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Interview no. 1686

Jesus Zamora

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Jesus Zamora

Interviewer: Yolanda Chávez Leyva

Project: Voices from the Border Project

Location: Café Mayapan in El Paso, TX

Date of Interview: July 27, 2016

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Transcript No.: 1686

Transcriber/Summary: /Ana Urías

Summary of Interview: Jesus was born in El Paso, Texas in the Segundo Barrio. He recalls living in an apartment complex facing the Franklin Canal on 7th and Virginia Street. There were a lot of gangs around including Los Equis Sietes and Los Catorces. He recalls coming home late from Armijo when he was about 6 years old. The gangs would fight on the corner of 7th and Virginia with chains and knives. He came out to run home and got hit with a chain. A lady in her seventies was watching and she came out to tell them to go home. He thought it was strange that they listened and respected that lady. He went home and hid the chain marks on his chest from his mother. He used to follow the Franklin Canal to Stanton Street and would wait for his maternal grandfather to cross the bridge. His grandfather lived in Bellavista in Juárez, Chihuahua. His mother was born in California and was taken to Chihuahua City when she was a young girl. She played basketball with the *Adelitas de Chihuahua*. His grandmother was a Yaqui Indian who was a widow to a private from World War I. She got remarried and moved to Chihuahua. His grandfather was a Rarámuri. He recalls being with his grandfather on a two-wheel cart pulled by a mule. He would travel to the desert to collect fruit to make fruit candies and *dulce de leche*. Sometimes his grandfather would jump off the cart to catch a jackrabbit to cook and eat. His mother would play in the different gyms in Juárez and met his father there. His father was friends with Tin Tan and his brother, “El Loco” Valdés, who were also from Bellavista. His paternal grandfather opened up a store on 2nd Street in El Paso called Zamora’s News Service. They sold newspapers and would produce magazines. The building still stands on Paisano Street between Oregon and Mesa Street. His father opened a store in Ysleta which was an extension of Zamora’s News. Jesus talks about different ways he would earn money such as selling metal, helping people carry groceries, and working with a mechanic. His parents did not know he was working at that time. This was when he was about ten years old. He made his First Communion in San Ignacio De Loyola Church. On Saturdays, he would go with his brother to wait in front of the church after baptisms to pick up the *bolo*. He attended Alamo Elementary School and then went to Bowie High School. He played basketball and baseball. When he was about thirteen, he would practice with the Indios de Juárez since his father used to play with

them. His family moved to a house in Cedar Grove and he attended Ascarate School. There were many white students there and he experienced a lot of discrimination. Teachers would hit them with a paddle if they spoke Spanish. They would put bows in their hair if they didn't bring a belt. He played football, basketball, baseball, and track. He later attended Ysleta High School. He particularly remembers a math teacher that would give him a hard time in and out of class. He was about fifteen years old. His father knew about these issues and told Jesus to challenge his professor. Back in Segundo Barrio he was part of the Boys Club with Father Rahm who was like a father to many boys. He had taught them how to box and even went to a Golden Gloves Tournament in the Coliseum. About a month after challenging him, they called him to the gym with all the coaches and other male teachers. He boxed the math teacher and knocked him out. The teachers left but no one said anything. About two weeks later, four men from the FFA (Future Farmers of America) caught him walking back home and began to beat him up. He fought back and beat them. The next day he was kicked out of school. The principal told Jesus that he would "grow up to kill somebody one day." He got up and told him that if he would kill somebody, he would come after him first. His father slapped him across the face and told him to respect the principal. They would not let him enter any other school. He passed the entry exams for the private Catholic schools but his father could not afford to pay the monthly fee. When he turned sixteen, he entered El Paso Tech and became a certified welder. When he received a draft notice from the Army, he joined that same day. He got his GED and went to college. He was deployed to Vietnam for three years and became a Platoon Sergeant. He was in the military for a total of twenty-one and a half years. He was injured in Vietnam when a bomb hit him on the legs. He was hospitalized in Japan. When they were going to return him to the United States, they placed him in the wrong plane and he was sent back to Vietnam. About two or three months later he finally returned through Washington. When they arrived, they sent them into a room and asked them to disrobe and proceeded to spray them with some chemical. They showered and received clean uniforms. The next day, they threw them out of the fort with bags filled with feces. They returned to change and were transported on a bus to take them to the airport. He was with a fellow soldier that was missing a leg. Before reaching the airport, they stopped to use the phone in a store nearby. They had called home to let their families know that they were coming home. The soldier's family told him that taking care of someone without a leg was going to be a lot of responsibility and care and so on. The soldier told Jesus to go to the airport without him. While he was waiting for his flight home, he heard on the radio that a soldier with a missing a leg had jumped off a building to commit suicide. He never verified if it was that same soldier. Jesus had 1200 confirmed kills in Vietnam. He got married there but they killed his wife. She was five months pregnant when he found her dead. They had gutted her child out. He feels like he went crazy and cannot remember anything after that. He had nightmares and would sign up for any mission that would involve combat and killing. When he arrived home everyone was happy to have him back. He stayed home fifteen days, fixed up a car, and left to Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia. They sent him to Fort Stewart soon after. Jesus recalls some altercations with his captain that almost got him discharged but instead they changed his company. He was married before joining the army and sent for his son, Jesus Alberto Zamora Jr. and wife to be with him in Georgia. Jesus would buy cheap cars and go crash them in the demolition derby. He felt that it helped with the anxiety and nightmares of Vietnam. Before leaving the army and coming home, his wife asked him for a divorce. She went back to Juárez and he was not able to see his son during that time. Jesus started going to UTEP (University of Texas at El Paso) and the Police Academy. While he was attending UTEP, he joined the navy. He was there for three years and then transferred back to the army. He was stationed at Fort Bliss and finished his Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration Computer Science from UTEP. He was part of the group of students that began MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*) there. He also worked as part of the police department at the university. In 1982 he was struck by lightning in the range and had to be revived three times. In 1989 he became a school teacher after leaving the army. He worked in Alamo Elementary and then in a Catholic

[??] School. When he was at UTEP, he would play baseball with the team and practice with the Sun Kings in Dudley Field. They would beat them but were never invited to join them. Later he joined the civil service in Fort Bliss. He was on the board for West Texas Credit Union. He was part of the advisory board of El Paso. He held many positions. Recently, he was giving PTSD therapy to active duty soldiers from Fort Bliss. He stopped working when it shut down. He believes that El Paso will suffer due to this. He mentions that the public is not informed of terrible incidents that happen in Fort Bliss and talks about two incidents in which soldiers kill themselves and their families due to PTSD symptoms. Jesus is currently involved in MEChA and in activism around the city. He is the Chief of United Inter-Tribal Nations in El Paso. He talks about issues the Tiguas as owners of the Diablos when the Chihuahuas came to El Paso. They primarily work with indigenous soldiers from Fort Bliss. He gives an example of a Navajo woman soldier that passed and how they helped them set up the ceremony. They work with different traditions and customs of tribes such as Navajo, Apache, Yaqui, and Rarámuri. He talks about issues in Mexico with the treatment of their indigenous populations. He discusses incidents and misconceptions about native peoples and about the history, ceremonies, and customs of their tribes. They don't only help native people but also Mexicans and Latinos because they all have indigenous roots. He discusses the origins of scalping and how originally it was the French that would do it because of bounties given by governments for scalps. Eventually younger Indians rebelled and began scalping as retribution. He talks about exploits the white man used against native peoples. His grandfather died in 1954 and told them to not say what they were, still fearful of what could happen to them even though things were changing at the time. He works with Latino organizations to fight for their rights so people can free themselves from being captive. They live with fear and with discrimination. He remembers discriminatory signs in downtown El Paso as well as Odessa, Midland and Lamesa, Texas. When they would travel for football games, they would sleep and eat on the bus because they would not let them in the motel or restaurants. He remembers a Tigua friend in Ysleta that would tell him to not say that he was an Indian. He said that if he thought that passing as a Mexican was tough, then saying you are Indian would be worse. He feels that today you still cannot be completely free. He talks about politics and how Trump is talking about everybody. That it is open and free discrimination. He says that we need to pray a lot for the community because it does not matter who is elected president, it will not go well. He recalls the movement of the black communities into the Hacienda Heights area in 1963 once they were free to live where they wanted. He wants young people to know that if they are having issues with drugs and alcohol to find help. As Natives and Latinos they need to clean themselves, return to reality, and be able to live under the laws of God, live in peace, and unite.

Length of interview 98 minutes

Length of Transcript n/a