

4-18-1975

Interview no. 159

Freddy Morales

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Freddy Morales
INTERVIEWER: Regino Ortega, Jr.
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 18, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: _____
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DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

The causes and effects of the Bowie High School Incident.

THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS
of the
BOWIE HIGH SCHOOL INCIDENT

History 3309 - The Chicano
Professor - Oscar Martínez
Student - Regino Ortega, Jr.

O: This is an interview with Freddy Morales, a VISTA Volunteer and part-time student at UTEP. This interview is being conducted on April 18, 1975 in the Office of Campana Para Preservar el Barrio de Sur El Paso, located in the heart of south El Paso. The interviewer is Regino Ortega, Jr., a student at UTEP doing an oral history report for History 3309--The Chicano, taught by Oscar Martínez.

Freddy, you told me you were involved in the Bowie High School disturbance here in El Paso...

O: Would you please tell me when the disturbance took place and how long it lasted?

M: This disturbance took place in 1969, and it roughly lasted a couple of weeks.

O: Where were you during the disturbance?

M: I was, during the disturbance, a student at Bowie High School at that time.

O: What role did you play in the disturbance?

M: My role during these disturbances were to create an awareness and conscious for the student in regards to Spanish detention and a form of dress code that was inflicted upon the student.

O: Approximately how many students were involved in the disturbance?

M: This disturbance affected every student on that campus because every student, as far as I knew, spoke Spanish as their mother tongue. And, also, every student had a distinct mode of dress which in regards, did not fit in the eyes of the administrators.

O: What complaints did chicanos have against the Bowie administration?

M: The complaints that the students had in regards to the Bowie administration, were the policies in regards to the student speaking Spanish on that campus. Another complaint, was the policies in regards to wearing certain forms of dress--dress styles. For, example, students who had jackets who had insignias in the back of the jackets representing certain groups in South El Paso, was not fit in the eyes of the administrators. To the student, this jacket was the only one that they had in

times of cold weather. They did not have any other jackets, any other sweaters, any other types of dress.

O: What methods did chicanos use to demonstrate their grievances against the administration?

M: The students on the campus let their voice be spoken of by representatives and organizers of the Mexican American Youth Association--MAYA. MAYA spearheaded the movement to bring about talks with the administrators and also the faculty members which were following the policies, or enforcing the policies, by the administrators.

Other tactics were the formulation of a Parents Committee for Student Rights which organized in Sacred Heart Church in South El Paso. The Parents' Committee for Student Rights met with the administrators, the faculty members, and even went before school board hearings to voice their demands--and wanted to know why students were being expelled because they spoke their mother tongue. And, they wanted to know why students couldn't wear their jackets which were the only ones they had.

O: In what way did the Bowie administration respond to chicano complaints?

M: In responding to chicano complaints, the Bowie administration seemed to place the issue off to the side. They would react in the manner that, when they were approached with the problems, they would try and hide the problem away. They would impose like a front and say that there exists no problems, while on the other hand, people were being expelled, people were being put after school for hours. People were being put to write essays that they will not speak Spanish--they will not speak Spanish so many times. That's about it. That's how they responded.

O: Was there any violence during the disturbance against chicanos?

M: No, there was no violence of any kind. The students on that campus felt that violence was not the alternative.

O: Which organizations or people were opposed to chicano actions toward the administration?

M: The only people that were opposed to the demands of the students were the administrators and the El Paso Independent School Board.

The people opposed toward the actions of the El Paso Independent School Board and the Bowie High School administrators and faculty members, were people representing the parents of the students that formed and banded together and formed an organization called "The Parents' Committee for Student Rights", the Mexican American Youth Association, people from various denominations of different religious backgrounds, and people from a housing movement group--the "Los Inquilinos" who were very much pushing the demands of the students and were opposed toward the actions of the school administrators...

O: Was there any administration policy change as a result of the disturbance?

M: Yes, all the demands that were presented by the students were met. No violence was necessary.

What happened as a result, was the students were demanding that Spanish detention be abolished--it was abolished. The practices on the school administrators concerning wearing different jackets with insignias representing barrio groups was abolished. The students could wear what they felt, or what they only had to wear. The bigots--the principal and the assistant principals-- Mr. Frank C. Polit the principal, his assistants, Mr. Kiset and Mr. Carpenter, were moved or placed in other schools and chicano administrators were put in. Also, several anglo faculty members that were racist toward the demands of the students, were also moved to put in other schools and chicano faculty members implemented. As a result of this, this led to the future, to a creation of a chicano library, the creation of a chicano club, the creation of more activities, more sympathetic towards the needs of the culture of the cultural background, the social and economic and religious background, of the students. It lead overall, to a different environment where the student did not feel he was being persecuted for speaking his mother tongue and an atmosphere was also created where the student could enjoy the benefits that he deserved in the beginning.

O: We talked about the complaints of chicanos against the Bowie administration and the response that the Bowie administration gave to the chicano complaints. And, you mentioned that there was no violence and that several chicano organizations got together to support the chicanos. Could you tell me which organizations did not support chicanos?

M: Yes, organizations which did not support chicanos were for example, the PTA, the school board, (but who in the end con-

ceded to demands), the group affiliated with other activities outside the barrio did not come in and support. Over all these were only...

The consensus of the groups that could be found in that general area, did voice out their support and only a minority of groups did not. For example, the PTA and the school board.

- O: How did the...these organizations, the PTA and school board... could you give specific examples of how they showed their opposition?
- M: By showing their opposition, it could be demonstrated that they did not participate in the process of going before or in behalf of the students attending that school. They were apathetic; they would hide the problem; they would shove it underneath their throats and not expose the situation. The El Paso Independent school board tried to let the problem remain as it was, and it was until undue pressure from above that came down upon them, that the policy started changing. The PTA, the administrators, and faculty--all the people involved in the schooling process just wanted to let the problem remain, but it did not.
- O: Was any civil action taken against the administration at any time during the disturbance?
- M: Well, due to these disturbances concerning Spanish detention and the dress code, it came about in the future by too much publicity...well bad publicity on their part, that an inquiry was performed by the civil rights commission in San Antonio, Texas. Mr. Frank C. Polit, the principal of this high school, was informed that he had to appear and testify in the civil rights hearing. Due to these hearings and the testimony, it was the consensus of the civil rights commission that there was a tremendous dilemma in this high school, and that they felt that this had to change or the Federal government in Washington would impose strict policies on the administrators to change the situation as it was. As a result, Mr. Frank C. Polit was removed from the high school along with other assistant principals.
- O: Could you tell me what specific action you took in organizing any opposition against the administration during the disturbance?
- M: Well, an example of my opposition to the administrative tactics. For example, was in writing for a newspaper that was distributed

to students on the campus of Bowie High School outside on the campus. And "Relámpago" was the name of the newspaper. And, "Relámpago" stressed the demands of the students. It put out in the light, Spanish detention and the dress codes.

What happened, an assistant principal, went before another friend--another student of mine, who was passing out this newspaper outside the campus, and he took the newspapers out of his possession. And, we felt he had no right to do that. We felt that we had the right to write off what we felt; we had the right for freedom of assembly, and that he wasn't obeying the law of the land. As a result, this case was taken to court...And, the results were that he was found acquitted. This was a bad blow for the students. But, still we didn't stop there. We came out with another newspaper to publicize our demands with a different name--calling it, the newspaper, "El Segundo". Still, portraying the same picture as it was on that campus. But, this time, we did ^{not} meet any suppression or repression on the part of the administrators.

O: How are conditions now at Bowie? Do you still hear talk about people...or students being punished for speaking Spanish...or wearing a certain dress, or wearing long hair, or whatever?

M: Well, it's a different situation now...these disturbances occurred in 1968; and we're now in the year 1975.

If you go to Bowie High School, you can find a totally different atmosphere. You can find students not being afraid to speak their native language, not being told by faculty members that speaking Spanish is deplorable ^{that} it will not make you advance in the society. It is not something that can be labelled inferior. It is something that can be labelled on equal terms as any other language in this world. If you go to Bowie, you'll find an extensive library on chicano materials; you'll find chicano faculties who are more sensitive; you'll find chicano cultures; you'll find chicano libraries; you'll find chicano principals and assistant principals and counselors. You can find a chicano club that's very active; you can find more participation by parents from the barrio in the school more than ever, as it wasn't in the past; you can find people wearing what they feel they want to in the school; you can find them wearing their clothes just like they want to and not what other people want them to wear.

O: In the beginning, didn't you say that the disturbance took place in 1969?

M: Right.

- O: Just a while, you said in '68. Did it take place in...?
- M: Well, in 1968 all the organizing and planning took place. It was until 1969 that the disturbance came about.
- O: So it was actually not until 1969 that all of this happened?
- M: Right.
- O: How do you feel about the part you played in the disturbance? Do you feel chicanos got what they wanted--what they deserved?
- M: Well, I felt that in the year 1969, Bowie High School was really a bad school for a chicano to attend especially in that High School everyone being poor, and not being able to have the same educational advancement as any other student here in El Paso or in the ^(CITY) City of Texas, or in the nation.
- As a result of my part and the part of the students, different actions came about to remedy the problem. No violence was encountered, all of our demands were met, and the situation in Bowie High School was something that the students in general, had wanted to have as it came about. And, as it is right now, a lot of students are satisfied with what it is. You won't find anyone voicing much disapproval as it was in the past.
- O: I don't have any more questions. Is there anything you want to say before I complete this interview?
- M: Well, overall what I have to say in conclusion is that, the disturbances came out...out of the problems with Spanish detention and the dress code, and it is through the banning of the students, in forming coalitions and unity, that demands can be met without any form of violence. That's all.
- O: I've been talking to Freddy Morales about the disturbance at Bowie High School during 1968 and 1969. I'd like to thank you for your time and your effort.
- M: Thank you.