and he kept on

hearing all these positive things about the film school. He finally said, "Come on, there's gotta be something negative about this school," and that's when I challenged him, I said, "There's this third-world within this third-world and the people from such and such countries are really treating the rest of us badly, because…"

TBW: How did they view you, as an American? Because they knew you were…

GS: Well, I think the Ecuadorianos and the Bolivianos and the, you know, the indigenous people from Mexico, you know, we were friends. We were friends, we connected from the beginning, and it was, again, just like, politically and the upper-class kids from those other [end of side one] [side two] Um, so yeah, it think it was just hard, and it was a question that he just didn't answer, because he got stumped by it. He got, because it wasn't a question, it was a comment, but, you know, he's a man without, you know, who never, is never at a loss for words, and he seemed to be at a loss for words. And Gabriel Garcia Marquez, you know, he's just, you know, passed by as they were going, he's like, "Good, you're practicing your Spanish." That was Gabriel Garcia Marquez' comment to me.

TBW: Great, your practicing your Spanish?

GS: Yeah, and six months later he ran into me and I, you know, he only hung out with the Colombianos, his favorite kids were kids from Colombia he didn't talk to anybody else. So some of us, you know, were [unintelligible], you know, you need to go talk to that guy. And um, he just kept on saying, "So, how's your Spanish?" And finally like a year later, you know, the whole year later he says to me…

TBW: Have you heard anything I've said?

GS: That's exactly what I said. I, and so I challenged him, I said, "If you really want to know who I am, you better start asking me a different question, because my Spanish has improved a lot more and you could ask a few other questions." And he got stunned, and apologized to me, said "You're right, I should be asking you other questions." And so, those are my—and everybody says, "Oh. Gabriel

Garcia Marquez, oh," and I thought, 'He's just a stuck up old man.' He didn't impress me, but, you know, I'm not, I haven't read much of his stuff. So that was my life in Cuba. And, I mean, there's a lot to say about it, and I haven't been back since. And I have to be back, but this job has really kept me from traveling.

TBW: And doing what you want to?

GS: Oh yeah. I mean, I think, I mean, we've been, Esperanza is always under attack for being Fidel Castro's, you know, cinemagraphic arm in the United States by gay conservatives in this city. Because we've promoted Cuba and all that stuff, so um, what else. I mean, I've wanted to go back because Cuba really is—I could have continued to be in that program for a couple more years and worked in the Cuban industry and actually worked on feature film that they might have done, but the U.S. embargo on Panama got, was implemented and so then I started thinking life was tough, but life got tougher. And I think what happened in Cuba's that the Cuban society, again, wanted to make things really good for the kids in this school. And just, you know, again, I mean they treated us differently, they, we were special kids, and even though we were special, then suddenly, you know, it wasn't as easy anymore. You know, it just got tougher all around. We traveled, we lived outside of Havana in a place called San Antonio de los Baños, so it was about thirty minutes away so we traveled back and forth. On a daily basis you could go to Havana, because there were buses. But then with the rationing of gas became more typical, everything just got difficult. It was really hard, and we, a friend from Costa Rica and I were just suffering so much, and how bad it was. You couldn't even go to a restaurant without having to wait for about two or three hours to just sit at a table and there were like, in a room this big, you know, two thousand square feet, and they would only be serving two or three tables and the rest of the tables were empty. We were like, "Why don't you serve?" It's like, there was no food to serve there was no—there were all these different reasons for it but for us, it became hell. It's like, if you're a bad person, you better be careful because if you're a bad person, you'll go to hell. No, you'll go to Cuba

instead of hell. [laughs] You know, it was like, it was just tough. And we understood that it wasn't about Cuba, it was just about the exterior, the United States and it's impending war on what turned out to be Panama. And the Panama invasion and all that, and it affected Cuba, because Cuba's partners were Panama and Mexico and all these places and all of the sudden you couldn't get even minimal stuff. And since that moment, you know, people got really sick and people were going blind and all that, so I didn't get to see that. It's since improved, and I didn't get to see that, either. And the Cubans can't come here, so it's not like I'm in contact with those folks. I think it's easier to make a phone call to Cuba, so now when we're looking for films for our film festivals, we can talk directly whereas when I was there, it was hard for people to call. I would call once a week for three minutes to talk to my parents or one of, to talk to my girlfriend or whatever. And, you know, they could call me and talk to me forever, but it was hard for them to ever find lines, going the other way.

TBW: It was a whole different way of life, I'm sure.

GS: Yeah. So when I came back here, a year and half later, because it has gotten tough over there, and I figured if I'm going to study film, I can study back in the United States at a different level. And I guess, ultimately, there was the Esperanza that was kind of there, and I had felt like I left it behind, so I wanted to kind of, put energy. And I was still talking to people, saying, "You need to do this about Esperanza, and try that, and yes, bring that group over and spend the two hundred," you know.

TBW: So it was still being worked on while you were gone.

GS: Yes. Susan Guerra was the first director, basically, she ended up directing. She was a volunteer person because there was no money, we just had a space. And then, um, then it just got tough for her because her husband, um, worked in the housing world and made, I guess he was a contractor or something, and the housing industry went down in eighty-seven, eighty-eight. So then he, basically, then it was hard, so they decided to move to Norway, which is where he was from. So they had lived in the United—they met in Norway and they lived in the United States for a few years and then he went

back home and she went with him. And then Carol Rodriguez was another board member, ran the space for about six months and then I came back. At the time that Carol was wanting to let it go and I basically said I was interested and they said, “Well, you’re interested.” The board that was there said, “Go ahead and take it on.” My partner, Gloria, had written her first, wrote her first grant, wrote it to Genevieve Bonn (sp?) over at Compassionate Society and she gave us our initial six thousand dollars so, that was the way we kind of had a budget of six thousand dollars in nineteen eighty-nine. You know, so even though we’d been around for a year and a half or whatever, we didn’t get money until that—I mean we got donations all the time, but not enough to hire anybody and so those six thousand dollars were… I don’t think my partner did that intentionally, it’s like she wrote it and the money came in, whoever would have been there would have been there, but nobody wanted it at that moment, so, and I was too excited. It was my dream, really. I think, ultimately, you know, other people helped co-found it, but I think this was the job I wanted or whatever, and that’s why I’m still here and maybe people want the job, too, but I’m not, I’m not ready to give it up. I don’t think the institution is strong enough right now. There are people at the Highlander Center (correct name?) that have been around for sixty years, or something like that, so.

TBW: Now when, in eighty-seven, when the the board and Esperanza was getting started, what were the, what were the primary goals of the organization, as you saw them?

GS: I think the vision was to find a central meeting space, a shared space, um, where people of like minds could come together. So that was, you know, that’s why a space was important, so people could come together. And ultimately, beyond that, it’s to share not only the space as a resource, but any other resources that people had. Everybody recognized that, um, that we were poor, everybody knew that.

TBW: The organization?

GS: All the organizations. So there were any social, economic, environmental justice organizations that believed in this positive, you know, social change, you know, environment, could come together

and call Esperanza home. But beyond that, it's like, how else can we share? So sharing was also the space, how do you, you know, how do we come into this space, and rent out this space and make it mutually beneficial to everybody so it wouldn't be too expensive, but everybody knew that they had to rent it but also pay for the A-C and the trash and everything like that. How could we open the space in the evening hours for people to have those meetings that they have, rather than having everybody go throughout the city to different people's homes. But again, being able to put down ten dollars for using it.

TBW: Kind of like a clearing-house for all these groups.

GS: For all the different groups, right. And there was a—Esperanza first went to a place called the Interchange Network, which was this network of all these social groups and they had a five-oh-one c-three, and we said, "We want somebody, an umbrella, so we can find this space and we can become this peace and justice center." And Cynthia Duda, that ran this organization, she was ready to give it up, said, "Yeah, sure we'll umbrella you," so basically we became a bigger organization, a stronger organization and Interchange ceased to exist because, I think, Cindy did it as a graduate student at Incarnate Word, creating this network and then this newspaper called the Interchange Network. And it came out on a monthly basis and it was, you know, eight and a half by fourteen, front and back and that was it. But it was a vehicle, and you could find it at Saint Paul's drug store and you could, you know, and that's where people like myself, at those spaces, would say, "Who's the Interchange? I'm interested," and such and such. And so um, the Interchange Network newsletter, which became La Voz de Esperanza, because she was ready to let it go, and it's like, "O.K., let's take it and let's also change the name." Because, again, if we're about this larger community and connected to this community, how do we, you know, how do we make things more accessible to people? So does Interchange Network mean anything to the larger Latino community, or to, I keep on thinking, 'What does Interchange mean to me?' But it meant something, and I don't think we tried to erase, I mean, as you

hear, I constantly try to tell that story, I constantly say that there was Susan Guerra and Gloria Ramirez and Cindy Duda and Romelia Escamilla and Beverly Sanchez Padilla, when you hear, when you write a little bit of the history we say was formed, the Esperanza was formed by a group of women, you know, so it's not, we try not to—again, it's about trying to be women and organizing and being more cooperative and communal than saying, "Oh, I did it all by myself." Right. So people keep asking my, "Why do you keep bringing Susan Guerra into it?" Because, you know, she kind of started, but then she left.

TBW: But if she hadn't done that work…

GS: She gave it the name. Yeah, exactly. If she hadn't been there as my confidant and my helper, then I might have not done it by myself. So, I mean, it was all, that board that included Judy Wade and Gloria Ramirez, if Gloria hadn't written that first grant, you know, we'd be just that much further behind. And Judy Wade was, you know, a constant person that went from Interchange to Esperanza and didn't get, become afraid as a white woman, to work with Latinas because then predominantly the Latinas, you know, took on more ownership and the white women stepped away. But Judy Wade continued to struggle with all of us, and we still love her, even though she lives in Vermont now. So I think, you know, it's just important.

TBW: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, you, the organization had your first grant, and you were open on Flores Street?

GS: Yeah. Flores Street. Esperanza runs the space, we work with, you know, organizations that—see, because the building was given to us by the Oblate priests.

TBW: O.K., so it was yours.

GS: It was lent to us. We got it for a dollar a year, and it was on a year to year basis. And the conditions of using the space was that we would follow the teachings of the Catholic Church. It was easier for everybody else to work under except for me, I think I had a harder problem. But I, I took that

to heart, I respected it, and I said, “The Catholic Church also is,” you know, “got it’s own problems and,” you know “has it’s own…” you know. I mean, there are gay priests who are dying of AIDS, and there are a lot of nuns I know that are pro-choice, so if those are the things, is that what they want us to do? Not speak about choice, and they don’t want us to speak about gay or lesbian issues? They didn’t ever articulate it.

TBW: So you kind of…

GS: So I said, “O.K. Fine.” It’s this, and I, as an ex-Catholic, can interpret it as I wish. And I just went ahead and challenged it, indirectly.

TBW: Was there ever a problem, though?

GS: Well, after the first lesbian and gay art show, I got a visit from the treasurer of the Oblate, whatever and was asked, “What is this all about?”

TBW: Because it was in the newspaper?

GS: Right, exactly. It was in the newspaper.

TBW: And you have to have publicity, or the show would be a flop.

GS: Right. So I got a visit after the first lesbian and gay art show. And I kind of said, “Look, this is good work, what do you want us to do? We’re even trying to earn income off of it.” They said, “Earned income, that’s a good idea.” [laughs] And so he kind of left it alone, and the second year it happened and he didn’t call in, and the third year was a bigger…one of the artists put a piece outside of the parameters of, you know, there was a little patio, so it could be hidden inside the building or within the patio, but this went outside the patio. And the artist came to me and said, “Look, this is the artwork, this is what it will be, it will be out there. Do you have any problems with it?” And I liked it, it was an installation piece called “Dirty Laundry,” and basically it was wire sculptures that represented people that had died of AIDS. And then there was sheets, um, bed sheets that were white, and on the bed sheets was the sodomy law of Texas. And that’s it. So to look at it, it was like white sheets flowing

and you had to get in close to read words, but it's the sodomy law, it's nothing that the law makers didn't write. But I think people were offended when they saw the word anus and a couple of other words, but you have to get in close to read those. That became problematic. I stood firmly. I, there was, that artist, Michael Marinas, who sits on our board now, and didn't at that moment, it was probably his strongest piece that I've ever seen and I really liked it a lot, and I think other people liked it. It also helped to bring our boards, our boards had to deal with some homophobia, because again, Esperanza's board has been people of color and white people, straight and gay, and all that sort of thing. It challenged a couple of our straight board members. And, um, we went through workshops and dealt with it that way, and moved forward. So that's when, that was in nineteen ninety, and all of the sudden, you know, six months later, you know, the Oblates wanted to sell the building. So the Oblates put the building on the market and our board, one of our board, our board president, Julian Oboa said at that moment—you know, I pulled him in as a straight Latino man and said, like, the board worked really hard and said, "How can we buy the building? If they want to sell it, let's buy it." And we met with them and we offered them all these different options and they said no. But the Refugee Aid Project, which was one of the other tenants went before them and said, "We'd like to buy this building." And they sold it to them.

TBW: So do you think it was a quiet, you know, like a protest against your politics?

GS: The Oblates were, their mission was always helping refugees all along, I think that was one of the—I think even when we moved in at the beginning the Refugee Aid Project was…and a nun named Sister Jean Dorrell was the director of that space. So she and I were together, we moved forward and worked with each other and we educated each other about each other's issues. Um, and for her, it was also important to keep us there as well as to keep the space, because none of us wanted to move. So she worked it out, I mean, they didn't include us at all, they just worked out their deal with the Oblates, but the Oblates were interested in working with the refugees, so then it was no longer, then the Oblates

would never be damned by their constituents. You see, that was the problem, you know, because if the Oblates were supporting lesbian and gay stuff, then people would stop giving them money as Oblates, so, yeah. That's the way it works. So in nineteen-ninety we were there for another three years, and Jean Dorrell was the director of the building, which is still called the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. I mean, she never took away the name or anything like that, but she ran it. Now people paid her the monthly, you know, the rent, and she picked up the, before, I was in charge of that. I took a lot of that responsibility, that was one of my jobs. And I think there was more of a connection at that moment with Esperanza and our network organizations because I think we were more about that shared, that clearing house space. And once that was taken away, then there was more opportunity to do more programming. Although programming had been, again, essentially part of our work. But the newsletter and then some programming, and then all of the sudden there was more time for programming, I think. And until she was there, everything was fine, and then she decided to move on to another job and then they hired several people, you know, because they couldn't keep one person at the Refugee Project and there were like two or three men that took on the job. So maybe she was there until ninety-two, or something like that. And for a year there was, just back and forth, back and forth. Then in ninety-three they hired a Latino man named Manuel, whose last name I can't remember, and he essentially helped to boot us out of that building. And it was claimed, the claim was that two Latinos, this Latina woman and this Latino man, had personality problems and we, they just wanted us to deal with the problems at hand and just resolve them and be good little brown kids and take care of our problems. And I was challenging him on his sexism and homophobia, and calling the white people of the board of Refugee Aid Project to deal with his misogyny and homophobia. Um, seems like every Wednesday we had Woman's Space, ELLAS, a lesbian Latinas group and, for whatever reason, there were all these women's groups that were meeting on Wednesdays, and suddenly his dance group, he had an indigenous group that had to start practicing on Wednesdays at exactly the same time these women's

groups would meet, and so, think of the drums and all that. So the women started meeting at Nexus and all these other bars and so, all of the sudden, Wednesdays, nobody was around. And so he stopped meeting and then, you know, I challenged him, "These groups have been meeting here for five years and you just came into your position, can't you just…I'm in charge still of who gets to use it." And it's like, "No, I'm in charge." So he was in charge, he totally denied the history of people who had been there, so pretty much all the lesbian and gay groups cleared out because they weren't wanted there anymore, they felt they weren't wanted there anymore. And then after our fifth or sixth annual lesbian and gay art show, we got a notice that we were evicted. And we fought for at least enough time to raise monies to put a down payment on this house.

TBW: And that was, what year was that?

GS: Ninety-three, and we moved on March eighth, ninety-four. So we were very excited about it.

TBW: Well, this is a good space. Very good. Nice parking and big place, well you can always use more…

GS: Yeah, and I guess the energy of a lot of our—I mean, again, that was the trying point, we went to the community and said, "Look, this is what's happening." And I, I put out some stuff. I wrote some articles in the newspaper, got attacked by the same group of people who didn't like us. [laughs] And I remember going to this meeting with a lot of progressive gay people, and I kept on saying, you know, "We have to deal with our own racism, sexism and homophobia. We're talking about the right, but the right sometimes is amongst us or it might not be the right but it's just, we haven't dealt with our own stuff, so why are we…" I said, "We were just kicked out by," you know, "so-called progressive Latinos." The people working on refugee issues, but they don't want to deal with their own homophobia. I had a Mennonite who said, "You know, if you just didn't do the gay stuff, maybe we could support you, financially."

TBW: If you just wouldn't do the gay stuff.

GS: Right. Because I kept on saying, you know, "How can we get some of your Mennonite volunteers to help the Esperanza?"

TBW: And they just absolutely balked on that point?

GS: Mm-hmm. You know, as time went on, they would say, "Maybe if you moved to the west side." You know, [unknown group name, sounds like Force Amida] was another organization that started about nineteen-ninety when they lost their jobs and Esperanza was quickly, technically was able to say, here's a hundred people, call them up, they'll be out there demonstrating with you and supporting you. And we started developing, as Latina women, this, you know, friendship and these were straight Latina women between ages thirty and eighty, you know, who had never organized at all, and technically I started doing what Esperanza is supposed to be doing, and they were right next door, so I could just say "Hello and how are you doing?" I could also say, "Why are you xeroxing two thousand pages when you should probably be going to a printer. It will be cheaper for you to do that." They said, "Really? We didn't know that." So then just offering these little ideas, like have you ever tried direct mail? You know, that's when you write letters, or how about major gifts? They were like, "What's that?" So it was kind of helping them that way and but we also started supporting each other, because they started seeing how Manuel treated them, as well as how he treated us. And that same Mennonite volunteer who wouldn't give us a volunteer, volunteered for the women there. And so it was, I mean, we're all supposed to help each other, but it was interesting how they sort of pitted us against each other and we were noticing that sort of stuff. Ultimately, the women from [Force Amida] left that space to go to another space, because the idea was let's be on the southside with the rest of the women. And my take on it was let's separate these women. Because it was the Mennonite Wes Hare (sp?) who kind of pushed for them to—you know, they had a feeling that they should be on the west side or the south side. They really wanted to be on the south side, and he wanted them on the west side, so they finally challenged him and said, "Why do we want to do the west side, our women are on the south side?" But

they went to a space that, to this day, you know, five or six years later, they spend eight hundred dollars a month renting a two thousand square foot building which is, from the beginning, was a wrong mistake. It was too much.

TBW: That's a lot of money.

GS: And he allowed for them to—at this moment, they're falling apart, because they have to pay this ungodly amount of money. Um, and that would have been something, I'd say no, I mean, if I was concerned about their two thousand, you know, piece job xeroxing or photocopying, why wouldn't I be more concerned about that? But they didn't know at that point, they were confused and, again, you know, so they—and that helped separate us. They didn't know gay at that point, and suddenly, they were in love when they went to San Francisco, they called us up and said, "Who do you know in the gay community in San Francisco, because we're still boycotting Levi's and we want your contact. And it's like, good, you know, so where a couple of years ago, they only had stereotypes about the gay community and this time they were able to move forward that way. And, you know, that's again, how we were breaking all these different…

TBW: You must have to do that at nearly every turn. You, personally, I mean, just as we've been talking about so many different kinds of social and personal issues about how you're perceived by people in so many different ways. How has being a Latina and a lesbian challenged you in your path to wherever it is you're going to end up?

GS: I always said that if I had been the Chicana from the west side who also went to Yale, if I had been a young man, with the same credentials, I would have been, you know, and of course not been gay, I would have been taken in by all the Willie Velasquez and all—because I saw Willie take in Juan Sepulveda and all these other Ivy League guys, and they were treated, they were the little brothers, the sons. And I though, 'Hmm, they haven't done that to me.' And I always thought that at Esperanza and in my space over there at Southwest voter and MALDEF and all those places would have been a lot

more, would have collaborated with us from inception, because I worked at those places, they all knew my name, but they kind of let me be by myself, and when they did issues, they continue to do issues around Latino issues, they don't ever include us. I've had to push my, you know, me personally…

TBW: Us meaning Esperanza?

GS: Us meaning Esperanza. Because I think, you know, ultimately we're about creating an agenda that is progressive for this city, for this country, whatever, for this world. So when they're talking issues, we want to be present at the table, but somehow we don't get invited to those meetings, so if I find out, if somebody lets me know, and I think some people have allowed me to know about certain meetings. Mainly it's been Latina women, straight Latina women. I think Latina straight women have always made the connection around sexism to be able to understand. They have to deal with racism and sexism, so it's easy for them to just jump over and get the homophobia stuff. So Maria Berriozabal was always a supporter of Esperanza, even though it might affect how other people perceived her but, because she was there, you know, we had access to a few other spaces. Antonia Castaneda who has been new to town, in the last three years, has also taken us and, you know, given us the opportunity to just, throws our name out all the time so it allows other people to think twice about what they're doing. But I think that even those women are special women, because there are other women in positions of power who haven't shared that and opened up. But I would also say that the Latino men have been just silent. And I think when Maria Berriozabal ran for office in ninety-one and lost, part of her losing was the men, the Latino men not supporting her. Not saying, we support Maria, I mean there were Latino men who did support her, but the Henry Cisneros' were absent, the Bustamantes were absent.

TBW: Why do you think that was?

GS: Because, I think she has that progressive agenda, first of all. And I think, you know, I don't know. I thought about a lot of different ways. But they didn't support her, so when Bustamante ran a

few months later for something, there was Henry Cisneros supporting him. And it's like, Bustamante had all these problems, ended up going to jail, right, yet there was Henry Cisneros right there.

TBW: I have a hard time, uh, I have a hard time getting a fix on the politics here. I've just been watching for a couple years now, but it seems to me that it varies wildly. I mean, depending on who you meet and who you're talking to, there seems to be a, Texas in general strikes me as being extremely, and maybe this is just where I came from, but extremely conservative. But there are pockets of people you meet, you know… How has, has that been a major problem?

GS: Well, somebody told me, what's his name? Tomas [unknown names] who works at the Rockefeller, who's from San Antonio, said that in nineteen ten when there was a revolution in Mexico, people fled. Some went to California, and some went to Texas, the principle places. Well, all the conservative people came to Texas, the rich, the middle-class, the landed, whatever, and the radicals went to California. That's curious, I don't think I knew that. But at the same time, MALDEF opens up it's office in nineteen sixty-eight in San Antonio. Southwest Voter Registration Project opens up its offices in whatever year in San Antonio. You know, Crystal City and the beginnings of the Chicano movimiento, start, right outside of San Antonio. Willie and all those folks come from Saint Mary's University, so there's all this radical thinking in the sixties and seventies from San Antonio, not even from Texas, but from San Antonio. Elected officials, you know, start here. In California, they're still trying to get them registered to vote, where we've had them registered to vote. Unfortunately, yeah, I think based on class and education and color, you have these Latinos who decide to come and go as they like. Is it three o'clock already? Are they ready to work?