

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURENTS BAÑUELOS-BENITEZ**

An Oral History Conducted by Rodrigo Vazquez

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Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada  
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
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## PREFACE



In 2018, Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez became one of the original team members of the Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada project. He was a recent UNLV graduate in journalism and beginning his graduate studies in education. He was of the first generation in his family to attend college.

As revealed in this oral history, Laurents brought a keen grasp of the cultural diversity within Las Vegas to the project and to his educational goals. As a youth growing up on Las Vegas' East side, he had a strong pride in his heritage, the son of Maria Benitez (El Salvador) and Manuel Banuelos (Mexico). He would use these life experiences and his innate curiosity to connect with each participant in the Latinx Voices project.

These qualities enabled Laurents to adapt to his teaching opportunities in the classroom. He also shares the challenges of teaching during the era of COVID-19 as schools relied on remote learning and teaching.

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June 16, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Rodrigo Vazquez

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Barbara Datch                                      6/16/2021

**Today is Wednesday, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021. I am in the Oral History Research Center here at UNLV. My name is Rodrigo Vazquez, and with me are...**

***Barbara Tabach.***

**And...**

Laurents Banuelos-Benitez.

**Laurents, can you spell your name for me?**

Yes. Laurents is L-A-U-R-E-N-T-S. Banuelos is B-A-Ñ-U-E-L-O-S. Benitez is B-E-N-I-T-E-Z.

**Let's get started with the first question, where were you born; where did you grow up?**

I'm a Las Vegas native; I was born and raised here. I was born at UMC, which I always kind of find really funny. How many individuals, just right off the bat, this was the exact hospital I was born at? And then constantly drive by it. Yes, I was born at UMC.

Actually, I didn't know this until maybe a few years ago, my parents' first apartment, when I was born, was actually just right across the street on Harmon. I think they lived there until I was about a year old; it was down the street from UNLV on Harmon. Then their first home that they bought was in North Las Vegas over by Von Tobel Middle School. We didn't spend a lot of time; I think I grew up in that house until I was about five. Then we moved over to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, over on the east side of Las Vegas, and that's really where I've lived the majority of my life with my family. I have an older sister, my baby sister. We lived there the majority of my life up until recently when I bought my first home at twenty-five, which is another crazy thing to be able to say, especially with this current market and crappy economy, to say I was able to buy my first home at twenty-five. Not many people my age can say that.

At twenty-five I bought my first home, and I currently live in...I call it North Las Vegas. Monse, my wife, likes to call it Centennial, but we're right on the border of it. If you go one

block either way, you go one block west, you're in Centennial; you go one block east, you're in North Las Vegas. But, yes, I've lived there for the last two years.

Really, when I think of the city and I think of Las Vegas, East Las Vegas is home. It's funny, I live in a gated now. I've never lived in a gated community, ever, never have. Yet, I feel safer when I'm visiting my parents and I'm walking around my neighborhood. It seems familiar. There's comfort in the familiar. When I go home, not to say that I feel unsafe in my own home, but...I don't know. Every time I go home it feels like home because my wife's there, my pets are there, but it's not the same as East Las Vegas; that's home.

***Describe East Las Vegas and what was it like when you were growing up.***

East Las Vegas, man, to me it is wonderful. I've always said this: You could walk and visit every shop on East Las Vegas and never have to speak a lick of English, because there's no need to. People of the Latino community, I tend to...The block that I think of when I think of East Las Vegas is Eastern and Bonanza because that's where I grew up. It really hasn't changed much at all. There is still a Smart and Final that has an alleyway. I remember one time that as a family we were walking, I think, from the Smart and Final. We were buying ice cream or something. The alleyway connects to houses in my neighborhood. I remember this dog, one of the neighbors' dogs popped his head over and barked at us and just gave us the biggest fright. Not that he was going to jump over or anything, he just scared the hell out of us. Every time I see that Smart and Final I remember that memory.

I remember the Hollywood Video that used to be there on Eastern and Bonanza. It was attached to Game Crazy, a videogame store. I remember asking my parents for money, to do chores or whatever, and save up a couple of bucks and then go to Game Crazy to buy a GameCube game or go to Hollywood Video to rent a movie. It's not that long ago, but I teach



now and for my students who in the grand scheme of things, aren't that much younger than me, because my high school ten-year reunion is not until next year. I'm not much older than them, but the idea of going to a physical store, finding a physical DVD, and then going home to watch it is such a foreign concept to them, but I remember that. I would beg my dad to take me there.

Hollywood Video is no longer around. They bit the dust even earlier than Blockbuster did. It's now a Walgreens, and I have memories of Walgreens as a teenager, going to that Walgreens to get a Gatorade or to get some kind of snack. There is a 7-Eleven there as well that has not changed at all. Currently it's a Cardenas, which is a supermarket that is in walking distance, but I remember it being an Albertsons; I remember it being a Sav-On. At one point I think it was a Lucky's before it became a Cardenas. I think of the Radio Shack where I would go buy batteries for the toys that I had; no longer around. I think now they're this Panda knockoff; it's called Chinese Restaurant, and it has a panda on it even though they're not Panda.

I think of this Latin music store that is no longer there. Now it's a Model Latino, Latino fashion. But growing up there used to be this Latino record store, and on the walls on the outside they used to have handprints of famous Latino musicians. Shakira had her handprints there; Vicente Fernández; Juanes. I remember whenever I walked by it, I couldn't resist measuring my hand against Vicente Fernández and seeing, oh okay, kind of measuring my hand's growth against whoever was on there. Now it's a fashion store and there's a bike store next to it.

I think of 28<sup>th</sup> Street, a lot of big people from Las Vegas came out of that street. Even though I didn't grow up on it, I have memories of 28<sup>th</sup> Street, or the projects that used to be on 28<sup>th</sup> Street and Eastern because I used to cut through them to get home quicker from Roy Martin Middle School, the original building that's no longer there. I think Sunrise Acres or some school sits on the land now that used to be Roy Martin, and Roy Martin has scooted down a block.

I think of a couple of murals. On the side of Cardenas, it's hidden and you have to get out of your car to see it or you'll never notice it, but on the side there's a beautiful Virgin de Guadalupe painted, and she has always been there, as a kid. The crazy part is there's a clinic in that little corner. In the clinic, my mom has taken me there a couple of times when I was ill. It's kind of an interesting view, sitting in a clinic where you're sick and you see the Virgin de Guadalupe looking into the clinic. Then on Stewart and Eastern, right across the street from the East Las Vegas Community Center, there's a mural of Pedro Infante that has never, ever in my twenty-seven years that I've seen it been tagged by anyone.

***Why do you think that is?***

I think it's because we recognize the importance of that mural, and the same with La Virgin de Guadalupe; it's never been tagged as far as I know. They're just beautiful homages to our culture, and I think the people in the neighborhood recognize that and leave them untouched. You can even say, "Well, tagging hasn't been a problem." Tagging is such a problem in that area. The Smart and Final that I mentioned earlier is constantly three shades of brown because there is the original color they paint, they'll be tagging and then they'll paint over it, but they'll never get the same, matching brown paint, and then a couple of weeks later there is new tagging above that fresh layer. Again, for some reason, they can't get the same matching paint, so there's another new layer. That Smart and Final, on the side, has always been three colors of brown because of tagging.

I also think of the beauty salon that sits on 23<sup>rd</sup> and Bonanza that you can tell used to be houses that got retrofitted to be businesses. On one side it used to be a tax place, and I think my parents did their taxes a couple of times there. Now it's a photography studio, if it's even still functioning. Across the street there is a beauty salon where I used to go get my hair cut, forever,

for years I went there. I remember you'll sit there—it's two chairs; it's a two-chair salon—and in the back you can always hear the family that lives there because I think they live in the back part of it. There's always telenovelas playing on the TV, always playing telenovelas. I remember you sit there and you're kind of waiting for your turn and you're just watching "La Rosa de Guadalupe" or whatever is on there. Next door, now there is a cell phone shop that is owned by a pair of Dominicans who are very hilarious. They're very unique in their way and they're just full of energy and loud. I've gone and gotten my phone fixed a couple of times. Cracked screens and stuff, they'll fix it for you.

To me the east side is a mosaic of people that have come into this part of Las Vegas and have built lives for themselves. There is this community there that if you're not from there, people are really quick to judge it. I've had friends who have come by and who have locked their doors. Like, what are you doing? They hear the east side, and it's, "Oh, that place is ghetto." This place is this and that. But really, it's the farthest thing from the truth. There are so many other little businesses and little places in that one block that I haven't even mentioned that I have so many memories of, and that's just that one block.

***Is it fair to say that growing up you always frequented those businesses for your services?***

Yes, especially before I was sixteen and I wasn't driving and didn't have a license. You could only go as far as where your parents were willing to drive you or where you could walk. Prior to being sixteen, the furthest I ever really got would be a couple of blocks more east to Bonanza and Lamb because that's where my childhood best friend used to live. There's a Panda [Express] there and he used to live on the community right behind the Panda. The reason I even got that far was because my childhood best friend's mom was best friends with my mom. They were both from El Salvador, and they met at a factory that made life jackets. That was the one place I could

most times convince my parents to go drop me off, or they would drop him off, or they would pick one of us and take us home.

Again, my neighborhood even expanded a little bit more because there are so many places that you have these memories of, and I can fill up a whole two hours just telling you all the different businesses and the memories I have there and walking there, especially in this fricking heat, right? Summertime is the time I would have more time to fill. I look back and think, how the heck was I walking from Bonanza and Lamb down two, three blocks to go to the park in this heat without a water bottle? It just never occurred to me to bring a water bottle, and we would come back.

To answer the question, the east side to me is memories of different places that I visited and I frequented, and, again, it hasn't changed much, really. I think the big addition to that block would be the East Las Vegas Library that now sits on 28<sup>th</sup> Street where the projects used to be. Apart from that it hasn't changed much.

**Do you find that families stay in that neighborhood long term?**

I think they do. Even on my street, on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, there's three or four families that have really been there forever apart from my mom. We have a neighbor across the street who has been there forever, and another house over they've been there forever as well. That neighbor that we have, his brother lives with him as well, and he has a neighborhood nickname. Actually, I don't even know his actual name, this gentleman. We know him as Flaco, skinny, and we call him that because he's really, really skinny. The reason everyone knows him as Flaco, well, one, because he's skinny, but Flaco walks around the neighborhood all the time. His brother works in construction, and Flaco doesn't drive. As far as I know he doesn't drive. He's always walking. He's got a ride from someone or he's always walking. It is not strange to sometimes be driving

down Maryland Parkway down to, like, Sahara and see Flaco on the corner. Again, Flaco lives two houses down from my parents. This man is walking from Eastern and Bonanza down to Maryland Parkway and Sahara. With my siblings and now my wife, we've almost made it a game of East Side Where's Waldo? If you know Where's Waldo, you pick up the (bucks). For us it's Where's Flaco? Whenever we go and drive and we see Flaco on the street, we'll be mid-conversation, "Oh, there goes Flaco." Then we will go, "Hey, there's Flaco."

Yes, there are a few families that stay there, and it's not to say that there aren't some people who come and go. There's a few houses, especially on 22<sup>nd</sup> that never seem to stay occupied for some reason. People just come and go. They stay a few years, they go. Recently they just constructed a new house. Two houses down from my parents, almost ten years ago there was a fire that completely destroyed the house, and it stayed empty, years. No one touched it. Recently they just constructed a brand-new house on it. They put it on the market for three hundred thousand. I remember when I saw that I was like, these people are out of their minds; none of these houses are close to that value. This goes to show how crazy this market is: That house sold for three hundred thousand. My parents' home, they've been there now twenty-two years, last we checked its value was at two-sixty [\$260,000].

***What did they pay for it, do you know?***

They bought it, I think, just above a hundred. That house looks nothing like it did when we bought it. I remember the first day we got there. There was no lawn. There was this tree that's still there, but there was like loose sand, almost. I remember the wind picked up and it was dusty, which was really confusing to me because at the house where we first lived, off of Von Tobel, my mom had this beautiful garden, plants, roses, just beautiful.

My mom has always loved flowers, to the point where she credits for saving me once from a bad fall. My parents are immigrants and they have always worked whatever shift they could get, and so sometimes they would be getting up at four or five in the morning and then take me to a family friend or something to watch me. One of these early mornings when they were going, it was in the middle of winter according to my mom, it was icy on the driveway and my mom didn't notice. She slipped and she was carrying me. I went flying in the air and I landed in her rosebush; it broke my fall. I didn't have a scratch on me besides a thorn scratch. My mom always credits roses from saving me from that really nasty fall.

It was so weird going to this new house and there was just dust everywhere. My parents, man, they put their sweat, blood and tears into that house. When they let the trees grow, you can't really even see the house because they have three or four trees and the trees will connect, so you can't even see them. My mom has roses. My dad has a couple of fruit trees that right now he's got peaches. The limbs are almost about to snap from how heavy they are with fruit. People come to my mom's house, and at some points they'll sell them. Whatever you can carry for a couple of dollars. People will come and pick fruits from my parents' trees.

Now they have chickens in the backyard, my mom; this has been her recent thing. I think at this point she has ten chickens and three chicks. Each one of these chickens lays an egg a day. They're getting about a dozen eggs a day, and that's their new thing now is to sell eggs. Now people stop at my mom's house to buy eggs. I'll even sell eggs for them sometimes. "Hey, you want fresh eggs, organic?" "Yes. How much?" "I'll bring you a dozen tomorrow." And I've shown up to work—

*I'm going to place an order for it today. I love fresh eggs, yes.*

You can. It's funny because my baby sister still lives at home, and she's the entrepreneur there. She gets in charge of the eggs. I think the last time I asked they were backordered, to the point where there was a three-week waiting period. I was like, okay, that's a lot.

That house is...I don't know. That house is mostly a symbol of my parents' hard work.

***Is it fair to say that the demographics of that neighborhood are all Spanish-speaking? When you say people are uncomfortable, sometimes they lock their cars, are those people who don't understand the culture of a neighborhood that get nervous?***

I think it's people who have never lived in the area and only know what they hear. The demographics of it have pretty much stayed the same. Actually, since I've left the neighborhood and moved into my own home, you're starting to see a lot more African American in the neighborhood, which is interesting because when I was growing up there, you wouldn't, you wouldn't see a lot of African Americans there. Now there's not a lot especially when you compare it to areas like North Town, North Las Vegas, or the Westside, which is historically Black. It's starting to change more. It's now more Black and Brown. Unfortunately, you're also starting to see a little more homeless people loitering especially on the main streets of Bonanza and Eastern, and that I credit to the original Las Vegas Library being closed down. The original Las Vegas Library used to sit up across from Cashman Field, and that's a place I used to frequent a lot.

***The library?***

The library and the Children's Discovery Museum. That's where it originally sat as well. I remember the first time I went through their tower to see the city because they had a little telescope in there. Especially in the last few years of existence, it got real bad with homeless people. They'd hang out in that area; they'd stay there. They closed it down and some of them

have come down the Bonanza hill, and you'll see them sitting in front of the Smart and Final, walking around 28<sup>th</sup> Street, especially because I think now they're going down to the East Las Vegas Library. And that's nothing against the homeless population here in Las Vegas because they are a whole other population that needs help and needs to be taken care of, but it's going to be interesting to see how the dynamics of the neighborhood change, if we're going to see pushback from the people that have been there for a while and if the city government is going to respond to that pushback. I feel like if that situation happened in Summerlin, you started seeing a lot more homeless population, you're going to feel like the City of Las Vegas would respond a lot more quickly versus whereas the east side, it tends to drag its feet a little bit more. It's going to be interesting to see if it gets worse; if it gets better.

Then the gentrification that's coming is also interesting. That house that I mentioned earlier that got sold for three hundred thousand is almost to me the first sign that gentrification is coming, especially when you consider how close we are, or at least my particular block is to East Fremont and the gentrification that has gone on there. You're starting to get more people moving into the area, and again we're seeing people being pushed out. Las Vegas, I think, is in this weird period where we're going to see pockets of gentrification happen and push people who have historically been in that area out. It's going to be interesting to see, one, how the community responds and, two, how the city responds.

The other area where I'm seeing that is North Las Vegas over by Mojave High School where I used to work. That school since its existence was right across the street from the pig farm. The people in that area that lived there were Black and Brown because house prices were low because of the pig farm. If you ever drove by that pig farm at eight in the morning especially after a heavy rain, it will knock you out. The pig farm a couple of years ago got moved deeper



into the mountains, I believe, now. They've dug up that dirt and, really, it doesn't smell anymore. The only time I got a whiff of it while I was working there was after a really heavy rain. I barely caught a whiff of it. I said, "*Oof*, it's still there." But I'm seeing again—my parents' block, it was one house that got built for three hundred thousand. Over by Mojave in North Las Vegas, now that that pig farm is gone, there's entire communities being built from scratch that don't go lower than three hundred thousand. I sit there and think that the people who have lived here since the beginning aren't going to be the ones buying those homes, they're not. You're going to get people from out of town. You're going to get people from California who, three hundred thousand, they can pay that in cash and then some just by selling off their property they had back in California.

The demographics of that school are going to change. I almost feel like the COVID-19 pandemic pushed it off a little bit because we were seeing White students coming in with far-right ideologies who weren't shy about sharing them in a school that has historically—Mojave has been around since 2001, so about twenty years—but has historically always been Black and Brown. Now we're getting kids...I generally don't believe they believe the stuff that they're saying, but they're hearing it at home and they're repeating it. I've told this to colleagues and I've told this to other people I've worked with, Mojave itself is going to be a case study in the next few years of what that transition looks like, that power dynamic of White people moving into neighborhoods that are traditionally Black and Brown and bringing in a belief system and clashing with the ones that have been there historically. It'll be interesting, yes.

***This may be a good point to segue into your career. When you started as a student worker on the Latinx Voices project, your goal was to become a teacher.***

Yes.

***Can you talk about working on the project and working on your studies and how that all evolved for you?***

Yes. I'm first generation to go to college and graduate college. To pay for my undergrad, I worked in the industry, in the service industry, waiting tables, bussing tables.

***That's what you were doing when you applied for the project. I'd forgotten. Where were you working?***

Planet Hollywood. Yes, this was actually my first job that wasn't retail or service industry. I've been working since I was sixteen, as soon as I could get a working permit and my parents let me work. But, yes, this was my first job that wasn't service industry or retail. I'm fortunate enough that what I made in tips was enough to pay for my undergrad. I completed my undergrad in media studies and journalism, and I looked around and went, "Now what?" because for me college was something I'm not sure I would have done on my own if I didn't have that push from my parents.

My mom has always said this, and I don't remember the first time she said this, but she's always said, "When I pass, don't expect an inheritance; don't expect money; don't expect whatever. The only thing I can leave you in this life is your education, and that is what I'm leaving you with, is your education." That has always pushed me to work at my academics even though I've been great at it, especially my high school career.

I tell my high school students, "Just because I'm your teacher doesn't mean I was valedictorian of my class." Honestly, I have no idea why Clark High School gave me a diploma, and I'm still expecting them to come ask for it back because I just wasn't a great student, I wasn't. Actually later I found out why I wasn't. But I wasn't great. I was always the kid who was

told, “He has great potential, but he can’t focus; he has great potential, but he’s lazy; if he would apply himself more, he would do amazing.”

I graduated high school and went to college because that was the thing to do. I almost flunked out of college. When I met my wife—because me and my wife met in undergrad—when I met her I was a semester away from being kicked out of UNLV because my grades were shit, they were. I was flunking, bad, because I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t ask my parents, how do I apply for FAFSA? My parents didn’t know. That was so hard to come home and see your parents, “Oh, you’re doing it?” I think to this day I don’t know that my mom knows how close I was to getting kicked out of the university. I don’t think she knows. I don’t think I’ve even told her. Then I met my wife, who is the complete opposite of me. She was being told the same thing: Education is our legacy to you. She took that and she ran with it. She was top of her class. She graduated with honors. When she got here at UNLV, she was killing it. She was doing great. Then here I was a semester away from being kicked out. We met and we started dating. She saw my grades. Really, I don’t know why the heck she didn’t bounce.

She always gives me crap for this that when we first met I acted disinterested. She’ll be the first one and she had feelings first. But I always told her, “I knew my grades were taking me out the door of UNLV, and you were going the opposite direction.” I always told her, “I thought you were just too good for me. I didn’t want to bring you down.” Like I said, I have no fricking clue why she didn’t bounce, but she stuck around with me. She pushed me to do better. She was my first epiphany of realizing how important education is for our community and what our responsibilities as first generation students is to our parents or our community. Because of her, because of her push, I went from a semester away from being kicked out of the university to my

last three semesters of undergrad making dean's list every semester, every semester. That was my undergrad.

When I finished I was like, "Now what? I've got the degree, but now what? What do I do with this?" Really, with a journalism and media studies degree, I looked around. I don't want to work for the R-J. I don't want to work at Fox News. There aren't many options here in town if you want to work in journalism. A lot of alumni from the Greenspun College ended up going to other places because especially with a journalism degree you go where the job is. I know one friend, she ended up reporting in this small border town out of Texas for a couple of years. She was front-of-the-camera talent. Everyone kind of just went each's way. I was just kind of stuck and didn't know where to go.

My wife at that time was working as a tutor. She's like, "You need a job." I was still waiting tables, but I was not happy. I was mad. Here I am with a bachelor's degree and I'm still asking people how they want their eggs. I just didn't know where to go. She started pulling me from the service industry, and she got me a gig as a tutor, which was okay. I worked with kids of all ages to help them with their basic math, reading and stuff. Then that led into me becoming a tutor at this charter school called Beacon Academy, or I was a teacher's aide. Actually, Lola Brooks off the board of trustees—I'm not sure if she's still there—but that's where I first met her and came across paths with her. She was the IT person for that school.

The more that I worked with students, I had people tell me, "Oh, you have a knack for this." And I was very resistant to it. I was like: *I don't want to teach; I don't want to do that. There's no pay. You're underappreciated.* I was spewing everything that you hear about when it comes to teaching.

The thing with Beacon Academy, even though they fired my ass from that job, they take in students who flunk out from CCSD and give them another opportunity to earn a high school diploma. I met students who had trouble with addiction. I got students who got involved in the life. Students who for any number of reasons fell through the cracks of CCSD. What was really startling to me was that the majority of these students were from my neighborhood. Beacon Academy sits on Flamingo and, I think, Hualapai. They don't have funds for school buses, so what they did is they would buy twenty-four-hour bus passes from RTC, and not even at a discounted rate because RTC didn't want to give them a discount for it, and they would give these students bus passes to ride the bus to and from their neighborhoods. Kids were coming from the east side all the way...almost Summerlin to attend classes online. It was just startling that majority of these kids were from my neighborhood.

I remember one student, he was almost blind. He really only had ten percent vision left. He could only see about a finger's width in his vision. I was talking to him. He was from my neighborhood. He mentioned that he just couldn't study because his dad had been deported earlier and that just kind of messed him up and he couldn't deal with it.

That prompted me to share the story of my mom being deported at thirteen. I say deported, but it's not necessarily a deportation. What happened with her and her process of getting permanent residency, she was asked to go back to El Salvador and wait out the process there. It was almost a punishment for the fact that she crossed illegally instead of waiting her turn, as you're supposed to. But what they don't acknowledge is, how are you going to wait your turn when your country is being ripped apart in a civil war? My mom was gone for about a year when I was thirteen, at an age where for everyone you're going through a lot. Those hormones hit you like a semi-truck. For boys it's aggression sometimes. You're trying to figure yourself

out. My mom was gone for that period of time in my life, through no fault of her own. I remember how difficult that was.

I shared that story with this student, and we made a connection to where he was like, “Wow. You know where I’m coming from. You know my story. You can relate to it. And you’re on the side with your degree.” It was like I saw the lightbulb flip for him if it’s possible. He stands out.

I’ve met students who were involved in the life, and I tell this to anyone who asks me, the only thing separating me from gang life, because it’s prevalent on East Las Vegas, was my mom because I was afraid of my mom more than any *cholo* on the street. My mom was scary and she kept me on the straight and narrow. I remember when she got back. Because Dad was so busy working to maintain the bills and to send money back to Mom so she had it back there, Dad couldn’t keep a close eye on me. I kind of started pushing boundaries and got rebellious. I remember the one time my dad ever smacked me was during that time period. I think he had a bad headache that day or something and he was trying to open a bottle aspirin. I back talked him. My dad is short. My dad is five-five on a good day. I’ve been taller than him since I was twelve. He reached up and smacked me, and for a split second it knocked sense into me, but I still kept pushing. When my mom came back, she realized that I was pushing those boundaries, and she was right back on it making sure that I wouldn’t get into stuff I didn’t and reminding me that my goal is to get my education and to keep pushing forward.

I saw these kids who had the same upbringing as me and because of a couple of different choices they made, or because they didn’t have a parent that was on them, they ended up where they ended up. I think that’s when it clicked for me that in good conscious I couldn’t go off and not be a teacher because I saw a need for it. At that school I was one of maybe—

***Which school are you talking about?***

Beacon Academy. I was one of six people on staff of color and maybe one out of three who actually taught in some kind of form. I wasn't a licensed teacher, but I was a teacher's aide. One other one being my wife because she also worked there with me for a bit. That's where it sank home that representation mattered.

Like I said, I got let go of that job because I pushed against the administration there. I was trying to call out things that I saw weren't right; that weren't for the benefit of the student. I had never been fired with a person having a smile on their face. It was the weirdest thing. I remember one day I came in. It was the end of the year, and so we were asking about things for next year. Are we coming back? They had us on a grant, so they had to make sure the money was there. I remember the first time I asked. "Yes, yes, you'll be here next year. You're good." They knew at this point that I was looking to be a teacher and I was looking into the ARL programs, the alternative route to licensure programs. There's a few here in the city, but I was looking into those. They knew I was trying to be a teacher, and originally I was going to stay there. I said, "Hey, they gave me my first shot here. If they want to support me through my studies, I'll stay here." Then just overnight they called me into office. She, with a smile on her face, was saying, "We really loved having you here, and we appreciate everything you did. You really care about your students. But we can't keep you." This was in the morning. I had just walked in for the day. She's like, "You can leave." I was like, "Oh okay." But I didn't. I actually ended up—and I don't know why I did this—I stayed for the rest of the day. It was a Friday and I think it was the last day of school. I stayed and I worked with students until the end.

At the end of the day I was sitting with the teacher who was in charge of the room that I was the aide for. He goes, "Man, this was a great year. I couldn't have done it without you. I'm

looking forward to working with you next year.” I’m like, “They fired me.” He was like, “What?” “Yes, they fired me this morning.” He’s like, “And you stayed?” I’m like, “Yes.” I’m still getting paid for the day because she had said, “You can leave, but we’ll pay you for the day.” I stayed. He was just in disbelief. I don’t know. I don’t know what happened.

Monse stayed on for a few months after the fact. She told me later that they couldn’t even own up to the fact that they let me go. They’re in a staff meeting when all the teachers notice I was gone. They asked what happened. The admin story was that I had decided to pursue teaching, but I wasn’t willing to do teaching at that school, and so I had decided to leave. Whatever. That was their own thing.

Shortly after that I landed here at the Latinx project. This project is my second—meeting my wife was my first epiphany of education. Then this project is probably the second epiphany I had because here I got to talk to so many individuals from all walks of life who have gone on to do these great things, and it was overwhelming how many of these folks credited education to their success and credited having one or two teachers that pushed them along the way. I saw that and, again, I was like—actually, I should say it was my third epiphany. My second epiphany was when I spoke to that student about his father’s deportation, and that made me realize I could not leave.

Here, I saw how important education was for our community. When you look at the stats, it’s crazy. About ten percent of Latinos have their bachelor’s degree. Current stats, Latinos are attending college at a quicker pace than other minority groups. We’re attending more than African Americans and Asians; we’re going in greater numbers. The problem is we’re dropping out just as fast, and it’s sad. It’s sad that even though our numbers enrolling are going up, so are our dropout numbers, and that’s how you stay with the stat of only ten percent of Latinos have



their bachelor's degree. Master's degree? It's one percent, one percent of Latinos have a master's degree. A doctorate is less than that. It kind of blows my mind that I finished my master's last December. I'm part of one percent, and it's probably the only time I'll claim being part of the one percent, of Latinos who have their master's degree; and, yet, I'm still not done because I want a doctorate now.

But it seems the last seven years of my life, essentially all of my twenties, have been epiphany after epiphany pushing me towards the classroom. I'm here now and I feel like I'm not doing enough. You've watched "Hamilton," right? Everyone knows "Hamilton," right?

*Oh yes.*

I watched "Hamilton" for the first time when it released on Disney Plus. The song that stood out to me—I can't remember what number it is—he writes that he's running out of time. "Why are you always writing?" That's how I feel. I feel like I'm go, go, go and I'm running out of time because I want to change education because I've come to the realization that the current education system is not built for people that look like me, it's not built for the African American, it's just not. There are so many roadblocks, so many ways to end up dropping out that it's a miracle that we're at ten percent with our bachelor's degree. It's a miracle that we're at one percent of a master's degree because this education system—we call it education system, but really some days it doesn't feel like it is. My goal is to change this. Of course, on my most ambitious day I see myself as secretary of education for the U.S. government.

*This goes to when you talked about policy.*

Right. But on my most ambitious day that's where I see myself. On my average day I want to rebuild CCSD because it's not working. It's not working at all. The pandemic has amplified the flaws in the system even more. On the paper, I put down "educational activist" because I will

take any opportunity to talk about education that I am given. In the last year I was invited to speak at a congressional roundtable with Congresswoman Susie Lee. I sat and I was a second-year teacher at this point. Yes, this was last year. We were talking about education needs for Latinos and issues. It was virtually done with Latino principals, Latino teachers who had ten, fifteen years plus experience, just big-name people, and Congresswoman Susie Lee. I actually got in because—I'm not sure if you guys are familiar. She's a state representative, Selena Torres. High school best friends with my wife. Selena put together that roundtable and for whatever reason thought of me and invited me in, and I took it.

My father has a bad habit of speaking without fully thinking. He tends to do it when he notices things are wrong. It has gotten him in trouble a couple of times. It's gotten him fired a couple of times from jobs. I inherited that trait. I say that because at this roundtable everyone is talking about the issues and everyone is thanking Susie Lee for her time. I was making a point, and Congresswoman really liked the point I made. As soon as I stopped talking, she went to thank me for making that point, but she mispronounced my name. She butchered it completely. I could not stop myself. I unmuted and said, "You mispronounced my name." I think I completely derailed her train of thought because I watched her freeze. She was like, "Excuse me?" I'm like, "You mispronounced my name," and I corrected her. I don't know where I got the nerve to do this, to correct a congresswoman in front of Latino educators. We were all in different places because it was Zoom, but I could hear the collective [making sucking noise] in all the rooms.

I did that because whether she meant to do this or not, at the end of the day it's a micro aggression. You mispronounce someone's name, how more personal can you get than a person's name? The least that we can do is pronounce people's names correctly. It's real bad with Latino students and African students, or Black students. It happens in the classroom all the time. You

get teachers who refuse to learn people's names, refuse to learn students' names. I have students who by the time they get to me, they have given up on trying to teach teachers their names.

They'll take whatever they're called. I've gotten to the point that I will learn a student's name.

I had one student, I will never forget this name and I will never mispronounce it again, wrong in my life. Her name was Nevaeh. Nevaeh, when you spell it out, is actually *heaven* backwards. If you spell it, it's *heaven* backwards. But when I first met her, I could not get it right. I was butchering it left and right, with good intention. I was like, "I'm sorry, let me get it better." It took one day for her to finally get fed up and cuss me out in front of the class. "You're mispronouncing my name." She's like, "If you can't say it, don't say it; call me this." Most teachers...deans, send that kid to the dean without a second thought. I apologized. I said, "You're right. I'm wrong." I went home and I practiced and I practiced. Like I said, I will never mispronounce Nevaeh wrong again.

Now I'm back to my situation. It came out of the same place of, if you can't get my name right, if you can't get other folks' names right, we can't have these other important conversations of what's halting our community. If we can't just start at the basics, it's almost a nonstarter. She apologized. I'm not sure she meant it. I'm pretty sure she was really annoyed at me. We continued. At the end there was this principal of East Tech, Darlene Delgado. I don't know how, but we ended up hanging out for a sec on the call, and Susie Lee was gone. She goes, "You did good." She's like, "That took courage to correct your name." Then she congratulated me on a bunch of points that I had made. I thanked her.

I got to learn a little bit more about her. She is also Salvadorian like my mom, grew up in the same neighborhood I did. Her mom still lives on Jenson Street, which is a couple of streets away from where my mom lives. She was telling me how she had these big plans for East Tech,

which is the magnet school on the east side of town, a lot of career technical programs. One of the things she was saying was, “Oh, I wish we had a Latin American history taught at East Tech.” At that point I had just started teaching Latin American history at Mojave. I begged for it and got to build it from the ground up myself, but I did it. I offered to her, “If you ever need help or you want me to talk to your teacher, whoever is interested in teaching it, I will gladly share the material I have.” That was that; that was the end of the conversation.

Fast forward a couple of months. I’m sorry I’m on tangents everywhere, but stream of conscious, right? A couple of months later—I should say this. I was very happy at Mojave. Mojave is in North Las Vegas. Like I mentioned before, the students have been historically Black, Latino. I was making a name for myself at Mojave. I was getting praised by my admin. I had full support from them. Any idea I had, they were onboard. Prior to the pandemic I put together a Loteria Night, Mexican bingo. I invited parents. I invited students. We sold Mexican coke. We sold chips with hot sauce. It was a big success. It was massive. I was winning favor with the admin. But I was going home and feeling a part of me missing. Again, I said the students were great. Mojave is one of those schools that has a bad reputation, especially first-year teachers or teachers coming straight out of college, it’s one of those schools that they get warned about. “Don’t go there; don’t go to Mojave; don’t go there.” When I was able to get my license and I started applying to schools, Mojave was one of three schools that I applied to. I remember I was like, “I hope Mojave doesn’t call me.” I remember saying that. I said, “I hope they don’t call me.”

I never heard back from three of the schools. The one school I hear back from was Mojave. I went in to interview, and on the same day of my interview, sitting in the lobby, also waiting for an interview, was a very good friend of mine, Kenny Brown. Both of us came up in

the ARL program at the same time. Kenny is a great guy. Kenny is Black, but grew up on the east side. He has a love for the east side as well. We were up for the same job because he's also an English teacher. I saw him and thought, I'm not getting this job; I'm not going to get it; Kenny's going to get it, but whatever, I'll go in. I have never advocated for someone else to get a job, and I probably won't ever do this again, but I remember my interview was first and at the end of the interview I told the admin, "If you don't hire me, fine, but if you don't hire the guy that comes after me, you're going to make a mistake." The admin kind of looked at me and goes, "What?" He's like, "Are you advocating for the other guy?" I'm like, "I know your next guy. He's a great guy. Again, if you don't hire one of the two of us, you're making a mistake. You just are." And he goes, "Okay." And I left.

Kenny went in and I remember talking to him. Kenny goes, "At the end of my interview I told them if they don't hire you, it's a mistake." We hadn't coordinated that and it sounds like it's coordinated, but it's not. He goes, "As soon as I said it, the admin said that you had said the same thing prior." I was like, "Well, it's true. If they don't hire one of the two of us, they're dumb."

I ended up getting the job, which I don't know why they picked me over Kenny because Kenny went on to be CCSD's Rookie Teacher of the Year. He was on the news. He got big prizes. I almost feel that the NFL draft who is, "Oh, he's going to do everything." I feel like the guy who got picked above Tom Brady and how is like, "This guy is going to do everything." Then I flunked out and Tom Brady, who was picked I don't know how many down, goes on to be the greatest to play the game. That's how I felt.

Anyway, I say that because I really love Mojave and I was really happy there, but I felt like something was missing. Eventually I realized that I wanted to go home, and by that I mean I

wanted to work on the east side. My student teaching, I did it at Eldorado High School, which is on the east side, and I loved it. Most of my students were Latino. I spoke Spanish. It was great and I loved that feeling. At Mojave I spoke Spanish with my kids. I started an organization of Latinos. They didn't have one, so I started one. They won awards while I was there. But, again, I just felt like I wasn't home. I could relate to the kids there because the neighborhood Mojave is in is very similar to the east side. I could relate to them, but I didn't know the area. Earlier I told you about all the businesses on my block. I could not do that at Mojave. I don't even live far from Mojave. I live about ten minutes away. But I still couldn't point out the businesses the way I did on the block I grew up on.

A couple of months ago I get a call from—or I was in another meeting with Dr. Watson, Dr. Jackson and Dr. Marrun, who are on the College of Education, and, to me, they are my Holy Trinity. These women are amazing. They have shaped so much of me as a teacher, as an educator. They have taken me, they have taken Kenny Brown, and a third other friend Juan Palacios, who is a social studies teacher now at Las Vegas Academy, we've all kind of been taken under their wing. I was saying the same sentiment, "I love Mojave, but I just...I don't know...I want to go home." I remember them asking me, "Where would you go?" And I thought of Rancho because Rancho is actually my zoned school. It's where I was supposed to go, but I was a magnet kid, so I was bussed out of the neighborhood to go to Clark High School, which is close to Chinatown. I don't regret my time or going to Clark, but it did—and I realize this now as an adult—the four years I spent away not getting my education in the neighborhood created disconnect between me and my neighborhood. When you hang out with your high school friends, you hang around the area close to the school. For us over there was hanging out in Chinatown, hanging out at the Meadows Mall, hanging out at the Palms theater, the Orleans. That's where

we would go see movies and stuff, going to Sam's Town because it had a theater, or Boulder Station. It created disconnect. I remember saying, "I want to go to Rancho because that's my neighborhood." I explained how I want to work with kids who have grown up on the same streets and in the same neighborhood that I did. Even though I was making connections with the kids at Mojave, it's completely different to be able to look at a kid and say, "I grew up on this street. The street that you're walking down, I walked down it, too." One of my favorite places to eat is Tacos El Gordo down on Bruce Street, which is a couple of blocks away from Rancho. "I know that Burger King that you go to on..." It's so much more. You make such a big connection just by saying, "I've lived here. I know this neighborhood."

Juan and Kenny were on that call, and Juan goes, "We have an opening in the English department." I'm like, "What?" It turns out Juan's sister works the front desk at Rancho. Rancho had recently lost one English teacher. Her name is Dixie Ax. She has been there so long that she was a former teacher of Kenny Brown. Kenny Brown was an alumni from Rancho. He actually went to Rancho, to the original building, not even the building that's there now. He went there. He was a former student of hers. That's how long she had been at Rancho. She had suddenly passed away in October. You can't really hire anyone in October to replace. Everyone has their assignment. They had a long-term sub. He's like, "You should apply. Give me your resume and I'll give it to my sister, and she'll make sure it goes to the correct admin." I was like, "I'll think about it," because it was tough. On the one hand, I'm at a school where I'm loved, supported. I have my place there. On the other hand, I can go home. I debated it for weeks. I was like, "I don't know what to do." I was open with my admin at Mojave and I told him, "Look, I love it here. It's not that I'm unhappy, but it's hard for me to not want to go home." They were like, "We get it. If you want to apply, apply. Go for it."

What finally made me apply, to just go full circle, Rancho's previous principal—and I can't remember what his name was—was promoted by Dr. Jara to be a regional superintendent, so he left Rancho. He had been there about fifteen years. His replacement was Darlene Delgado. She had left East Tech to go to Rancho. Her reasons for going to Rancho is because that's her school. Her mom lives across the street from Rancho. I saw that and I remember I saw that because CCSD staff gets summaries of board meetings, whatever news happens through. There will be times where you're like, "Oh, these schools have new principals," blah blah blah. I remember going through the list and I saw Rancho, Darlene Delgado. I was like, "Oh shit." I reached out to Darlene and I was like, "I don't know if you remember me. I'm the jackass that corrected Congresswoman Susie Lee in the middle of our thing." She goes, "Yes, I remember you. What can I do for you?" I'm like, "You have a spot in your English department." She's like, "I do. Are you interested in applying?" I'm like, "I am." She's like, "All right, send me a resume."

I sent her my resume. Again, I didn't expect much. I was like, "I'm going to try. If it happens, it happens, cool." I had an interview a few days later. I went in with...I'm going to tell them about my pedagogy, my style of building relationships with students. Really, building relationships with students is the cornerstone of my pedagogy, my teaching style; that's where I start everything. Just kind of going in with this is who I am, this is what I want to do, this is why I want to be at your school. Darlene agreed with everything I said. The interview was quick. I think it was twenty minutes because it was a school day, or it was early before my school day started.

Then I didn't hear from them for days because Jara this year has had the habit of dropping really crucial information last-minute that sends the whole school system into a frenzy.



Right after I interviewed—and I can't remember what he dropped—I think he suddenly announced we were going back, or he had suddenly announced something that sent the whole school into a frenzy. I didn't hear back. Part of me was like, well, they're busy putting out this fire that Jara just started, and the other part of me was like, you didn't get it, you're fine; you tried and you didn't get it, move on. I ended up getting it.

***You'll be there this fall?***

I'm currently there. I'm currently there because CCSD got a bunch of federal money, which we're using in part to fund a summer acceleration program to help students who fell behind because of distance ed.

I got the job. She told me I was her first hire as Rancho's new principal, first teacher she hired. Again—

***Very serendipity, it sounds like.***

Right. I go back to my NFL analogy. Oh, I am her number-one draft pick. I cannot bust. I can't do this. Yes, I'm currently there. I told my admin at Mojave, "Look, they offered it to me and I can't say no. I want to go home." Everyone at Mojave—Greg Cole, who is the principal there, and Tim Wells, who was my direct admin, were very gracious and very supportive, and they sent me on my way with their support. With the summer acceleration program, if you work it, you're getting paid for your time, but you're going to work at the school that you're assigned. I was kind of in limbo because I technically wasn't a teacher anymore at Mojave, but I technically hadn't started at Rancho yet. I remember asking my admin, "I want to work the summer, but where do I go?" And he goes, "It's your pick. If you want to stay here for another month, we could have you. If you want to go to Rancho, go." I ended up coming to Rancho because, one, Ms. Delgado said, "We need you," and, two, it's a way for me to get to know the school and get

familiar with the building before we officially start. I predict fall is going to be very chaotic because we're coming—at least Rancho is coming back in full force. Some schools are offering an online option, but Rancho did not have enough interest to offer, and so we're coming back in full force. Yes, that's where I'm at right now.

*I want to change the trajectory here a little bit. The one question, when you were doing interviews for the Latinx Voices, how did that resonate with you? I can remember we were at the Culinary Union and you had an interview. Were you both in that, Rodrigo, somebody from El Salvador? I remember that was an emotional experience. Do I recall that correctly?*

Yes.

*Can you talk for a few minutes about doing the interviews and what you learned culturally about yourself or about your family, about your community? What did that feel like?*

My biggest takeaway from the project is that the Latino community is not a monolith. I think too many politicians right now are so anchored on, “We need to win the Latino vote; we're never going to have power if we don't win the Latino vote.” There is no such thing as the Latino vote. There just isn't because we are so diverse as a people. For years I always wondered, well, if Latinos can just get it together and agree, we can be a powerful voting bloc.

*You believed that it was more monolithic before the project?*

At one point I did. I felt that we were. I felt that sometimes we were voting against our own interests. If you look at Cubans in Florida, I was super young when this happened with George Bush's election and Gore, and then it just recently happened again. I was stunned. I was like, “They're voting against their interests. What's wrong with them?” Going through this experience with the project, we're not a monolith. The Cuban experience is completely different from the Mexican experience. Me, as a dark-skinned heterosexual male, my experience as a Latino is

completely different than...I can't remember his name. He was very big in the LGBTQ community. Salt and pepper hair and goatee. I can picture his face, but I can't remember his name. But he is light-skinned. Anyway, completely different experience. Different experience for a Latina. Monse is White-passing. The other day Monse...can pass for a White woman until they hear her speak and her LA accent comes out a little bit, or they see *Hernandez* at the end. That's when they realize she's Latina. Really, this project made we go, "No wonder we can't ever agree on anything." We're a varied people, and you think that would make me more jaded, like we're just never going to...

If anything, it made me appreciate it more, and it made me realize that there is so much work that needs to be done. As a community we have to address machismo in our communities. We have to address colorism. I don't know if you guys are caught up in Lin-Manuel Miranda's controversy with *In the Heights*. He's getting a lot of flak for the lack of Afro Latino representation in the leading roles of the movie. That was something, even there, that I found myself conflicted because I saw it opening night. I went down to Maya Cinemas and I took Monse to see it. I loved it. I cried. I was like, "This is fantastic." Then the next day I'm looking through Twitter, and people are bashing it. I'm like, "What did I miss?" I was conflicted because part of me is like, we as a community should be supporting this; we should be supporting Lin-Manuel Miranda because this is how we start proving to Hollywood that—and this is my media studies part of me—we should support this to show Hollywood that we can make money; that our stories matter; that we'll go and support movies if you make them. On the other hand, it's a movie set in Washington Heights, which is historically Dominican, Puerto Rican, Black, and I think if Lin-Manuel Miranda came and made a movie called *East Side* and it was just all light-

skin Latinos, I'd be pissed, too. That's not east side. That right there is a perfect catechism of how diverse we are.

Even Rita Moreno stepped in it this morning. Rita Moreno, again, superstar in the Latino community, he got wind of her because she has a Peabody Award, too. First Latina to win an Oscar for *West Side Story*, which is amazing. She can't see the other side of it. She came on Colbert and she said, "Why can't we wait to criticize it? Why can't they just wait? Why can't we just support it?" I think hearing her echo what I first felt, I went, "Oh, yes, no, we should be mad. Yes, we should support, but we should also criticize because if we're not, if we're just sitting here and taking what they give us, we're not going to make progress. We have to keep fighting." It kind of comes back to my experience with Susie Lee. I could have just shut up and said, "I should be happy that I'm at the table. I should be happy that I got invited to speak with a congressman, someone from the barrio, from the east side. I'm sitting at the table with Congresswoman Susie Lee and she wants to hear what I have to say. I should be grateful I'm at that table." But, no, pronounce my name right, right?

***We're going through this on a daily basis at our house, so I totally relate. My grandson, the camp counselor won't say his name properly.***

Right. Again, if we can't even at the base level just agree and get the names right, it's a nonstarter and we're not going to get anywhere.

***Go back to learning from the narrators. What did you feel every time that you sat down to talk to somebody new? How did that change for you from the first interview to the tenth to the twentieth interview? Do you remember?***

I remember going in with an open mind. Before the start of the interview, I was thinking, well, we're a monolith; we all have similar experiences. After the first few, I came in with an open

mind of this is what I think might happen, but we might end up far left. Really, it was a feeling of appreciation. There were some narrators who I wholeheartedly disagree with on some of their views, but I understand where they came from especially listening to their experiences.

***Were those generational? We interviewed a lot of younger people, it seems, relative to other projects. But, nevertheless, you were young. Both of you were younger interviewers. Was that intergenerational?***

Sometimes it was. I think right now what we're seeing is people in my generation, we're getting to the age where we want change. I almost see it as two schools. There's the old school, Chicanos who is that older generation who for them it was assimilate to survive. Then there's a generation like me who are grateful for what the Chicano generation did; that you got us this far, but we want more. Again, like me, the Chicano generation, I feel, sometimes are grateful for being invited to the table, and then there's this generation that is like, "We should be invited to the table, no questions asked, and now we should be allowed to speak." I think what we're seeing, there's a clash between these schools of thinking, and it's going to keep happening for a while.

But, again, tying it back to what I felt, really, for me this project was a reconnection to my community, acknowledging that we're not a monolith, and that I used it as almost a basis to try and understand where everyone is coming from. Really, every single person is a result of their experiences, is what it comes down to. We might not agree on everything, but our views are shaped by our experiences.

***You can't argue with a person's experiences.***

Yes. You can't.

***Rodrigo, you have a question...***

**Earlier you were talking about policy. Obviously, you're a teacher and you've been involved with an administration that you really liked despite the fact that everybody seems to blame the administration. Where do you think education policy and actual education have disconnect? Where do you think disconnect is?**

It comes from the people in charge not actually being in the classroom. Distance education is a perfect example of that. When we first were told we were going online, they said, "You have to take attendance." There were all these crazy rules that they wanted us to follow. We're all working from home, and it really felt like these rules were coming down from people who wanted us to look good to the parents, to be able to justify, look, we're not in the building, but your kids are getting rigorous education and it's still the same rigor. It was kind of almost for looks. The reality of it was we were struggling, especially those first few weeks. We were struggling to get Chromebooks in the hands of kids. We were struggling to get kids connected to the internet. Even months down the line we were still getting kids that just couldn't get past the technical issues. Again, as a teacher here I am trying to IT a problem for a student at their house. "I can't open the assignment; I can't see what you're showing us." I'm trying to IT it. Then policymakers are saying, "Oh, you've had a few months at this; now you're a pro at it. Now let's start talking about how we administer this state mandated test that you have to make sure your kids don't cheat on, make sure everyone does it, and you need to make sure you hit this certain threshold." We're just kind of like, dude, you are all the way down there at the finish line, and my kids still haven't tied their shoes. That's where that disconnect is coming from because whether it's admin that have been out of the classroom too long and forgot how to teach or it's people who have just never stepped foot in the classroom, the people who really should have a say, the stakeholders who should have a say, which in my opinion are teachers, students and

parents, aren't really being invited to the table. We're not getting listened to. CCSD can be a very toxic relationship almost. They'll say, "Oh, we want to hear your feedback; we want you to take care of your mental health." I can't tell you how many times I've heard that in this last year, "Take care of your mental health, but make sure you get all these grades input by this time, and make sure you write all these IEPs for students, and make sure you attend this meeting," and this and that, "but take care of your health." It's not going to change until, one, we get more voices of those stakeholders to be taken seriously. But then, get policy written that reflects the realities of our classroom. It's so easy to say, for twenty minutes my kids are going to do this, for fifteen minutes they're going to do this activity, and I'm going to wrap up with this. The truth is it hardly ever goes that way. You might go off on a tangent about a separate subject. Your power might go out. This or that. Really, to answer your question that disconnect is coming from people who aren't listening to the stakeholders who are in the classroom. Really that's what it comes down to.

**Moving forward with everything semi going back to normal, and like you said Rancho is completely opening up, how do you feel the pandemic in particular affected your community, so essentially students of color, right?**

We took the biggest hit. The buzzword that got thrown around a lot was "learning loss." I don't think there's such a thing as learning loss, of kids regressing. I don't think that's a thing because if it was why are we taking three months off in the middle of the year? If learning loss is a thing, why is summer three months' long? What this pandemic did, it didn't create new problems; if anything, it amplified the problems that were already there. Kids not having access to technology.

Some teachers were exposed as, you can't teach; you should probably not be in the classroom because you were able to hide behind different mechanism, and all the sudden it's just you and a computer screen and you just have yourself to entertain these kids and educate these kids. We had teachers who refused to learn the technology. Here we are in the middle of a pandemic and we have to teach online and we have all these different programs, and it is very overwhelming to learn this on the fly, but you had teachers who just flat out refused to learn. "I don't want to do this. Give me my overhead projector. Give me my whiteboard." As educators we should be willing to adapt and learn new technologies because that's the business. If we can't keep up with the tech, can't keep up with what's coming out, how can we hope to educate the students in front of us?

I say that because the overwhelming narrative during the shutdown was, let's get back to normal. Let's get back to normal. Normal is not good enough. Over the pandemic I was invited to help write a chapter in this anthology series called "The COVID Chronicles." It was published here through one of the doctors at UNLV. I can't remember his name. They took stories from all walks of life, and we were invited to write for the educational section. I wrote that going back to normal, what that really means is going back to an educational system that does a disservice to my community, to the Black community, really to the poor community, the poor White community, it does a disservice to them. We're going back to a normal system that does not work. I wrote this back in July, August. I remember saying, "We have a chance to start from scratch. When again will we ever have a moment where all schools are shut down, buildings are empty, educators could really sit down and have real talk and conversation to adjust the issues that we were seeing being amplified? I remember I wrote, saying, "Let's not go back to normal. Let's change what normal is because normal prior to COVID was just not good enough."



Now, with us going back, my fear is we let that moment slip by us, and now we're going back to normal, back to the disservice that we were doing prior. The reason for that being is because the overwhelming voice that was heard was not that of the parents and the students who have the most to lose. It's not the voice of my Latino parents on the east side. It wasn't the voice of my Black parents in North Town. It was the voice of the parents in Summerlin who, again, probably had really good intentions to get their kids back, but they had left no room for other voices or anything that broke away from their narrative. The people on the school board did not help with it. There are a couple of trustees on there that should not be on there. I hate to say that I'm disillusioned that I'm going back into the fall year disappointed. Part of me. But at the end of the day, I center myself by saying, what I can control is my classroom; that's it. As much as I advocate and I will take every chance to speak at any engagement they ask me to, at the end of the day all I have control of is my classroom, and for now that's good enough.

***Did you ever visit El Salvador?***

Yes, I did. I know both my parents' home countries and where they grew up.

***Your mom is Salvadorian and your father...?***

Is Mexican. My dad grew up in Zacatecas, Mexico, or he was born there, but he was raised in Tijuana, Mexico. I haven't visited Zacatecas, but to be fair my dad hasn't visited Zacatecas in fifty years, so he hasn't been back home, either.

My mom...I went to El Salvador actually when she was in the process of fixing her legal status. When we were first originally told that she had to go back to El Salvador, we were told, "Oh, it's going to be a couple of weeks." My mom took me and my baby sister with her. She's like, "We'll go out together and we'll come back together." El Salvador is the complete opposite climate of Las Vegas. I remember getting off the plane and the air felt heavy. It felt heavy

because it was so fricking humid. El Salvador is jungle. When I was there at thirteen, I met family who I've only known because of their voices on the phone. I spent my summer there; that summer between seventh and eighth grade I spent it in El Salvador. I remember when it was time to come back home, I was just like, "What you need? I've got to go home." She stayed behind for another nine months.

I haven't been back since. Part of me does want to go back. Another part of me...I hate to fall under the same narrative that El Salvador is dangerous and this and that, but I feel if I go back I'd be lost. I'm not familiar with the area. At this point it's been almost fifteen years since I've been there. Their current president, [Nayib] Bukele, I see all the writings of an authoritarian dictator on there, which has been really weird because now I'm experiencing what I imagine a lot of White folks experienced with Trump and their parents because my mom is a very big Bukele fan. But this goes back to her experience, right? When you grow up in a country that's war-torn, once the war ended it got overtaken by gangs and really hasn't known peace in decades, now you have a guy coming in and is cleaning it up and is putting people to work, I can't blame my mom for overlooking some of his dictatorship qualities. I don't see myself going to El Salvador anytime soon if Bukele stays in office and he keeps heading in the direction I feel like he's heading because recently he just made El Salvador the first country in the world to accept bitcoin as legal tender, which to me has just opened up El Salvador for recolonization by all these big tech companies that get involved with bitcoin and all the tech bros. We're reopening the door to—

*I am so confused by the whole concept of bitcoin.*

Right. And so am I. I don't really get it. I understand it, but I don't fully get it.

*It sounds like a special club.*

Right. Really, when it comes down to it, he opened the doors for these big tech companies to come and recolonize El Salvador, and he claims it's going to be for the benefit of the people. But people like my grandmother, she is in her nineties now, can't operate a mouse on a computer. How is bitcoin, this digital currency, going to benefit her? How is a country, whose people are really just recovering and there are bright minds in there, but the infrastructure is not there, how are they benefitting from bitcoin? You don't have to go that far back to see how switching up a country's currency can screw them over, right? About twenty years ago they got rid of the *colón*, which was their original currency, for the US dollar. It was the same argument: Oh, this is going to benefit the people by us using the US dollar instead of our *colón*. It sounded great, but the problem was that people were still getting paid in *colóns* and their bills were in dollars. It makes no sense. Then the *colón* was weaker than the Mexican *peso*. The Mexican *peso* is twenty-to-one right now, so it's weaker than that. It hurt the country. I've learned this, one, through my experience here with the Latinx project, but also my time teaching Latin American history. I had to relearn a lot of history of the continent in my area. But, again, you want to go back further and see how bad things can get when you let foreign countries come into Central America and Latin America and have the run of the place? Look at the United Fruit Company, which is now Chiquita Bananas, and the banana wars and banana republics. That is my long way of saying that I'm uncertain of my mom's home country's future.

***How do you identify? You always ask that question in the more traditional structure of one of these oral histories. What do you say when people ask you that?***

I'm an intersectionality of all my experiences. I'm an accumulation of all my experiences. I think if you would have asked me that question two or three years ago, the last time I was working here—

***At the beginning of the project.***

No, not even at the beginning. I think towards the end I still would have told you, “Oh, I’m Mexican and El Salvadorian.” I’m a lot more than that now. Really, when it comes down to it, I’m an accumulation of my experiences that got me to this point. Culturally, and probably more to my mother’s dismay, more Mexican than Salvadorian because of my wife who is full Mexican on her parents’ side. I tend to be around more Mexican culture. But I still am a blend of my mom’s experiences in El Salvador, I’m a blend of my father’s experiences in Mexico, and I’m a blend of my own experiences. It’s a tough question, how do you identify? I can’t believe we asked this and had people on the spot answer this because now on the flip side I’m like, that’s a tough question.

***I’m laughing in harmony with you. It is. It’s an ironic situation we find ourselves in. At the end of this project, and the reason it’s important to have your voice included in this, it’s like, what does the term Latinx even mean? How has that evolved since we inherited that title for the project? None of us named it that. Our ambivalence or embrace of it has altered over the last three years, I guess.***

You’re right because *Latinx*, the first time I heard that term was here when I started this project, and I thought, oh, this is cool; I like the meaning behind it; I like the reason for the X, to be more inclusive. But now this term has gotten out of academia. I think when we first started this project, academics were the only ones really using it, and now it’s almost out there in mainstream.

***Media is using it now.***

Yes, media is using it. Now we’re getting a lot of pushback from members of the Latino community of saying, “It’s not grammatically correct. It’s this. It’s that. Why don’t we use *Latine*?” Which is take off the X and add an E. Again, it just kind of goes back to...I guess when

I want to take the easy way out and you asked how I identify, I'll say, "I'm Latino." But really there is no easy answer because we can't even agree on the term. Other people say, "I'm not Latinx; I'm Chicano. I'm not Latino; I'm Hispanic." We can't even agree on the name; and, yet, we have people saying, "Why doesn't the Latino voting bloc get their shit together and vote?" We can't agree on the name. Let's start there. Again, it always comes back down to the name.

***It's interesting. It really is.***

Yes, it's tough.

***I think the more you try to make people look or sound alike, the more you actually see the differences, and that's what you've really articulated today is that it can all be the same, but as much as it's the same, it's different. It's not possible.***

I think when you look at other communities, so the Black community, they're not a monolith either, but their community unfortunately has had their history and their roots erased, and I think they can unite over that; their history has been erased. At some point they can at least unite around that. I look at the Asian community and I'm curious to know if you guys are getting this now with the Pacific Islander project. They got terms thrown at them, and some of them—the model minority—some of them really bought into it and have ridden that to success. But there's other blocs of that same community that are darker skin, from Filipino, Taiwan, all those, who are saying, "We're not a model minority and we've never been treated like a model minority." Identity is hard and it's a tough question and it's not going to get any simpler, no.

***Any other questions?***

**You're good. You hit everything.**

***You know all the questions. We could have talked for hours. I really appreciate you giving this. This is really good. Thank you very much.***

Yes, thanks.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]



*Far left:* Laurents with his father, Manuel Bañuelos. *Left:* His mother Maria Benitez.

*Below:* Latinx Voices team receives recognition from Historic Preservation, City of Las Vegas in 2019. (L-R): Nathalie Martinez, Monserrath Hernández, Laurents, Barbara Tabach, Rodrigo Vazquez, Elsa Lopez, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Marcela Rodriguez-Campo.

