



**From Midvale to Mexico and Back**

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**Abstract:** From Mexico to Midvale and Back, is the story of the amazing journey as a result of being selected for the Becas Para Aztlán program in August 1979. I tell of where I grew up, the events that took me from a boy without goals after high school to graduate school and beyond. The wonderful people I met, who became friends and remain friends. This is the story of a young Chicano who's family was in this country when the Pilgrims were the illegal aliens. The story of an amazing family who did not always understand my choices but were always supportive.

**Keywords**

Casa Aztlán, Becario, Chicano Movement

## **Origins**

The story of Casa Aztlán begins long before I arrived in Mexico City on August 2, 1979. A few years earlier Mexico discovered a huge oil reserve off their eastern coast. Little did I know this discovery would propel me to a whole new and exciting cultural, political and educational journey. It was an experience that would lead to new opportunities, opportunities I had heard were only possible for Anglos in the United States; Graduate school, WOW, I'm going to graduate school and at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the most prestigious university in Latin America.

The new, and unexpected path would bring me to where I am today began long before I believed college was possible. It was the culmination of three major events that occurred in the late 1960's, and 70's. Each one was a stepping stone to the next that would lead to the founding of Casa Aztlán and an exciting life journey that followed.

## **The Rule of Three**

Obviously, there are events in my life that brought me where I am today beyond the three I mention here, including being born to two magnificent parents, R and AR, twelve amazing older brothers and sisters, who married so pretty wonderful spouses, forty-four pretty cool nephews and nieces. My Catholic faith was as much part of my culture as it was my religion; so much was our Catholic faith part of our culture, for most of my adolescent life, I believed to be Catholic you had to be Latino, and vice versa.

Like every human on the planet, major events, some voluntary some unexpected, move us in new directions. I believe most of us can point to at least three specific events in our lives that changed the trajectory of our life. These are the three major events I've identified, which laid the foundation to Casa Aztlán, and brought me to a rather peaceful place in my life, along with a profound sense of accomplishment.

First, was my family's move. When I was eleven years old, R moved his family to Midvale, Utah, a small town about ten miles south of Salt Lake City. Moving there would lead to meeting one of the most influential persons in my life, Albert Garcia. His father, Chuy Garcia would play an indirect role in the founding of Casa. The next event occurred a world away. In the mid-seventies, Mexico discovered a huge oil reserve off their eastern coast. Little did I suspect, this discovery would change my life. Finally, and perhaps the primary reason the two events mentioned earlier would merge, was the Chicano Movement of the early 1970's.

## **From Llano Largo to Bingham and Beyond**

In the late 1950's, my father decided to leave the little township of Llano Largo, New Mexico and move to Utah. He worked for a short time in San Francisco, California in 1956. However, the frequent earthquakes were unnerving to my sister Lorraine, so he moved his family to Utah to be with his sons and extended family, first to West Jordan then to Bingham Canyon.

Bingham was the home of the largest open pit copper mine in the world. Eventually my parents, would call this place home. This mining town evolved in a rather unique way, probably more unique than most towns in the United States. The copper mine was not only one of the largest employers in the State, they also paid well. During World War II, male workers were

scarce, and the mine needed workers. For some reason' unbeknown to me, the mine attracted workers from Puerto Rican, Japan, Italy, Greece, Mexico, the former Yugoslavia and New Mexico to replace the primarily Anglo miners. By the mid 1950's, the mining town of about 15,000 was changing, more than half the population was from the places mentioned above. Eventually, they brought their families. From the villages and towns of Northern New Mexico, entire families moved from Peñasco, Llano Largo, Llano, Rodarte, Chamisal, Las Trampas and other villages, to Bingham for an opportunity to work in the mine, in the late 1940's and 1950's.

### **From Bingham to Midvale and the Connection to Casa**

By the early 1960's, the copper mine was expanding. Kennecott Copper Corporation (KCC) began buying up the Oquirrh Mountain. Eventually, the vast majority of Bingham Canyon residents moved their families to the outskirts of Salt Lake City. Many of us had never been around a majority white culture.

In the early 1960's, my father moved his family to Midvale. Across the street lived the Garcia's, Chuy and Margarita. Chuy was from San Pedro Caro, Michoacán, Mexico, Margarita was from Vallecitos, a little village in Northern New Mexico.

The Garcia's had four girls and one son, Albert. Albert and I attend Judge Memorial Catholic High School in Salt Lake City. However, because of the expenses, I ended up attending Hillcrest High School my senior year, where I was befriended by Manuel Trujillo, who would be one of the people responsible for introducing me to the Chicano Movement.

After graduation in 1968, Albert would go on to college. What made this unique was in 1968, he would be the first Chicano, and real acquaintance I knew, who was attending college. By May 1970, my high school graduation approached. I was struggling to get enough credits to attend the graduation ceremony, needless to say I was not a good student. My D average gave me the credits to graduate but I had no direction, goals, or understanding what I wanted to do with my life. Though the Chicano movement was going on all around me, I was totally oblivious. Finally, in January of 1971, I made the decision to enlist in the Army at the tail end of the Vietnam War. I would serve two years, thirteen of those months in the Republic of Korea. I had made the decision to not only join the Army but volunteer to go to Vietnam to avenge the killing of my cousin and two other friends killed by the Vietcong a few years earlier. I was seeking revenge. However, an interesting thing happened to me in the army, I turned against the war, while the United States was at war. When the opportunity came to go to Vietnam, I said *chalé*, (nope) no way. I was honorably discharged in September, 1973.

### **El Veterano lost**

Though I had heard about the G.I. Bill home loan program, I didn't pay attention to it much. Little did I realize at the time it would open doors, and create opportunities I never imagined existed. Upon my discharge I still had no direction, goals or sense of what I wanted to do with my life. I took advantage of a government program which gave veterans preferences for certain government jobs. I would work as an electricians' helper at the Army Depot in Tooele, Utah. Working there would present another event that would alter my life, and eventually point me to Mexico City.

After a few months of working, I meet Roberto Mondragón. Roberto was a long haired, intelligent, handsome biker, scholar but loved his drugs. He was articulate, charismatic and convincing. My relationship with Roberto would last years until his untimely death. Roberto educated me on the G.I. Bill, the government paid you money to go to college. Taking his advice and thinking, what do I have to lose, I enrolled at the University of Utah. Wow, what was I doing here?

By 1973, my friend Albert was in his senior year at the University. Years earlier, I had met Manuel Trujillo a fellow high school graduate, both were attending the University of Utah. I had not yet enrolled. Albert and Manuel invited me to a University's, Chicano Student Association (CSA) meeting at the Guadalupe Center basement, on Salt Lake City's westside. It was here, I would meet the University of Utah's Chicano leadership. I met a future judge, future state senator, teachers, police officers, counselors, professors, though none of us knew it at the time. I quit my job at Tooele in August of 1973, and became a full time student.

## **Viva La Raza**

It was here, I not only joined, but leaped in with both feet, into the civil rights movement. By making the decision to quit my job and pursue a degree, I was laying the ground work for Mexico. As a member of the Chicano Student Association (CSA), I got involved in the Coors beer boycott, the grape boycott, and many other social justice issues of the 70's. The more involved I became, the more aware I became, the more determined I was to get my degree. The problem was, I was approaching my junior year and I still hadn't chosen a major. I had very few role models. Once again, opportunity knocked.

During my sophomore year I met Dr. Armando Navarro, a political science professor at the University. Dr. Navarro wrote, and received a grant from the Rockefeller foundation. The program would be administered by the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics. The grant awarded scholarships to fifteen Chicano students who would pursue a degree in Political science. This would set the stage for the rest of my life.

The internship forced me to declare a major. It required me to get involved in political activities, I was loving it. The scholarship not only required us to take classes but we had to intern at the state legislature, on a political campaigns, and at a public agency each quarter. The impact of this scholarship was huge. I was learning about the political process, I was drafting legislation, meeting politicians, attending political conventions, I was eating it all up. During my tenure at the University of Utah I met many Chicanos and Chicanas who would graduate and went on to successful careers. Still today, we understand we owed it to the movement.

## **Mr. Vice-President**

I was elected CSA's Vice-President of Community Affairs, my first official title. It was in this role that I would meet activists who would become part of who I would become. One of the most defining and highlights of my time on campus was when the University of Utah, the Latino community and several partners hosted the first "National Chicano Forum" at the Salt Palace Convention Center in the summer of 1976. Hundreds of Chicano activists attend the three day conference. Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez from Colorado, Jose Angel Gutierrez, founder of the Raza Unida Party and many more Chicano leaders were in attendance. We sponsored workshops

on social justice, developing leadership skills and creative writing, to mention a few. Zuni Paz, a Chilean singer, dazzled the crowd with her rendition of “La Bamba Chicana”. We felt a real sense of accomplishment. We were able to brag how the University of Utah had the most tenured Latino faculty in the country. We had so much to be proud of.

### **To Work, Back to the Community**

In 1978, opportunity came at me unexpectedly. My friend, and future State Senator, Pete Suazo was leaving his job as the Mexican American Community Corrections Counselor at SOCIO. SOCIO (Spanish Speaking Organization for Community Integrity and Opportunity), had been the largest Latino civil rights, non-profit organization in the State. Pete recommended and vouched for me. It was this job that would give me the experience as a community activist which contributed significantly to receiving a scholarship from Mexico. The program involved assisting inmates at the Utah State Prison and youth locked up in detention or involved with Juvenile court, transition back into society. It was during my time at SOCIO where I had heard about the huge deposits of oil discovered by Mexico, never for a minute believing it could impact me.

It was 1978, I had been working for SOCIO for a year when I was approached by two friends from the movement. Lorenzo Archuleta and Salvador Mendez suggested I look into this scholarship program being offered by the Government of Mexico. This was the first time I had ever heard of “Becas Para Aztlán”. The Mexican Government was going to use profits from the new oil reserves to fund scholarships for Chicanos to pursue their graduate degree at Mexican Universities. It was their contention, “if the U.S. was not going to help us with our education, they were. I’m sure their agendas went beyond that, I was not sure. The Becas Para Aztlán program was the creation of the Raza Unida Party out of South Texas. A group of Chicano activities had persuaded the Mexican Government, it was in their best interest to provide scholarships to Mexican/Americans, who would become natural ambassadors in the future. The agreement was to provide 50 scholarships, every year for five years, 25 would go to individuals pursuing their graduate degrees, 25 would be for student wanting to study medicine.

### **Graduate School in Mexico, Estas Loco?**

Salvador, who I was now working with at SOCIO, often met to share stories about the movimiento. It was during one of these frequent meeting, he shared information about a scholarship program offered by the Mexican Government to Chicanos, the Becas Para Aztlán”program. Lorenzo Archuleta, a friend from the University had applied and been accepted to the class of 1978. Salvador was thinking of applying, but was going to wait a year. Lorenzo, was in constant contact with Salvador, sharing with him, what an exciting adventure it was. Lorenzo had chosen to study medicine and was assigned to the University of Puebla, in Puebla, México.

In the spring of 1978. I received the application package from the Becas Para Aztlán committee headquartered in Texas. Luz Gutierrez was the administrator, I high energy, tell it like it is Chicana. Luz was the wife of Jose Angel Gutierrez, founder of the La Raza Unida party in Texas and the individuals who negotiated the Becas Para Aztlán program with Mexican Government officials.

The applications process was challenging. The scholarship program focused equally on recruiting Chicanos with a history of community activism as it was student with decent grades and committed academically. I finally submitted my application, and in June of 1979, was

informed that I had been accepted to the class of 1979. Salvador was also accepted. However, by this time, he had a good job with the Youth Corrections and was having second thoughts about quitting the security of a professional and rewarding job to a life of uncertainty in Mexico.

### **Go Back to Mexico! So I Did.**

It was not uncommon to hear comments like, “go back to Mexico” from racist or ignorant whites, so I thought I would take up their challenge. On August 2, 1979, I packed my belongings and headed to Mexico City. Salvador had decided to stay with his new found career. Though I was disappointed, because Salvador had been to Mexico City earlier, I was looking to him to help navigate the journey. I was on my own.

Arriving at the Hotel Beverly, I was surprised how small the place was but happy I had a bed in Mexico City for at least two weeks. Registering at the front desk, I was also relieved I was at the right place, thinking to myself I made it over the first hurdle. After checking-in and putting away my world possessions, I made my way to the restaurant. I was hungry and wondered what do they eat here. Near the entrance, I encountered a tall skinny vato who, I was sure was another becario, he just looked Chicano. Before I could say anything, he asked, are you a becario? I was relieved once again. I met my first Chicano in Mexico who would turn out to be another very good friend for years. BO was from west Texas, and had that Texas drawl, when he spoke in English. What impressed me, and actually comforted me was his command of Spanish. He knew the lingo of Mexico, outgoing, smart, articulate and very much a gentleman. It would be B who would help me navigate this new bureaucracy on the path I had chosen.

For the next two weeks the fifty of us becarios would be treated as guest in Mexico’ The agency responsible for administering the scholarship by the Mexican government was CONACYT (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Technlogia). Though my Spanish was adequate to understand most of what was being said to us by the agency workers, there were times, much of what they said just went over my head. However, I was thankful for the Spanish I did know. This is when I first realized, probably for the first time, my parents had given me this gift, the gift of retaining my native language, Spanish. It hit me, all those years of interpreting for my mother who refused to learn English was a gift. The fact that I was forced to retain my Spanish, though there were many times I was frustrated, and sometimes even embarrassed, when I had to go with her to the store to interpret. Because I was the youngest, and pretty much the last child to leave home, I was left with the responsibility of being her official interpreter. I now realized I owed much more then I realized to this lady, whose parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and several generations before who were born in the United State, and yet it was my generation and that of my brothers and sisters who would be the first to use English as our primary language. What a gift, I thought to myself, as I set through the long orientations at CONACYT.

As the two week orientation progressed I became increasingly comfortable, though not yet confident of my decision to pursue a masters degree in political science in another country, all in Spanish at that. However, I was making new friends, good friends. Eventually there were a group of us who would come together to have discussions as to where we came from, our involvement in our particular state with the Chicano Civil Rights movement. As the orientation progressed we became more anxious because most of us still did not know what Universities we would be assigned to.

## **Time to Cut the Cord**

The time finally came when we were assigned to our schools. Many of the students who were going to study Medicine were assigned to universities outside of Mexico City. Most of us doing graduate work in the social sciences were assigned Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). By this time there was a pretty significant group of us who were evolving into an activist group, promoting the idea, we need to meet regularly to talk about our experiences, help each other traverse the Mexican bureaucracy, and just offer support.

It was time for CONACYT to wean us from their guardianship. It was time to move out of the Beverly Hotel, we were on our own. By this time, some of the Becarios had already acquired a place to live, but a group of us had no idea where we would go, where we would live.

## **A Chicano Embassy in Mexico City Founded**

Our housing search was a daily task. We only had about a week or two before classes started and we were getting desperate. We decided to break up into teams to find a place for some of us or all of us to live. This was not easy in Mexico City, a city of 17 million. We needed the place to be relatively close to the university, close to the a metro station or bus stop and affordable on our stipends. Benito and I were one team, Ruben and Estevan were another and so on.

Benito and I came across an ad for a five bedroom house on Calle Joaquin Romo, in Colonia Tlalpan. The house was a two story place, about three miles south of the University and just off the major street in all of Mexico. Benito and I arranged to see the place. We arrived at the house and were greeted by an old man, probably in his 80's, who pulled up in a mid-sized American car, nothing extravagant but he had a chauffeur.

The old man didn't greet us, the chauffeur did. It was clear he was speaking for his boss. He told us the amount we would need for the rent, as well as a deposit. It was affordable if five of us contributed about \$80 each month. There was one problem, we needed a "fiador" a co-signer. Where would we find someone in Mexico City to co-sign for a bunch of college students from another country? None of us had any connections, or so we thought. This is where my family's move into the house on main street comes into play.

My parents neighbors, Chuy and Margarita Garcia became dear friends of my parents, visiting each other frequently. Chuy was a generous man who liked to brag about the people he knows and the things he has. Upon learning I had been accepted to study in Mexico City, he immediately ordered me, he didn't ask, to look up his nephew in Mexico City. His nephew was a successful bureaucrat with a maid, a car, and a nice house in Mexico City. "He can do a lot for you, so make sure you contact him", Mr. Garcia insisted.

While at the Hotel Beverley, Benito and I arranged a visit with Alberto Garcia, Chuy's nephew. He lived in a high rise apartment near the University. He and his wife were very hospitable. After a meal, he offered us a cocktail. I was introduced to Presidente, a brandy very popular in Mexico. It turned out we had several more, and before we knew it, all of us were feeling pretty good, so good Benito and I felt our Spanish greatly improved, at least in our own minds.

It was a wonderful, and as it turns out, an opportune gathering. We passed the evening talking politics, about family and fixed many of the world's problems. Later, that evening, his younger brother Armando showed up. Armando would become a great tourist guide, and friend to us for the remainder of my stay in Mexico. He showed us the ropes, where to get what, and how to get around. Before leaving that night Alberto reassured us, we were always welcome in his home and if there was anything he could do for us, just ask.

The time came to find a fiador. it was time to ask. Hesitantly, Benito and I met with Alberto to make the request. To our surprise, he agreed without hesitation. We had a place to live in Mexico City thanks to Chuy Garcia's nephew.

A few days later the five of us moved in, no furniture to speak of, only sleeping bags, our clothes and few other belongings. Because the living room was the only room with carpet, we all slept there the first night. Little by little, we began to accumulate pieces of furniture. By this time classes had begun. We were nervous about attending graduate school where most, if not all the classes were going to be in Spanish. We were assigned a counselor who would help us navigate the system.

Three or four months into our program we met Roberto de Anda. Roberto was a Mexican national who grew up in the Bay area. He was teaching at a college just outside Mexico City. He had a car and spoke fluent Spanish, academic Spanish. He was sharp, well versed in the politics of Mexico and had a firm handle on political ideology. Roberto would soon apply and become a becario, and a lifelong friend. The house on Joaquin Romo had five bedrooms with a maids quarters that needed repairs. Roberto needed a place to live, so we agreed, if he was willing to pay for the remodeling and clean up the room he could move in. Adding him would lower our individual monthly rent. Before long, Roberto moved in.

It was around this time we began to talk of the need for a meeting place, and a place where becarios from other schools around Mexico could stay when they visited the city. We felt there was a need for us to gather, to share ideas and thoughts about our stay. We developed a plan. Basically, the plan established the house on Joaquin Romo as CASA AZTLAN, the official meeting place of all becarios. Everyone soon signed on, we now had, what we referred to as a, "Chicano Embassy" in Mexico City.

Casa Aztlán would eventually become what we had hoped. A meeting place for becarios, room for visiting becarios from outside Mexico City, and an orientation headquarters for future becarios who would follow. Equally important, it would be recognized by CONACYT, and RAZA UNIDA, as the becarios' headquarters. It was all that and more. We had guest arriving all the time from different parts of the United States who were visiting Mexico or passing through on their way to South America. We became well acquainted with our barrio rather quickly. The Saturday mercado became a routine as did eating at the local taquerias, and shopping at the tienditas (mom and pop shops). We quickly adapted.

## **Return to Aztlán, Professor**

By the summer of 1981, my two year scholarship was about to expire. Also, a feeling of getting back to the U.S was setting in. I felt I had gotten all I was going to get from this venture, it had been a remarkable one. I met new friends, completed two years of grueling graduate work at the most prestigious university in the Americas. I was exposed to a part of the world I had only heard about and most important, I was leaving with a new set of goals, goals that were far-fetched only two years before. I was going down a new path that I never imagined, I was going



to teach political science at Northern New Mexico Community College in Española, New Mexico. In a most interesting way, I was living the American dream on my own terms.

Becoming a professor was one of numerous rewards I received from the three major occurrences in my life. These events changed me forever, and allowed me to be where I am today, a most rewarding outcome.

Moving to Main Street in Midvale, where I would meet the Garcia family, the discovery of new oil reserves in Mexico and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement all come together to transform my life in ways I never imagined. I was not the person who left Midvale to study in Mexico, I was a new person who had seen the world, and now saw the United States in a whole new way, a way that showed me what was possible with new knowledge and abilities to control my own destiny, ways I never thought possible.

I never imaged I would be a professor. Teaching political science at the community college would give me yet new opportunities. My experience in Mexico filled me with confidence. I felt, for the first time in my life, I could do things, accept challenges and continue growing without the fear of doubt. Interestingly enough, one of many opportunities would come during my first year in Española.

Working part-time as a college professor made daily living a challenge. To compensate my income I used my new found confidence in my ability to speak Spanish and love of music to land a part-time DJ position with the local Latino radio station. This experience gave me a whole new insight into the people of Northern New Mexico, and an introduction and appreciation of Chicano music. This new experience would serve me well in the political campaigns I would be involved in later back in Utah.

## **Welcome Governor**

During the two years I taught at the college a few more unexpected opportunities surfaced. These opportunities came indirectly as a result of my experience in Mexico. My approach to life had changed. I now had a renewed confidence to take on challenges as opportunities, an attitude born out of my Mexico experience.

In 1981, my first semester at the college the general election cycle was taking place around the country. A local politician had ran and lost the 2nd congressional seat two years earlier, and was running again. By this time, the 1980 census had been completed and New Mexico was awarded a third congressional district because the population had increased. What better way to teach political science than to have a live congressional candidate for office speak to my class. I placed a call to the campaign office of Bill Richardson. He agreed to speak to my class the following week. I did not know Mr. Richardson, but I know what he looked like.

The day he came to speak to my class I agreed to meet him in the student union lunch area. Here was a future congressman, Secretary of Interior, Ambassador to the United Nations and Governor of the State, standing there waiting for me. No one around us knew who he was, or why he was there. After he won his primary, I invited him back to speak to my class. Bill Richardson would go on to win the election.

Bill Richardson had been a congressman for six months when I was invited by his office, to apply for a LBJ Congressional internship. This internship provided me an opportunity to intern for the congressman in Washington D.C. for a summer. Not only was I teaching political science, I was going to witness it at work. I would be a participant if only for a couple of months. This experience would serve me well in my classroom. One of the most memorable moments

that occurred during my internship was meeting the lady who would become the Vice-Presidential candidate for Walter Mondale in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro. Congress members receive dozens of invitations to attend events around Washington. Obviously they can't attend all of them so they send staff, or in my case an intern to represent them. I arrived at the hotel, I don't recall the name, but it was luxurious. At least three hundred people filled the ballroom, many of them elected officials or staff. I don't recall ever feeling so out of place.

Asking myself once again, what am I doing here and what am I suppose to do? Eventually I settled near the back of the ballroom, where most of the help stood to await their next assignment. A rather short lady was making the rounds and she soon approached me asking who I was as she reached out her hand to shake mine. "I'm with Congressman Bill Richardson" I responded. She introduced herself as Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro. I don't know why but I remember her well, perhaps it was because she was so pleasant and didn't strike me as a lady with power. Months later she would be introduced as the Vice-Presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. I thought, how cool it was, I had the opportunity to meet this lady, she had left me with a positive impression.

This would be one of several interesting occurrences I experienced while at this small college. I have no doubt they were opportunities that came my way, and I took advantage of because of the impact and new found confidence the becas program had on me. Later that year, I applied and was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities scholarship. The award gave me the chance to study Religion and Politics for one summer semester at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Before leaving Española to return to Graduate school at the University of New Mexico in 1983, one more exciting development involving Casa Aztlán occurred. As a faculty member of the college I was the advisor to a student group, CONNEXIONS. This group was the brain child of a professor by the name Dr. Enrique Lamadrid. A high energy and committed professor, Dr. Lamadrid had written and received a grant to educate students on their connection to Mexico, culturally, musically and politically. I convinced Enrique to allow funds from the grant to take a group of fifteen students and two advisors to Mexico. Dr. Lamadrid agreed. The purpose of the trip would be to visit historical sites, meet and interact with the local population and best of all, we had a place to stay, Casa Aztlán. The two week trip was a huge success, so successful we did it again the following year. The residence of CASA were excited at the prospects of sharing their experiences in Mexico with a group of impressionable youth, they were so hospitable. Many of them accompanied us on our tours. It was so rewarding for all parties involved.

While in Mexico, I met and eventually married a beautiful lady from California, Rebecca Elisarraraz. Two year later, my daughter Sonia was born. What a blessing, a result of Rebecca and I meeting in Mexico, my family moving to Midvale, Mexico's discovery of new oil reserves, and my activism in the Chicano Movement, an unlikely and beautiful outcome for a guy who barely graduated from high school. In 1987, I graduated from the University of New Mexico with my master's degree. Rebecca and I felt it was important to raise our daughter with family so we relocated to Utah.

### **The Utah Coalition of La Raza Officially Replaces SOCIO, Viva La Raza**

Then things changed again. In the summer 1992, the Institute for Human Resource Development (IHRD), a social service provider for Latinos in the state was searching for and executive director. IHRD was the largest Latino nonprofit agency in the state, with an emphasis

on migrant head start, gang prevention programs and other social services. I was interviewed, and hired. In short order, I reorganized the staff and eventually convinced the board into changing the name of the organization to something that said more of who we were, and what we did. Centro de la Familia (CDLF) was now the official name.

It was during my tenure at CDLF when I attend my first annual National Council of La Raza, now known as “UnidosUS”, Conference in Houston, Texas. NCLR is the largest Latino advocacy organization in the nation. It was an eye opener to say the least. I met professional Latinos from all over the country. The workshops were educational, the entertainment was the best, and there were so many Latino activist I knew, and some I had heard of, and wanted to meet. NCLR is an affiliate organization, meaning they are made up, not just of individual members but agencies or non-profit groups from around the country. They provide tremendous support to their affiliates to include startup money and training.

I returned to Salt Lake with an idea. By this time SOCIO had become defunct and there was a huge need for a statewide Latino advocacy organization. I called a meeting with some of those who attended the Houston conference and proposed the idea of organizing an NCLR type organization in the state. Some liked the idea, others were pessimistic but supportive. Our challenges was to answer the question, “if Latino non-profits in the state want to join an affiliate organization, what did they have to gain”? My argument was simple, we could speak with one voice on topics the entire group endorsed, we could raise funds to help with training so the groups could focus on their own missions, and more importantly it was needed.

After months of meeting with, and convincing Latino organizations, we held our first press conference to announce the creation of the new civil rights organization and voice. On October 12, 1993, EL Dia de La Raza, the Utah Coalition of La Raza (UCLR) was born. I was elected as its first chairman.

We had an impressive turnout, the media was very interested in our mission. The next day the announcement of a new Latino organization made the front pages of Utah’s major newspapers. We had gathered seventeen organizations to sign on as members, organizations that included Centro Civico Mexicano, Centro de la Familia de Utah, The Utah Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Catholic Diocese, the American G.I. Forum, IMAGE de Utah, the Chicano Student Association from the University of Utah, the University of Utah’s Chicano Scholarship Fund Board of Trustees, and several others.

Utah now had a major Latino advocacy organization to speak to the issues related to Latinos. Coincidentally, just two weeks after our inaugural there was another police shooting. A Salt Lake County Sheriff critically wounded a young Latino. Police shootings were too common in our community, this was just another one in a long history of police violence against Latinos. The family soon contacted UCLR, asking us to get involved and make sure the shooting is investigated properly, talk about baptism by fire. We organized a march to bring attention to unjustified shooting by police. We had significant turnout and were able to get the media coverage we wanted. A few days later, we called a press conference demanding to speak to the newly elected County Sheriff. He refused several request. We decided to contact our friends on the Salt Lake County Commission, Randy Hourichi and Jim Bradley, who convinced the Sheriff to meet. Once in the meeting, I recall Jim Bradley and the Sheriff coming in first and making the ceremonial introductions. The news media was not allowed in, but were waiting outside to hear the outcome. Jim Gonzales, Pete Suazo, not yet a senator, Robert Archuleta, our official attorney, and I entered the office reserved for our meeting, feeling a little unsure of the outcome, but we were going to make our position known. Because this was an official meeting, we were

told we could not proceed until Commissioner Hourichi arrived, there had to be at least two commissioners present to make the meeting official. Soon after Randy arrived, the newly Republican elect Sheriff made an odd but interesting statement to the group, “How do I know these individuals speak for the larger Hispanic Community” was his question. Without skipping a beat, both Randy and Jim, in their authoritative voices responded, “Sheriff, UCLR speaks for the community”. In that instant, UCLR was made the legitimate voice of the community.

Though little came of the investigation, the officer involved was never punished, but UCLR had stepped forward at a critical time, and was seen as the Latino Advocacy Organization in the State. Yet another event would take place that would have a lasting affect not only on my life but to the citizens of Salt Lake County. Prior to leaving CDLF, I had been appointed to the Utah Transit Authority’s (UTA) Board of Directors. Two years earlier a measure had been defeated by Utah voters to raise taxes by a quarter of cent to fund a light rail system. However, the general manager, John Pingree was able to secure federal funds to move the project forward. This soon became a very devise issues, and I was right in the middle of it.

A resolution was before the board to fire the general manager, and in essence stop light rail from coming to Utah. Needless to say, the media was all over it. As it turns out, 7 members were for removing the general manager and 7 were against his removal. My vote would result in a failed vote, and most likely, allow the light rail project to move forward.

I don’t recall ever having been under so much pressure. I was being called by County Commissioners, the body who had nominated me to the board, with Randy Hourichi, the same person who had come to our rescue in the early days of UCLR demanding I vote against the general manager. I was called by the Mayor of Salt Lake, Deedee Corrodini, encouraging to stand my ground, and vote to keep him. Calls from the media asking how I would vote were nonstop. I so wanted to be somewhere else.

The day came for the vote, I voted to keep the general manager. That was not the end. Several weeks later, the opponents of light rail took me to court. Their claim was, my term had expired and my vote shouldn’t count, it should have been postponed until my replacement was named. If they prevailed, light rail was doomed. I had made the case that light rail was good for Utah, it was good for the environment.

On the day of the hearing, every media outlet in the state was outside the courtroom door waiting for the judge’s decision. I recall thinking, why me, I did not ask for this, I didn’t do anything wrong. Simultaneously feeling, if the judge decides in my favor, only good would come from this, it will make things right. The judge decided in my favor, and TRAX would go on to be a huge success.

## **Otro Washington**

It was a tough year, I was out of work and looking when I received a fax from a friend informing me of a position in the State of Washington. The job was Executive Director for the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs. My first thought was, why they would want to hire a Chicano from Utah to at work at this job in Washington? I applied and got the job.

This position was a Governor’s cabinet level position, special consultant to Governor Gary Locke on matters related to the Latino community in the State of Washington. I was confident I was well versed on most issues related to Latinos. You name the subject, I probably had knowledge and experience with it. Talk about getting hit with a dose of reality. I never expected the first issue I would have to face in the state was temporary farmworker housing. I

thought I knew about farmworker issues, but soon realized I had no clue about this topic. I learned quickly. It was controversial and the community was divided, Latino advocates on one side, growers on the other, with a whole lot of people in the middle.

Eventually, this issue would be settled with the growers agreeing to put up some money and the state putting in some. Though not totally resolved, it was settled for now. I soon found out being an activist and trying to speak for the governor was not a good combination. The governor would take positions I did not agree with, and often some community activist took positions the governor could do little about, like immigration raids, and I was in the middle.

I had great support from the community and a crop of new friends. To my delight, after my departure from the Governor's office, I was invited to sit on the board of Centro de La Raza, the best known and oldest Latino community organization in the state. After a short stint with the Washington State Liquor Board as the Alcohol Awareness Program Manager I decided to return to Utah, my family kept pulling me back.

### **Building Healthy Communities, The Political Campaign**

Not long after, I returned to Utah in 2001, yet another event occurred in my life that would not only impact me, but my family and friends for a long time. The 2002 general elections were right around the corner. I was approached by Jim Gonzales who, by this time had his own political consultant business and worked mostly with democrats. He brought up the subject of county elections and the party needed a candidate to run against the Republican incumbent from Salt Lake Counties 3rd District. I guess I didn't need much convincing, I soon registered with the county clerk and was a full-fledged candidate for County Council.

For most of my adult life I wanted work at a job where I could make a positive difference in people's lives. Being a County Councilman offered one of the best opportunities to do just that. I had worked on campaigns before but never been a candidate. The task ahead would be grueling. Fortunately, I was working as a part-time consultant with Midvale City so my schedule was flexible. For the next six months I would attend fundraisers, the Democratic Party convention, give numerous speeches on how I would make a difference on the council and the council needed a voice from the communities of color. It was exhausting and exciting simultaneously.

We lost the election by 4,000 votes. Never the less I felt humbled, I had received over 12,000 votes, votes from people I didn't know, but believed in me and my campaign to trust me with their vote. Equally important, most of my family members discovered they were Democrats for the first time. I had gotten a significant number of family politically involved, most for the first time in their lives, this was rewarding.

### **Seeking Diversity**

Not long after the campaign, yet another event happened that I had no part in, but would impact me for the next 10 years. In November of 2003, Utah elected a new Governor, Jon Huntsman. Just like the oil reserve discovery in Mexico, I had no idea this was going to have a profound impact on me. After his inauguration he appointed his cabinet. He named an attorney Lisa-Michele Church, to head the Utah Department of Human Services. Lisa-Michele was a quiet non-assuming individual who was as sharp as they come. Lisa-Michele wanted to do

something to improve the services minorities were receiving from this agency. She spent her first years as Executive Director meeting with the offices of Ethnic Affairs and others to find new ways to improve services to the communities of color. She was not satisfied with what she found.

She had met with Salvador Mendez, who by this time was the Assistant Program Director for Juvenile Justice Services, a division under her command. Salvador was very direct with her, suggesting, she need to bring someone in to promote the services in the community, but it had to be someone who has her total commitment. Soon, she drafted a new job description, calling for a person who knew the community, knew social services, was bilingual, and had a degree. The job fit perfectly. I was interviewed and got the job as the Community Relations Program Manager. I had the unique opportunity to work with refugee groups, the Native American tribes of Utah, the gay and lesbian community, as well as the Asian, African-American, and of course the Latino community. I made a whole new group of friends, most important, I gained their trust. I felt I was making a difference in peoples' lives, specifically the diverse communities of Utah.

### **The Gift that Keeps on Giving,**

When I first heard about the Becas Para Aztlán scholarship program I needed convincing to apply. Why leave a good job for such an unknown path? Once convinced by Lorenzo and Salvador, I was sold, what did I have to lose. By this time I just felt it was the right thing to do. When I first arrived in Mexico, I admit I was conflicted, did I do the right thing? Not long after meeting my new friends from the program and sharing awesome experiences I was convinced I was in the right place. I often wondered, what would I do with a Master's degree in International relations from the Universidad Nacional Autonomy de Mexico. However, this hesitation would soon give way to a whole new world filled with a new sense of confidence. I never thought of, or intended to be a college professor, but this is where my decisions took me. My professional goals were evolving. I was more committed to social justice. I became more versed in the works of John Locke, the English philosopher, Thomas Jefferson, Emiliano Zapata, Che Guevara, and more committed to the non-violence teaching of Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez. I was a new man, I was unafraid of new challenges.

My ability to read, speak and write Spanish was a goal I sought when arriving in Mexico. I know the choice I made to study in Mexico gave me the knowledge, skills and experience to impact my career decisions. I was able to use my education to mentor and teach others, and more importantly, to remain active in my quest for social justice. Without hesitation my enhanced community activism was made possible by my experience in Mexico. I knew, to have a real impact, I needed to have real credentials, and is why I pursued a master's degree from an American University. Titles can be misleading, but helpful in this world. I have no doubt that my degree, fluency in Spanish and new found confidence advanced my community engagement and allowed me to successfully advocate for social justice. Even today, as I ponder my next life choices new challenges surface, challenges that require advocacy.

Almost five years ago I lost my brother Floyd to Alzheimers. Because I was working with an agency with an aging components and had first-hand experience with a victim of the disease, I was asked to become part of the board of the Utah Alzhiemers Association. They needed someone to help them reach out to the communities of color, to educate them on the disease. It was I who was educated, educated on just how many organizations who mean well,

know very little about our communities. I learned very quickly, and like so many times before, if you are not at the table, you have no voice. If I/we are not at the table, don't expect our concerns to be addressed.

### **Exito, What We Accomplished, So Much More To Do**

One accomplishment I believe, most of us involved in the Chicano Movement in Utah are most proud of, is the University of Utah's' Chicano Scholarship Fund. The Fund has awarded over 500 scholarships to Latinos, many of them went on to very successful careers. It was my privilege to serve as Chair of the Board of Trustees for three years.

Because of my accomplishment and profession, I have had the opportunity to speak to many groups. I never let an opportunity pass where I don't speak about social justice and about choices I have made, people I met who impacted my life. Whether giving a speech when accepting an award, in the classroom, or sitting with a young man recently arrested, my message is the same, "control what you can control, don't worry too much about what you can't, the choice you make today will be yours for a lifetime". I tell them not to be afraid of challenges because, there was a time I was afraid. Afraid of what people would say, afraid of the unknown.

Living in another country gave me a new sense of pride in being an American, after all I was a veteran. It also gave me a renewed sense of anger. Angry at the exploitation by the United States of other societies, anger at our arrogance, anger at our sense of entitlement, yet I couldn't wait to come back home. I was going to fix things.

I once heard someone say "there is nothing wrong with this country that can't be fixed by what's right with this country" (I think it was President Bill Clinton). I am not naive enough to believe that racism, homophobia and income inequality are on their way to being eliminated but, I am confident one person can make a difference to setting it on the path to a better place.

I fell in love with the taco stands in Mexico but still missed my chile verde, pozole, fresh beans, and my mother's aroze con leche. I was exposed to so much of Mexican culture, music, the people, and of course the food. The four times I traveled by bus or car from Mexico City to the U.S, it always felt good as we approached the northern states of Zacatecas and Chihuahua, because the food was becoming more familiar, I couldn't wait for the burrito vendors to board the bus. I was getting close to home.

There is a story told by my family which may or may not be true, but is plausible. The story takes place in a small village in North Central New Mexico. One day in the fall of 1821, just after Mexico had won its independence from Spain, my great great grandmother, Maria Concepcion living just outside of Santa Fe saw her sister running up a hill with a look of, "I have some news for you". Her sister, Maria Florencia, short of breath, informs her, in Spanish and confused, "herminita, ya no somos "cuidadanos de España, somos cuidadanos de Mexico", (we are no longer citizens of Spain, we are now Citizens of Mexico)". Some thirty seven years later, and still living in the same house just after the Mexican/American war of 1848, the sisters much older now. The same sister, once again runs up the hill to my great great grandmother's' house and exclaims "hermanita ya no somos cuidadanos de Mexico somos cuidadanos de los Estados Unidos. (we are no longer citizens of Mexico, we are now citizens of the United States). My great great grandmother became a citizen of three different countries without once moving from her home. Literally she did not cross the border, the border crossed her.

I tell this story to illustrate just how much the United States is changing and Chicanos continue to be at the forefront of that change. Many of us may not refer to ourselves as Chicano

any longer, more comfortable with Latino or Hispanic. However, it was not the Hispanic Civil Rights Movement that catapulted us to new heights, it was the Chicano Movement. The proximity to Mexico provides a never ending flood of cultural reinforcement to those on this side of the border. Whether it's through intermarriage, movies, music or television programs, America is becoming more brown. A lot of Americans are threatened by this change, but it's coming. Not only do we see more Latino politicians running for office, we see the markets changing.

### **Retired But Not From Life, En Fin, in Conclusion**

I find myself with a lot of time on my hands, time to reflect on my life and career. Like most people, there are many things I would have done different, but in this life there are no do overs. Besides, the decision I made and no one else that has led me to a most rewarding and unlikely path. A path that really began when I decided to go to Mexico.

Graduating from high school with no clue of where I wanted to go, lead me to join the Army to avenge the killing of my cousin and friends in Vietnam. It was unlikely I would turn against the war and begin my journey advocating for social justice because I recognized the injustice of the war. My journey would take me to the University of Utah, where I could get a degree and better prepare to advocate for causes I believed in. I never fathomed I would have a job assisting inmates from the State prison get a second chance. I never, in my life thought an event, so far away in the Gulf of Mexico would lead me to Mexico and graduate school. This all points to everything that occurred at CASA AND AFTER CASA. I returned to the United States believing I could change the world for the better.

Today, I find myself retired from State government but not from life. I will continue to seek a position as a delegate to the Democratic convention and be part of the Democratic Hispanic Caucus. I will use that stage to challenge our friends, the elected officials to appoint more Latinos to their cabinets, I refuse to be sidelined and allow them to take our votes for granted. Too many Democratic officials who are elected, shower us with praise and promises, their staff will reflect the community, only to be dismissed as, "I can't find qualified Latinos to fill the positions", response.

I find myself in a rather good place in my life. I have a beautiful and wonderful lady by my side, my soul mate and future wife, Blanca Preciado, along with her two sons, Carlos and Alex, her three grandchildren, Anthony, Austin, and Izzy, a dog and two cats. All bring so much joy to my life. I doubt I could be in a better place.

We can all point to occurrences in our lives that changed us profoundly. I believe I can point to the three that changed mine. Our move to Main Street in Midvale, the new discovery of oil reserves in Mexico, and the Chicano Movement, all were responsible for taking me to Mexico and giving me the confidence and opportunities to have a most pleasant and successful life. Without hesitation, I can die tomorrow and will die happier than perhaps 95% of the people on this planet. However, no outcome or blessing is more beautiful than the gift of my beautiful daughter, Sonia Lucia, that resulted from the three events.

I am so grateful to the people of Mexico, the Mexican Government for providing the money and La Raza Unida party for negotiating the scholarship. I have been given so much, I still owe so much. In 2010, I was awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Drum Major Award by the Utah Martin Luther King Jr. Commission. In March of 2013, I Received the Cesar Chavez Peace and Justice Life Time Achievement award. These awards are indeed an honor, and I was so



grateful to so many people that made it possible. When accepting these award, I was finally able to say so much of what I felt in my acceptance speech. While I don't recall all of it, I recall thanking my parents Rodolfo and Amelia, and Lisa-Michele Church, for the opportunity she gave me. But the quote I remember most, and felt so profoundly was "so many of you are a part of who I am".

Though I was raised Catholic, I have more in common with Bill Maher, the comedian than I do with Pope Francis, though I am glad he is pope, and though I am more secular today than before, Jesus is still my role model. The experiences in Mexico D.F. were so profound and meaningful it laid the tracks for a most exciting and rewarding life. So to all those mentioned in this manuscript, "so many of you are a part of who I am".