Raul Valdez
TCU Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project
https://crbb.tcu.edu/interviews/interview-with-raul-valdez

Part 1 – Introduction:

TCU: First of all, we'd like to start the interview by-

Valdez: Is that thing on?

TCU: Yes, he's recording.

Valdez: Okay.

TCU: First we want to talk about your background. Where are you from, where were you born?

Valdez: I was born in Del Rio [foreign language 00:00:17].

TCU: When?

Valdez: In 1947.

TCU: How was it growing in Del Rio?

Valdez: It was great, when I was a kid. There was a lot of creeks and rivers, and stuff, so I did a lot of swimming, and playing Tarzan. Swinging off, jumping off of trees with a rope, you know, and all that. It was a perfect place to be a kid. I spent a lot of time in California, too, though. All my summers, I'd spend in California. San Jose and in Los Angeles.

TCU: That was back when you were a young kid, a young child?

Valdez: Yeah, I started going to [inaudible 00:00:59] I was about 10 years old, or nine years old, I can't remember when, but anyway, it was about that time. And then I kept going when I was a teenager.

TCU: Who were you staying with in California?

Valdez: I had family, I still have family over there. Even though my uncles and aunts have passed away, I still have cousins. I used to stay with family.

TCU: When you were going to school in [foreign language 00:01:29]?

Valdez: Yeah. And then I used to spend also time in San Antonio. I lived with my grandmother there for a while. She was living in the projects there and the bocce courts, in the west side.

TCU: How old were you when you went to San Antonio?

Valdez: About the same age as when I went to California the first time. About 10, I guess, something like that, 11 years old. And then I kept going back. I spent a lot of time there. I had a lot of family in San Antonio.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/introduction-5

Part 2 – Going to School in Del Rio and Working in California as a Teenager:

TCU: So in Del Rio ... You went to school in Del Rio, right?

Valdez: Yeah.

TCU: So how were the schools back then?

Valdez: Segregated.

TCU: So you were going-

Valdez: White people and the people that lived across the river would go to Del Rio High School. And all the Chicano kids would go to San Felipe High School. And all the people from ... There's an Air Force base there named Laughlin Air Force Base. And all the kids from Laughlin Air Force Base would cross the district and skip us and pay taxes to Del Rio High School. And they did that for years on end. I don't know how many millions of dollars San Felipe lost out on.

But San Felipe was really a very good school. First of all, it was harder for us to feel racism there, because we were all Chicanos, even the teachers. We had good role models, and as a matter of fact, more teachers, lawyers, and doctors and things graduated from that high school than many high schools in this state, I'm sure.

TCU: So what did you and maybe your friends back then, what was your perception of the other school, or did you ever interact with the Anglo children [inaudible 00:01:31]?

Valdez: Eventually toward my junior and senior year ... Oh yeah, we interacted a little bit, and in some cases there was animosity. But in a lot of cases, there was friendships, especially among the Chicanos from across the creek. San

Felipe Creek. It's a beautiful spring there by ... There's beautiful springs there, by the way.

So anyway, yeah. There was a lot of interaction. A lot of it was very positive. And toward the end of when I was gonna graduate, we played football for a couple of years, and we actually beat the other team.

TCU: So when you were going to California to San Antonio, what were you doing there?

Valdez: Hanging out. Hanging out, having a good time. As a matter of fact, in San Jose, when I ran out of cash, I'd go do some farm work. Pick apricots. See, I wasn't ... We would do it. We were just a bunch of crazy kids. We were teenagers. We liked to hang out downtown and stuff, and we'd go work for a week or something like that picking apricots, pears. Strawberries, forget it, man. That was hard work. We quit. I walked off of that job. But I have a lot of respect for farm workers. As a matter of fact, I still participate in their events with the UFW and things like that. I always volunteer and try to do what I can to support the cause.

But back then, we were just kids, and we wanted to buy a nice shirt or something to go hang out downtown and lean on a parking meter or something, that kind of stuff. So that's why we used to go to work and get some new shoes and some things. Hey, when you're 15, 16 years old, 17, you just wanna impress. You wanna dress sharp and all that stuff. That's what I used to do. Even though most of my life I've been in jeans and a T-shirt, and that continues. But there was that period of time when I wanted to have a nice Pendleton or something like that. So that's why we'd go do farm work.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/going-to-school-in-del-rio-and-working-in-california-as-a-teenager

Part 3 – Picking Fruit in California as a Teenager:

TCU: So I was going to ask about working in the fields. Why were strawberries different?

Valdez: Well, first of all, they would pay you $1.25 for a big old box. I had to fill it up to the top, I mean over the, totally full. And it took us like half a day to get one box. Even in the '60s, you know. That's when it was. That was, it was a lot of work, man. And I didn't know how to do it. Once you get it, you know. There were some people that had been doing it for years, and they'd pass me up and they'd be way out there. And I'd be still over here looking for strawberries and all. So it wasn't an easy job if you don't know what you're doing or how to do it.

TCU: How did you join? Somebody told you about the opportunity or how did you?

Valdez: There's people, there were people who used to take a pick up truck and pick up people and take you out to the fields.

TCU: And back then, did you get to, I would imagine you got to interact and meet people who were doing that full time. Like that was their main.

Valdez: Of course, yeah.

TCU: Did you recall any particular friendship?

Valdez: Well, it's a long time ago. I had a lot of friendship there. And we had a lot of jokesters and stuff like that. I got along pretty well with everybody. I've always felt equal to everyone and everybody's equal to me. I've never had any kind of superiority or inferiority kind of complex. I'm not gonna look down or up on anybody, up to anybody. Some people deserve to be looked up, though. Up to, though. But nobody really should be looked down on.

TCU: For example, did your experience in San Jose' or San Antonio, did you ever compare it to how life was in Del Rio?

Valdez: Well, a couple of times I didn't wanna go back. One time, my parents had to go get me, when I was 15 I think. I said, "Hey, I'm staying man. I'm gonna graduate, I'm gonna hook up here, man. I'm gonna do the high school thing here." And I was getting ready to register and everything. Nah, they drove up there and got me and brought me back.

TCU: Going back to Del Rio, were you aware of differences between your school and Del Rio High School?

Valdez: Yeah. Yeah, some of 'em were obvious, you know. Definitely Del Rio was whiter. There was no white people in my school. There was maybe one student in the whole population at a time that was not Chicano, or black.

TCU: More or less, just for the record, what was that proportion of African Americans during the same time you were at school?

Valdez: I can't remember. Maybe 10%. And probably 89% Chicanos. It's not even 1% white, man. 'Cause there was just one student at a time that I remember. I remember even the guy's name. One guy's name was Mike. And he went there. He was kind of cholo, chuco white guy, you know. He was kind of a cool guy. And there was another, there was a girl there once for a while. But everybody was brown like me, or darker.

Did everyone get along. Sure. Oh, there was fights, man. You know, it's high school. We got company here. Apparently, let me just ...

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/picking-fruit-in-california-as-a-teenager

Speaker 4 – Apache Courts in San Antonio:

TCU: I also wanted you to ask you about what you mentioned about San Antonio. What do you remember about Apache Courts?

Rivera: Well ... it was a nice place to hang out for a kid, you know we'd play out in the playground and stuff like that and, had a lot of little friends there. I can't remember any of them now, you know, it's been so long. I was just a kid, man. But ... yeah, well it was also kind of a, there was also some bad characters there, you know. For kids. And there was a couple of stabbings and they beat up a cop one time that was taking care of us, when we watching a movie, they showed free movies outside in the basketball court. Hang a little screen, a big screen, there. And show movies, you know? Free movies. So the kids would sit around there and the cop that was supposed to be taking care of business there got jumped, and they just beat him up with ...

So-

TCU: Do you remember, or you know the aftermath of that? Or it's?

Rivera: No, not really. We all went home, forgot about it. You know it wasn't ... but we didn't see that in [inaudible 00:01:22]. You know, there was not a lot of stuff like that going on there, even though ... that kind of stuff happens everywhere.

TCU: So, what happened after high school? So, you finished high school?

Rivera: Yeah, and I went to college but I was playing in a band. I thought I was gonna be a musician forever. Well, I'm kinda still a musician. I like to jam out. I got different genres that I mess with, you know. But back then, it was popular to play kind of heavy rock. Jimi Hendrix. And Beatles. And Cream. I don't know if you know those bands, they're old school.

And Wilson Pickett. All kinds of music like that, cover band in other words. Some songs we'd kinda change around, you know, we'd rearrange. So that was our originality, you know we tried to break out of just playing exactly like the record. I was never nerdy enough to just learn the song exactly how it goes. But, we were kind of popular back then in the little area there and then around Del Rio, and Eagle Pass. We'd play Eagle Pass and little towns around there. Played San Antonio one time and-

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/apache-courts-in-san-antonio

Part 5 – His Band "The Chocolate Grapevine":

TCU: What instrument did you play?

Valdez: I play guitar.

TCU: And what was the name of the band?

Valdez: The Grapevine. And then we changed it to The Chocolate Grapevine. That's pretty stupid, isn't it?

Kind of for the time. There was a psychedelic kind of time. Times of the times.

TCU: Do you remember who those names came about?

Valdez: Yes, I do. Barely. That's my answer. Sort of.

TCU: And so you were saying, you were about to-

Valdez: I had a vision one time. I saw... there was a big old winery, a vineyard. And one day I could swear there was chocolate dripping out of the... instead of grapes, I saw chocolate coming out it.

But it was a vision. You know, one of those visions that you get.

TCU: So these... the band was formal. You were attending college, right?

Valdez: No. I think we were still in high school. As a matter of fact, we called ourselves The Changing Times first. But that wasn't weird enough. We needed something weirder.

TCU: How many members did the band have?

Valdez: We had four, five. We had five members.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/his-band-the-chocolate-grapevine

Part 6 – Getting Involved in Activism:

TCU: At this time do you remember when was the first time you got involved in any activism? I mean, there was a big rally in the Rio March in the sixties. Were you involved in that [crosstalk 00:00:11]?

Valdez: Oh yeah. Absolutely. I marched in the thing, I was involved with the Brown Berets back then and the people that were organizing and all that. I'd drop by all the time. I found it real interesting that finally somebody could... It was sort of in the back of my mind that things weren't quote right, something was wrong. Even when I was a kid I was wondering, "What do you mean Columbus discovered

America?" I always wondered about that stuff. Or, "George Washington's my father, huh? That's kind of weird." I was a kid but I was questioning all that. And I was questioning the way they were presenting history to us. So I think that was a good thing, having those questions in mind and then some people actually starting to stand up, united against the government and the governor and the governor's decision to fire a bunch of people that were actually doing good in the [Spanish 00:01:16].

That's just one of those motivating things. In many ways I feel that all along I had this consciousness or deep thoughts. I started to wake up very young.

TCU: So how did you become involved? Did somebody invite you into the...

Valdez: I just went over there, I knew everybody, so I went over there to find out. "What's going on man?" They said, "Oh they're firing these guys and the governor blah blah blah blah, and it's the same story all over again: discrimination, anti-Chicano or anti-Mexican, or anti- this and that and all that stuff." And I said, "Well that's true." I've known it all along but I never heard it articulated quite this way. So, seemed like the right thing to do so I joined up. As far as hanging around and doing little errands, doing whatever was need. And marching on that particular day. Then, I heard the speeches that Ramsey Muniz and Jose Angel Gutierrez had in those days. Inflammatory as they were, it was like, "Wow!" I had never heard anything like this, man. And the most important thing is hey man, that's true. They're speaking the truth, but nobody else dares to, seemed like.

I mean, people have been talking liberation or at least anti-discrimination or social justice for centuries, even in Texas because we have a history here. We have a history of very serious... people don't even know that Mexicans used to get lynched just because they were Mexican and they wanted their land. That's how we lost all our land, all our wealth. And so anyway, because of lynching and because of massacres and things like that that occurred early on, from the 1800s on, I can't say it was the first time somebody stood up and spoke up about it. But when they did, it was my time, it was our time, our turn to participate in something that was very exciting and very motivating.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/getting-involved-in-activism

Part 7 – Getting Drafted into the Military:

Valdez: I was playing rock and roll. I knew how to play Mexican drinking songs, and stuff. [inaudible 00:00:09] You know, and that kind of stuff. [inaudible 00:00:14], you know, I knew all those songs, too. We'd go out in the boonies somewhere, and drink beer, because we were still too young, and take a guitar, and make a fire out there, and play music.

Anyway, but the rock and roll was good, too. I don't have anything against either one of them. I'm also a blues man. I like to jam out blues. I can the blues all day long.

TCU: By the way, I fully trust you. You were the singer for the band, also?

Valdez: I was one of the singers, yeah. We had a singer that used to be the singer. But I did some of the songs, or sang background for almost all of them.

TCU: What do you remember being the immediate aftermath of the march? How were things after that?

Valdez: Well, to tell you the truth, I got drafted shortly after that. There was a draft going on back then. As a matter of fact, we had a concert coming up. We were going to play with this band that had a number one hit, or something. I'll tell you the name of the band in a second here. Oh, yeah, The People. One hit wonder. I never heard of them again, but we played with them. That was the last concert we did.

But I got a delay, and I volunteered to go in the Army, so I could change the date, but still, I went for two years only. So, I joined up, I was gone so the aftermath, I wasn't around to really see it, you know? I wasn't around long enough to see that.

TCU: Okay. So, can you tell us briefly about your experience in serving? How was the training?

Valdez: The training was a piece of cake. Some of the kids would break down and cry, and just couldn't take it. I'd been a Boy Scout, but we were Boy Scouts like kind of ... What do you call it? Out of the box. I mean, not like, not just, "Boy Scout this and that, and we're going to go to camp." No, man. We'd go spelunking in serious caves, with nobody there, with just us. And maybe a leader. Sometimes a leader would be with us. And then sometimes we wouldn't, and then we grew up in the woods, in the creek, all that other stuff. And then climbing hills, and going out on serious, almost like expeditions, man. We'd go way out in West Texas, or a little west of Del Rio, and all that stuff. Hang out there.

So training was nothing for us. But some kids, I guess they were city kids, that didn't know, you know, never been around, didn't do anything. But no, it was very easy training.

TCU: Where did they send you for training?

Valdez: Fort Bliss. And it was 100 and something, I'm talking about in the 100's in the shade, all the time, every day.

Speaker 8 – Being Deployed in Panama and Vietnam:

TCU: So, and eventually, where were you deported?

Rivera: I was sent to Panama first. And, I wanted to get back out as soon as possible. I heard that you could get a fifty-something day early out if you went to Vietnam. And I was the sole surviving son, so they couldn't send me unless I volunteered. That's why they sent me to Panama, they didn't send me to Vietnam.

So, I volunteered to go to Vietnam. I said, "Man, I'll go to Vietnam, and I'll get out early. I'll be out in two months ahead of time." I wanted to get out as soon as possible. Then, two things happened. I started liking Panama, it really nice, man. Really cool. And, really pretty girls, all that kind of stuff there. Also, they took six months to send me my order for Vietnam. After they said, "Man, that's it." Then the whole reason for wanting to go was after you get out a one-year tour, they let you out. That was the deal back then. Or they keep you somewhere just for a couple of weeks or couple months, and then let you go.

So I wanted to get out early. So they took six months to send me my orders, so it took me that long to ... I mean, it kind of defeated the purpose in other words.

TCU: So then-

Rivera: But I got to go to Vietnam anyway.

TCU: So, how did that go?

Rivera: It went ... I came back in one piece. I don't know about spiritually, because when I got back, I really didn't want to talk to people too much. I didn't relate. People asked me all the wrong questions, or, "Hey man." First of all, you're in one situation one day, and I mean like overnight, you're over here. I said, "Man, it's quite a transition to go through." It wasn't easy, the transition to kind of all of a sudden be here and relate to everybody the way I used to. I felt like I wasn't the same person anymore. You know? "Hey wait a minute, things have changed."

It had been a short time, but I couldn't relate to the same people the same way anymore. Or, I don't know, it's hard to explain. There could have been a little bit of PTSD there or something. But, the main thing is, I did come fairly healthy, pretty healthy, except for that.

TCU: Did you return, when you went back, straight to [inaudible 00:02:58]? Or?

Rivera: I went to San Francisco. I got together with a buddy of mine who just had gotten out jut a little bit earlier, right before I did. And he bought a brand new car, and we cruised San Francisco for three days and three nights nonstop. And, we had a

really good time. Went to all the crazy hangouts from those days. 1971. And, we had a blast, man. It was a really-

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/being-deployed-in-panama-and-vietnam

Part 9 – Going Back to College:

Valdez: Then I came back to Texas. Went to visit my folks. My folks were still alive at the time. We went to Del Rio again. But from there, I took off for college, and I said, "I gotta take it serious now," because I flunked out the first time. That's why they drafted me, you know? Because playing music and going to school didn't work out. I was partying too hard before I left. So that's why I got drafted, because I flunked out. I just dropped out. And I didn't even bother to do it formally. I just walked off and, "See you later. Having too good of a time man. I want to play some music."

TCU: Where were you going for college?

Valdez: Oh, I went to Southwest Texas State, which is now Texas State University. I also went to junior college, way before, and that was at Southwest Texas Junior College. But anyway, I was going to Texas State, and I just didn't make it. It wasn't Texas State like I said. It was Southwest Texas back then.

TCU: So and these second-

Valdez: This second time around, I went to Texas A&I, because I heard that they were forgiving with grades there. If you took a course over and made an A, over there, you had to make an A for every F, and when I dropped out, I got straight F's. You know like four F's or five F's, then I had to make all those up. And I think, "Oh man, I'm in a big hole here. I don't think I'll ever get out of this one." And then I found out that A&I, you just took the course over, and they canceled out the F. I graduated right away. Pretty fast.

TCU: So what was your major at A&I?

Valdez: For the first time, I decided I was going to be an art major, and I got a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

TCU: So by that point, did you already have that started working in visual arts, or was this your-

Valdez: Well, I used to draw in school, when I was in elementary school. Instead of paying attention to the teacher, I'd be drawing. But don't get me wrong. I was a straight-A student all the way through, maybe til I got to about seventh or eighth grade. Then I started being rebellious. You know, "Hey, it's not cool to get good grades." So I started being a little rebellious and I didn't ... Started flunking out,

and "Hey man, that's cool. I'm flunking out. I'm just like a regular guy here. You know, I'm not one of the nerds." I don't know whether the ... I was totally confused in my attitude. Instead of doing well, I wanted to be just cool like everybody else and skip class and this and that.

TCU: So in this, this second time after coming back from Vietnam, did you resume your involvement in activities then?

Valdez: Oh yeah. Absolutely. Especially at A&I. A&I was boiling hot man. Everybody ... We stormed the president's office. Went over there, try to get a couple of things settled as far as a couple of policies that they had at the school that we didn't like. Some guy was being helped kept from graduating. So we just walked in, you know, walked into his office. Didn't even knock. A whole bunch of us just walked in there and sat around. They were having kind of a formal meeting. A bunch of suits were sitting in the office, you know? Couple of them got up all with their eyes wide. Walked out. We all sat around this really fine, nice table. Nice and shiny, you know? Somebody put their feet on the table and everything. "We want to talk to you." We talked to the president. He talked to us, so yeah, we did the stuff like that.

TCU: And the [crosstalk 00:03:54]-

Valdez: And I was getting music too. There was a lot of songs and music that I started playing back then. I mean, then, again. So

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/going-back-to-college

Part 10 – Going Back to College:

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Rivera: And I was getting music too. There was a lot of songs and music that I started playing back then. I mean, then, again. So

Part 11 – Public Art, Part One:

TCU: So you mentioned that work was destroyed.

Valdez: Yeah, it was. My home was burned some time back and I lost a lot of paintings, well, all the paintings that I owned, 'bout 300 of them. They all burned. And all my family history including all the photographs and stuff. From Texas history because my family goes back in Texas history forever. My great-grandfather was born in Gonzales, Texas. My other great-grandfather was born in San Antonio, I believe.

I've been trying to check him out 'cause I got confused with when they told me several things. I know my grandfather was born in Eagle Pass to him but they were working on the railroad at that time and he moved to Eagle Pass to work on the railroad. And my other side of the family comes from Gonzales, Texas.

And my mother was born in Oklahoma. But she came back to Texas with her family, 'cause they moved out there for a while. In other words, this is our land right here, you know, and some of my ancestors are definitely indigenous. You know, I've seen pictures, I lost both pictures, though, but I had pictures of my aunts and they definitely look indigenous.

You know, and that's one of the things about the Chicano movement that we're proud of that part and we don't deny it and we actually think that that's an asset 'cause these are our roots. We are embedded in here, you know, and then Spaniards came later. But my family was here in Texas before the Spaniards.

TCU: And for example these message, these type of message, for example, talk about the roots, indigenous roots. Why do you think music and art are, you know, powerful ways to communicate this, this type of ...

Valdez: Well, quite simply, they're universal. And it's like the beat of the drum. It goes with the beat of the heart, you know, it's part of you and it hits you and it penetrates all your senses. Your visual senses, your auditory senses, everything. You can even feel it in your pores when somebody beats a drum, sings a song, does a painting. Besides that most of us are visual learners, over 70 per cent of us visual learners, maybe 80.

Primarily visual learners 'cause we all learn from other sources as well. But when you repeat something over and over again, like, say for example back in the old days they would say, "One and one is two. Two and two is four. Da-na-na-na ..." Repeating and repeating or some teacher is talking to you and talking and talking and talking and you kind of tune it out and go somewhere else.

But they show you something, boom!, it's part of you already. You'll never forget it. It's in there. And then if you utilize it correctly, the arts are the best teaching tools there is. You can relate information as no other media, you know, no other medium. It's one way to educate. And I've got a little paper that I wrote one time about that. Wish I had it with me so I could refer to it, but it's actually a little more ...

Slightly academic, not too academic. I'm not too academic, but just a little bit where I make the case, the importance of it. But also if you notice the first thing that gets cut in schools is art. And the arts are, "Oh, no, no. Gotta cut art. That's superfluous. That's the fluff," you know, when it's not.

But it's not a good thing for some people, the people that are controlled and dominated to be free thinkers, you know, and be creative. They don't want creative people, they don't want us to be creative. You know, it's not about that, you know, just follow the rules. You know, follow this, this is the formula for this project or this thing.

You learn that and you come up with the answer that they want you to come up with and that's it. It's math, science, and all this other stuff and they even ... Oh, and history, of course. "This is the history we want you to learn and learn it just like that. Don't learn your own history, learn this one 'cause we all have to come together with these truths." You know, so I think it's called "brainwashing," isn't it?

But, anyway, things work out that way sometimes and that's ...

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/public-art

Part 12 – Public Art, Part Two:

TCU: So after you finished college and you started painting, so when did you start painting murals in public spaces?

Valdez: I was going to do one in Kingsville, but it didn't happen fast enough, 'cause I moved to Austin right after that. I've been coming to Austin since I was a kid. It seems like I did everything when I was nine or 10 years old, right? But around the same time, I came to Austin a couple of times. I had an aunt that lived here. My uncle came to UT. He was the first one in our family to go to University, and I was the second to go to a university.

My whole family, my dad was a valedictorian and so was my aunt, but they couldn't afford to go to college. It would take up to a full scholarship, 'cause my dad's father died, my grandfather. I never got to meet him. He had to be the bread winner and take care of his family. It was Mom and his siblings. He was the

oldest guy in the family, so he didn't go to college, didn't take up that opportunity. But that was back in those days.

I think, most importantly, I came here and went to grad school, and I actually did a mural here at the Center of Chicano, where I started gathering a little in 1975. I did a mural. I started getting a list of opinions from the kids in the community, 'cause I said, "I want to do a real public art." Underline it, real public art.

I want to have it be part of the public, their opinions, and I want them to come in help paint. It's going to be theirs. I want to make this happen, and I want to have a new kind of approach to public art, 'cause I'm very influenced by the [Spanish 00:02:13], Orozco, Siqueiros and Quivira, but they would never do something like that. I mean, they would do their own work, with assistance and whatever, but they would usually just do their ideas. Or maybe they would get, somebody suggest a theme, a general theme or something, but they would do pretty much ... but I wanted to do something that would be really a ... I would be a tool for the community to express itself.

That's when I started doing that, 1975. Then the following year, 1976, I did a mural a Juarez-Lincoln University on the inside of the building.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/public-art-part-two

Part 13 – His Murals:

Valdez: ... the interior. And that was called [Spanish 00:00:05] 'Cause that was the farm worker clearing house, the National Farm Worker Information Clearing House, besides being a university. I asked a little bit, I didn't do a full survey there but I got ideas and that was one of the ideas. Well do we work with farm workers, we do this and that and raise the consciousness of people about the plight of the farm worker and stuff. So that got to be the general theme of that mural there.

So they liked it and they wanted one outside. I did the one inside for nothing. They did rent a small scaffold for me to use but that was about it. I didn't get any money out of it. But then again I did a lot of little ... we'll come to that later maybe. But anyway, and then I did one on the outside. They came up with a little bit of money and paid me. You can't even imagine how little, but anyway. That was a huge mural for the money. It was about 80 feet by 16 feet tall, second story level. [Spanish 00:01:31]

And anyway, that was a prime location by the way. It was right on the freeway on I-35 and Cesar Chavez street. It used to be East [Fir 00:01:44] back then. And when I did that it just got a lot of attention. A lot of people, everybody saw it man. You couldn't drive south on 35 without seeing it. Or go by on Southeast [Fir 00:02:03] street. It was just way out there, you know. A lot of people would drop by while I was working as well.

Willie Nelson came by one time and asked if I wanted to do something at one of his venues. Couple of other people, [Daryl Ohl 00:02:29] told me that [Kowich 00:02:31] from the Longhorns one time said, oh yeah ... I ran into him one time and he said he was familiar with it because his wife always drove by it. She'd go out of her way to drive by it. He said she liked it and all that stuff. And different people, a lot of people in the community itself started really appreciating it.

I did it for the community and I'm saying this because I was successful in that they accepted it. And it was proven when they destroyed it. They tore it down and people were protesting the destruction of the building but they weren't saying don't tear down our building. They were saying don't tear down our mural. And I would say, "Hey man they're tearing down the whole damn building, what are you talking about tearing down the mural." But that was the symbol, that was our Statue of Liberty, like somebody called it.

TCU: Were you involved in any attempts to preserve the mural?

Valdez: They invited me. I was doing a contract in Houston. I went out to Houston for just a little period of time and I was coming back. And the city council invited me to address the city council. And they said, "We're going to cut it, we can cut it and move it over to [inaudible 00:04:03] It was a park over there deep in the East Side. And I said, "Well actually it would be better if you tear it down."

So it reflects who you really are and what you really want. This is a mural, it's not a painting that you hang on a wall and just move and hang somewhere else. So if you want a true reflection of what you guys really are ... I was telling the city council that you might as well just tear it down because you're destroying something else. It's the integrity of it being there. It's not something that moves, it is a landmark. And landmarks don't get moved. So they tore it down.

They were going to pay, I think at that time, $80,000 for a company to come and cut it in sections, and bricks, glue it, I don't know what, encase it, put it on a big truck and move it and then reinstall it over here, for $80,000. And I said, "Why don't you give us $80,000 and we'll paint more murals instead." But they wouldn't do that.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/his-murals

Part 14 – Resistance to His Art:

TCU: So given that you were working in public and you were talking to the community about... to inform your work, and you discuss it with other people.

Valdez: Oh yeah. Wait. And also, the media would ask me, "Hey. What do you think about them tearing down your mural?" I'd say, "That's not my mural." They'd say, "What? What do you mean? Everybody says it's your mural." "It's not my mural.

Listen to what they're saying. Listen to the chant." And I said, "Don't tear down our mural. See? It's theirs."

TCU: I was going to ask with this type of very visible works, what was the reaction of people from outside the Mexican-American community, like Anglos, for example?

Valdez: It was mixed. And some people came by there saying that you know, this is a jinx. It's causing earthquakes around the world. Somebody actually did come up and tell me that. And then some nut would come around and knock down the scaffold, and I say nut because I got to talk to him one time. He didn't behave very well. He didn't attack me or bad mouth me or anything, but he was just all over the place with comments similar to that.

But every now and then, I'd show up, and the scaffold was knocked down. He'd push it over the edge of the sidewalk, and it would be on the ground. And it was three high.

One day I was so angry that he tore it down, I just picked it up, and put it up by myself, you know, three... put the scaffold back up, corner by corner, one by one, there I go. And I was just losing my patience with that person.

TCU: Where did this person come from or how was...

Valdez: He was just somebody that used to go around, come around the neighborhood. I think he was sniffing paint or something. He was out of control.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/resistance-to-his-art

Part 15 – Gentrification in Austin:

TCU: And since then ... The building was torn down in the mid-80s, if I recall correctly?

Valdez: Yeah, '83.

TCU: '83. So since then, how has the situation for Mexican-Americans in the city, its visibility, how has that changed since then?

Valdez: Well, there's one word that can come into play as far as answering that question, and that's gentrification. People are getting thrown out of their traditional or familial homes, their family homes. They're losing their homes. And it's all by design.

And one of the things that I would mention before anything else, as far as why and this and that and very complicated how things are, and there's

some good things about it and some bad things about it. It's all about greed. People are greedy, and they think that, "Hey, this is nice over here. Why don't you just kick all these brown people out of here and we can open up a bunch of clubs and nice bars and just raise the prices up. They won't be able to afford it anyway. Just get them all out of here."

We marched a lot with that particular theme, and I even painted a mural here. That one also got destroyed, by the way. It was on panels in [inaudible 00:01:42] El Centro Chicano. And it was referring to the gentrification itself, and how the displacement of families and all that stuff. It's very clearly explained. Totally in your face. You can see what's happening. The cops are protecting some people and not the others. And there was a lot of police brutality as well, against Mexicanos or Chicanos. And this is not something that would happen in West Austin back then.

Now East Austin is of course demographically changing enough to where I think the cops are nicer to some of the people around here. 'Cause back in those days, if you were riding a bicycle down the street, they might pull you over and say, "Where'd you buy that bike? Where'd you get it?" Or if you were jogging, "What're you running from?" Stop you in the street and say, "Where're you running?" Now there's people running all over the place. They don't tell them anything. I think it's okay to run now.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/gentrification-in-austin

Part 16 – The Politics of Murals:

TCU: So as we prepare to wrap up, I wanted to ask ... So in your view, why and how are murals political?

Valdez: Well, first of all, all you got to do is paint your culture in a positive way instead of a very stereotypical way. If you don't do a stereotype of it or a cartoon of your culture. That's already political. Then again, we have so much to talk about. For example, we could paint something that anybody else would paint, and it wouldn't come out the same because we can address things like taxation without representation, for one. And it's very easy to come up with a subject like that. Also, because we're sort of strangers in our own land ... This is our own land here. It's not somebody else's land. And to declare that simply by representing your culture, what else can it be? It's got to be political.

I can answer that question for half an hour more. Or maybe an hour. I can give you a speech on it. But we could leave it at that for now.

TCU: And I wanted also to bring up something that we were commenting right before the interview. Why don't you include frames in the murals?

Valdez: Well, murals are ... First of all, it's supposed to be arte integral, integral art. And this is my thing. I want to go out and ask people, "What do you want to see in this mural?" I go to a school, paint a mural, I ask the kids. And I have a question there, and I have a table there. Or I send it to the classrooms and then bring all these. And then I get a committee of people, and then we go through them. And you can see the repetition of things, and you make a note of those, and you put them here. Then all those ideas gel, and it forms an idea. After you see so many and you pick out the similarities ... You don't include everybody's idea. But you get a canvas of the community. That makes it integral, I think. It integrates into the community because that's what the community requested and wants.

And then we have the integral part of the actual architecture. Because most of the time, it's gonna be in an architectural setting, not usually a portable mural. Those exist, but no. When it exists there, you don't want to frame it off and separate it from its surroundings. You want it to expand and blend into the rest of it and integrate into the architecture itself. So if you frame it off like itself, you're dividing it and cutting it off from it.

Now there's another thing as a Chicano. We also have an international perspective on things. And we have international opinions. I've been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I've also formed an organization called Veterans Peace Action Teams where we took water well drilling rigs, for example, all the way to Nicaragua to place that people needed stuff like that. Supposedly, Ronald Reagan himself ordered us to be stopped when we were taking humanitarian aid. When 150 people came and spent the night at my house, we took off from there in trucks and cars, and we're gonna leave everything down there in Nicaragua because we've been on a delegation where we saw the atrocities of the [inaudible 00:04:23] War back then.

And we didn't appreciate it, especially since we've seen what we'd seen in Vietnam. So we decided to do something about it and not just talk about it. And I think there's an art in organizing, as well. I took a little roll, a mural from the kids, and I did a mural myself, as well, on canvas. And we donated it to some organization down there. I don't even know who got it now. But we just dropped those off. But the important thing was that ... We got arrested there. I was one of the national coordinators of this thing. And we got arrested at the border for trying to cross humanitarian aid. So we sued the president and all his cronies

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/the-politics-of-murals

Part 17 – Conclusion:

Rivera: And so the Brown Berets started and little by little we became pretty big here in Austin, to our surprise. We would be getting calls from Senora Martinez that they beat up my hijo last night for no reason.

TCU: They the police?

Rivera: They the police. So we talked to Ms. Martinez talked to the young man. Or somebody else would tell you, "Well they beat up my son." And so forth. And then we began to get people joining the organization. As we got little bit more stronger, we began to work with making alliances. And one of the alliances we made was with the Black Panthers, here in Austin.

The Black Panthers, at that time, here in Austin were led by a man named Jessie ... Actually it was Jesse, not Jesse Jackson, Larry Jackson. Larry Jackson. And he's still around he's a, I see him every so often having coffee, we talk about the old days.

We began to talk, and we began to say, "Look, what they're doing to us, they're doing to you." And back and forth. So we said, "We need to come together and form a stronger alliance amongst ourselves." So that waws very, very good because we began to realize that it wasn't just us. And it wasn't just them. It was people of color, poor people. So your political consciousness begins to be from a very much of a nationalist point of view. "Yo soy Chicano" and "Chicano Power" and all that, you become more politically conscious and you begin to take it as a class struggle. And it's an issue of class, not necessarily black or white. Even though we were targeted, because it's basically the poor versus the wealthy. You began to read more and-

TCU: Do you remember the types of books that you were reading?

Rivera: Oh yeah. It's gonna surprise us. All of the sudden I was reading Marx, Lenin, I was reading about Franz Ferdinand. I was reading everything that you could get your hands on. That's where you learn the global, I began to think more of an international perspective. Again, this is before I went to University of Washington, and so when the, the thing that really worked for us with the Black Panthers, is that they had a lot more experience than we did. We began to emulate what they were doing, and what they were doing to organize. They had their headquarters, we had our headquarters. They had child care, they had a school for the kids after school for the kids that didn't have their parents at home and they would provide free lunches for them and so forth. We said. "We need to do that."

So we had people that volunteered, they gave us books. All of a sudden these little kids started coming to the Center La Raza, Centro Chicano it was called here in Austin. Centro Chicano. We had oranges, bananas, cookies, whatever, and kids books and like a room here. We'd sit down and start reading with them. And what was interesting is that we could get, we began to get their parents knocking on our door. And the parents would say, "What are you all doing with my kids? Who are you?" And we would say, "We're the Brown Berets." We wore our caps and our military uniforms. The kids are out running on the street and this, they just came

because some other kids told them that we were here and we played with them in our yard, played catch or whatever, then they'd come in.

Then you get the parents involved, some of them joined the Brown Berets. The ones that couldn't they said, "Oh, so I don't work, I'm a Senora [inaudible 00:04:28] when do you have the kids here?" "Well we have them here from 3:00 to about 5:00 and then their parents get home from work." Well I'll tell you what, I'll bring some taquitos.

So before you knew it you began to develop this core group of people that was 150% behind you. You could not do wrong. Because they knew that you were helping your community and they would always say, "I support the Brown Berets because you all are defending us." We were not afraid to stand up to the police, we were not afraid to stand up to oppressors. So by providing the food, we were also helping them in many other ways. So that was one of the many benefits that we got by our allegiance and our connection with the Black Panthers.

In later years there was another group called the Black Citizens Task Force that we aligned with also and held demonstrations and unity conferences and so forth here in Austin.

https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/conclusion-3